

Q&A: Knocking it Stiff with Criquet Shirts

By Scott Winship, Managing Director, GulfStar Group, Consumer Products & Services Practice Leader



GULFSTAR GROUP
INVESTMENT BANKERS
www.gulfstargroup.com

NATIVE NEW YORKERS AND LIFELONG FRIENDS, **BILLY NACHMAN** AND **HOBSON BROWN** (PICTURED BELOW), WENT ON THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT POLO SHIRT AND ENDED UP LAUNCHING A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL APPAREL BUSINESS IN AUSTIN, TEXAS.

How did a couple of Yankees settle on Austin, Texas as the launching point for the Criquet brand?

HOBSON: Billy and I may have New England roots but Austin's entrepreneurial spirit and laid back culture fit our personalities and the Criquet brand more. Austin is a city with such laid back people that you can sometimes forget it's a mecca for those on a quest for perfection. The perfect chord. The perfect breakfast taco. The perfect platform for software. And of course, the perfect shirt. It's the city of South by Southwest, after all, where music and imagination converge. It's the city of The Invitational, too —"the greatest golf party on earth"— proudly sponsored by Criquet.



As you conceived the product and brand strategies several years ago, what were they key elements you were focused on to draw attention in a space that is not short on competition?

BILLY: Our number one focus was the product. We launched with one shirt, which we call the Players Shirt. It's a shirt that Hob and I had borrowed at some point from our fathers' closets but now had a hard time finding in stores. So we set out on a quest to recreate this shirt and thought, "How can we improve on it?" Looking at fabric first, we felt like organic cotton would be a huge improvement over the polyblends from years past. It has a nicer look, softer feel, and won't catch fire if you get too close to a match. Additionally, by using removable collars stays in our shirts, we have found a way to keep the shirt collars from getting all bent up after a few trips through the washing machine.

HOBSON: I think the other thing we did well was having an authentic voice. From day one, we felt like the Criquet customer was us. Coincidentally, there wasn't a brand out there in the market rooted in this authentic, classic style that we connected with. So, we didn't have to think too hard about what would resonate with customers or do a ton of demographic research. Do we think it's cool? Would we wear that? Do we think the message is humorous and engaging? We still do this today.

From an operations standpoint, were there specific "opening" strategies that you decided to employ or emulate related to design and development, inventory management and merchandising?

HOBSON: We bootstrapped the business for the first couple of years, which forced us to be very targeted. We focused on doing one thing right, which was our Players Shirt. We made as many as we could afford, sold out of them, then made more. We wanted to prove there was an appetite and that guys were really connecting to the brand. This gave us the confidence and resources to go bigger and eventually hire people who were much better at inventory management and merchandising than Billy or myself.

BILLY: By focusing on online sales and growing wholesale distribution later, we were able to put all our attention on developing the brand directly with our customers instead of chasing down accounts.

You have such a passionate consumer base for such a young brand. Why do you think consumers love the brand so much?

HOBSON: It definitely starts with good product. If you don't have that, then you've got a house of cards. I think our customers also appreciate the authenticity of the brand and connect with the "19th hole" spirit we put out there. Like Billy and myself, our customers want to dress well but don't take

"fashion" too seriously. Not a lot of apparel companies take that approach. In other words, we're not attempting to try and mandate a fashion viewpoint on the market, but we do work very hard to provide guys with compelling style options that truly reflect the attitude and lifestyle aspirations that we all have in common.

BILLY: Also, I think customers appreciate our connection to the past. We get lots of comments from customers that the Players Shirt reminds them of their favorite shirt they had gotten from their dad's closet. That type of emotional connection may be the largest intangible contributor to the success of the Criquet brand.

What is the biggest mistake you have made thus far as an owner of the business? Conversely, what is the best decision you've made?

BILLY: Going too deep on an unproven product. When we first launched our button-downs, we made custom fabric instead of going the cut and sew route, which is what most shirt companies our size do. By going custom, we had to buy a lot more fabric. The shirts turned out great and our customers loved them, but we ended up holding onto a lot more inventory than we would have liked.

Now we do smaller runs of button downs with a great factory in El Paso. We search for partners who can live up to our quality standards and technical specs. When we find them nearby, we choose them first.

HOBSON: I think focusing on doing one thing perfectly before expanding has been our best decision. We had a women's line of shirts early on but dropped it to focus more on our men's shirts. We were seeing the most growth there, so we decided to put all our focus and resources there.



Talk about finding great talent to help maximize your vision for the brand and commercial opportunity. What's the fundamental characteristic that has to be there to make it work?

BILLY: Take your time. Don't rush it. On a small team, it's absolutely critical to find people who are team players.

HOBSON: The Criquet Clubhouse is not your typical cubicle office. We built a putting green in our backyard, have a beer sponsor and host multiple parties throughout the year. This means that working at Criquet is not a normal nine-to-five type thing. So, when we hire, we look for people we think will thrive in this non-typical workplace. To us, Criquet is 24/7. We don't expect people to have the same passion (or time commitment) for the brand, but we want people to feel vested and excited about working here. Right now, Criquet is more like a family than a workplace. Hopefully we can maintain that culture as we grow.

You guys are entrepreneurs in a pretty classical sense. That means that you probably don't sit around patting each other on the back all that often. How do you define long-term success for the brand?

HOBSON: You're right about not patting each other's back all that often. Truthfully, we should do it more. It's important to celebrate the small victories, whether it's hitting monthly revenue goals, launching a new product or getting some buzz about the brand. If you don't stop and do that, you can dwell on missed opportunities, or be too locked-in on getting from point A to point B. Sometimes it's the stops along the way that take you to new heights. If Criquet becomes a nationally recognized lifestyle brand known for a fresh (and fun) take on classic style and for trying to do things the right way, I'll be satisfied. Dress well. Do good. Enjoy life. That's it.

