

# Klebahn Brings Design Know-How to Timbuk2

BY SEAN HONG

SAN FRANCISCO, CA—Perry Klebahn may be the chief executive officer of Timbuk2, but that doesn't mean he can't talk shop like a savvy designer. Klebahn, who is formally trained in product design, was not long ago the owner of Atlas Snowshoes, where he developed product from the ground up.

Klebahn started Atlas Snowshoes as part of a student final project while attending Stanford's school of design. He developed aluminum and composite shoes that required less maintenance and were less than half the weight of the wood-and-rawhide snowshoes common at the time.

After nine years as Atlas' chief executive officer, he sold the company in 2000. Atlas Snowshoes is now a part of K2 Sports.

Klebahn, 40, has also served as executive vice president of Patagonia, where he was responsible for the company's direct business and North American wholesale, operations and marketing groups. In all, he has 16 years of outdoor industry experience and an extensive background in product design and engineering.

In 1996, Klebahn accepted a teaching position at Stanford Institute of Design under a program where practicing alumni share their experiences with students. He continues to teach today, and was recently appointed to the founding faculty of its "d.school," where students and faculty in the engineering, medicine, business, humanities and education departments take a multi-disciplined, collaborative ap-



Perry Klebahn

proach to working together and understanding design as a human-centered concept.

"[Teaching] makes me better at my job. When you have to teach something, it focuses you more on the process of how you get something done, and I find that work life tends to sort of beat that out of you," he said.

Klebahn, who joined Timbuk2 in December, describes himself as an avid but not particularly excellent road cyclist, scuba diver and surfer. He calls San Francisco the ideal location for an active, outdoor lifestyle.

out which interesting directions our customers want to go, and determine if those paths will generate revenues.

## What is it about product customization that consumers are drawn to?

**Klebahn:** Customers are drawn to the customization experience as much as the customized products. There are all these different stages that people go through. There's a lot of anticipation that happens before. It's very rare that someone walks in cold or goes to the Web site cold and first time builds a bag. They usually try it a couple times, think about it and maybe get some advice from friends. There are a lot of intricacies there. You're playing designer. When you see the time people spend on the Web site, it's not a small commitment. The designing is a legitimate experience. It's not like going to a clothing store and buying a cool-looking jacket. There's so much more commitment and thinking that goes on.

## What's going to happen at Timbuk2 this year?

**Klebahn:** Timbuk2 is growing. I think there's some magic in the brand. It's an urban brand and it's from a place—it's from San Francisco. There are also a lot of interesting things the company has done with customization I think were way ahead of its time. There's magic right there. How do you not screw that up, number one, but how do you enhance the parts that are interesting and meaningful? You have to have sustainable growth within a company. You have to have it grow enough so that there are new things and new energy and new people coming in, but I'm not going to try to take the brand in a completely new direction and blow the lid off it. To me it's about evolutionary moves forward. The cool thing about Timbuk2 is it has a lot of different distribution—in both bike and outdoor markets. It's not just dependent on one industry.

## How will Timbuk2 retain its original, bike messenger clientele?

**Klebahn:** That's going to be how you measure my success in a lot of ways. Anytime we move to a new distribution, we make sure it's someplace where our urban roots make sense. The bicycle messenger is still the barometer we use to judge whether we're going to do something or not. You can't alienate your base, because if you do, you're done. **BRAIN**

## Why did you sell Atlas Snowshoes?

**Klebahn:** We were vertically integrated here in San Francisco. We had a factory—raw materials came in one door and we made snowshoes out the other. It was a fun, crazy deal. I sold it because I had done it for nine years, and it had grown to the size it was going to be. It wasn't going to get much bigger. On top of that, it was an incredibly seasonal job, with 75 percent of sales done in the fourth quarter. Every Christmas Eve, I was working to get shipments out the door, so for about eight or nine years, I never got to see my family during the holidays.

## With your background in product design, will you be more involved in development at Timbuk2 than a typical CEO?

**Klebahn:** I hope so. The problem with business is so much of it is driven by the revenue lines, so a lot of times you get stuck on the gross side of the business. I think I may tend to be more balanced in terms of having a real love for the product, but I realize sales and distribution can be its own art form. During my time at Patagonia, they had multiple distribution channels, and there's a lot of innovation involved in figuring that out. The thing I can do is drive the design process into other parts of the

business. I'll definitely miss designing some, but I think the cool thing is the design process can still be applied to other places. The magic is how to get sales guys to think out of the box, like designers do for product.

## Do you think you'll try your hand in the design once in a while?

**Klebahn:** I think my strength is working with designers. My background and training makes me good in the collaborative process with them, but the designers here have way more game than I do in terms of their visual design skills. They're way beyond me. I can be part of the process and contribute to the brainstorm sessions and add my energy and oversight. The answer is no, I don't think I'll be doing any design. If you see any butt-ugly product, you can blame it on me. But I don't think I'll dive into design at that level.

## How have your first few months on the job been?

**Klebahn:** Busy. Like any other job, you first walk in the door and you're completely optimistic about everything, but it takes a while to build relationships with the team. I worked with Andy Howe, who runs the sales here, for two years while I was at Patagonia. I have to give myself a little time to get to

know and be able to function at a high level with a few of the other folks on the team. You can't run with people day one. A big portion of the first months is getting relationships squared away.

## Timbuk2 is an iconic West Coast brand. How do you build it beyond that?

**Klebahn:** You could have a million good ideas, and if you tried them all, you'd kill a brand, because it would die by a million cuts. The big thing for me is understanding what built the brand. I was actually next door to Rob [Honeycutt, original founder of Timbuk2] when I was at Atlas—those guys were next door to me in San Francisco. We used to have burritos every lunch and complain about our business and other struggles. We're still very good friends, so I can talk to him about what things were really important about starting Timbuk2. Another way is going on the street. I find it's very effective to spend time in a retail store to talk to customers. Bike messengers are in and out of here every day getting their bags repaired, so we can talk to those guys about what they like, what they don't like and how they want to customize bags. We need to get a read on what the iconic status is. There is a slew of smart people here with a slew of ideas. You look at all those ideas and figure