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Roots & Blues & Business

Bluescentric's Matt Marshall

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ROOTS & BLUES & BUSINESS

At Bluescentric, There's Never A Dull Moment

by PORCSHE N. MORAN • photos by L.G. PATTERSON



Business is anything but usual for Columbia entrepreneur Matt Marshall. The owner of Bluescentric — an online shop that sells merchandise to roots, rock, soul and blues music fans — is as likely to dress in jeans and a T-shirt as a suit. He schedules his business meetings at a local barbecue restaurant rather than in a boardroom. For Marshall, going to music festivals is part of market research. His company's budget includes an expense account for vinyl records. He papers his office walls with concert posters, and considers a turntable and guitar picks just as important as pens and paper.

"This is hard work," he says. "Growing

a business is a delicate balancing act with far too many long hours, but I can't find anything more fun than this. I love doing the business part. There is never a dull moment. There is always an opportunity to grow and learn something new."

HOBBY TO CAREER

Marshall, 31, graduated from Rock Bridge High School in 2003. He earned his bachelor's degree in marketing and business administration from Columbia College. He launched Bluescentric in 2009 as a hobby while he was working as a computer programmer. In 2013, he decided to quit his job to focus on Bluescentric full time.

"I wasn't happy at work, and I wanted to do something different," Marshall says. "I've always been an entrepreneur.

As a kid, I had a snow cone stand or a lemonade stand. I also love all sorts of music and the culture around each genre. Blending my passion for music with my passion for business has been an interesting mix."

The mix has proven to be a successful one. Marshall says his business has grown each year since he started. He began by selling T-shirts. Then he expanded his apparel inventory to other items, such as pullovers, tank tops, hoodies and onesies. Now, he offers even more goods, including glassware, calendars, tote bags, hats and bumper stickers. Marshall says he has shipped products to customers in 65 countries; international sales make up 20 percent of the business. Wholesale and custom screen printing are also facets of the company.

"People love roots and blues music," he says. "They come out to the festivals in droves. They want items that allow them to express their love for the music, but there isn't much out there to cater to them. There is a lot of generic music merchandise, but not a lot of people are doing what we are doing."

Despite the demand for his products, Marshall says that getting the word out about Bluescentric is prone to interesting and unique challenges. He does 75 percent of his advertising through social media. He also promotes the business with ads and giveaways on "Bluesmobile," a syndicated radio show hosted by Dan Aykroyd as his "Blues Brothers" character Elwood Blues.

"Our market can be challenging to reach because it's rooted in varying-sized niches, and hinges so much on word of mouth from our direct-to-fan approach," he says. "You have to fine-tune your advertising and marketing strategy to make sure you're getting to the right people. The social media tools are of incredible value to us. I wonder if we would have been able to grow as fast as we have without them."

Once Bluescentric gets a customer, Marshall says that high-quality products and dedicated customer service keep them coming back. Bluescentric's team of freelance graphic designers creates exclusive, original artwork for each piece of merchandise in the shop. Marshall and his shop foreman put a handwritten thank-you note in every order. They also add small, free gifts, such as pin-back buttons, to the packages. Bluescentric boasts a 30 percent rate of return for customers.

"Every customer is very valuable to us because these are such tight-knit musical communities," Marshall explains. "People talk, and they love to share their enthusiasm. You really have to be good to all, and honestly be a fan and a part of that culture to succeed. We like to show people that we care."



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The online and mail order nature of Bluescentric gives Marshall the option to run his company from anywhere in the world. Yet, he says Columbia has been a great place to do business. He recently joined EPIC (Emerging Professionals in Columbia), a networking group for young professionals sponsored by the Columbia Chamber of Commerce.

"Columbia is an awesome place to do this business," he says. "I own a house here, and I like the city. Musicians know Columbia because of The Blue Note. It's good to be right on I-70 and right

between St. Louis and Kansas City. We get our material shipments quickly. It's also easy to get a flight out of town."

Marshall says that being sustainable and giving back is an important part of the Bluescentric business model. The company creates and sources everything — except the stitching of the T-shirts — in the United States, oftentimes in the Midwest. The company also strives to be eco-friendly, printing on recycled paper and recycling 95 percent of all the paper produced.

"We think sourcing and fulfilling responsibly is important," Marshall says. "We also want to put money back

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into the local community. People who are passionate about authentic music are helping to contribute to the music's economic viability in a low-impact way."

Besides Bluescentric, Marshall is also the publisher of a quarterly magazine called *American Blues Scene*. He spends much of his time on the road or in the air traveling for both of his businesses. He says the constant travel makes it hard to find a work-life balance.

"We get inspiration and make business deals from going to concerts and festivals, so traveling has to be a big part of what I do," says Marshall. "When you are immersed in this all day, every day, you can get burnt out on it. Maintaining this kind of schedule is a perceptual balancing act. But when you listen to the music, you fall in love again and it blows you away. There is never a shortage of good music. That is what keeps me going."

GROWTH MODE

Six years into running Bluescentric, Marshall says his company has reached a crucial point. He is in the process of determining the best way to manage the risks and challenges of his business's rapid growth. He currently operates Bluescentric out of a 800-square-foot space on the south side of Columbia. He has one full-time employee and several freelancers who telecommute from around the country.

"I'm in a spot now where I really need to expand in every area," he says. "I need more office space. I need more employees. I'm excited to dig into these issues, but it is a bit scary. I don't have a blueprint for how to do this. The trick is to find the right way to grow the business without hurting it."

A strong business plan is one thing that is guiding Marshall. He says that the past 16 months have found him spending a lot of time on the document, but that hasn't always been the case.

"I had to create a lot of structure for



the business after I had already started it," he says. "My lack of planning at the beginning showed me how much planning is really needed to be successful. I've done things with a plan and without a plan, and having a plan is much better."

One part of his plan is licensing. Bluescentric has secured licensing agreements for several artists, such as late blues legends Howlin' Wolf and Bo Diddley. The agreements allow Marshall to create signature apparel and other memorabilia for the fans of these musicians. He's also inked a deal

with Nike to reuse the "You Don't Know Diddley" slogan from its famous 1980s Bo Jackson ad campaign. Marshall says he has a short list of about 20 other musicians for which he would like to license products.

"I want the business to grow big enough so that we can come out with really exciting products, and do really cool things for our customers," says Marshall. "But, I still want to be able to pay attention to the details. Music is supposed to be soulful and intriguing. We put our hearts into what we do." **CEO**