



PADDLE POWER:
YOLO'S FOUNDERS,
JEFF ARCHER (FRONT)
AND TOM LOSEE.

The wave riders

Two savvy marketers glide to the front of the stand-up paddling crowd

Jeff Archer refuses to let my limited coordination and athletic ability get in the way, so our interview will take place while paddling Florida's Pensacola Bay. Archer, one of the founders and owners of YOLO Board, sets me up on one of the company's easy-to-balance YOLO Yaks, a surfboard-kayak hybrid. It's clear, as we glide across the water, that Archer relishes his role as an ambassador for stand-up paddling (which goes by the hip acronym "SUP") as much as he does his job at one of the growing sport's most innovative companies.

Archer and YOLO co-owner Tom Losee didn't invent SUP or its boards—that credit likely belongs to the ancient Polynesians—but their savvy, marketing-driven approach has, despite the

sport's West Coast roots, made the Santa Rosa Beach, Fla.-based company an industry leader in just five years.

On the East Coast, the YOLO brand is synonymous with the sport. "They have done excellent marketing," says Shawn Brown, co-owner of Outdoor Gulf Coast, a Pensacola, Fla.-based website. "Even if it is not on a YOLO board, someone will say, 'I see someone out there YOLOing.'"

Before starting YOLO, Archer and Losee each ran their own businesses; Archer worked in furniture importing and sports apparel, Losee in landscaping and coffee retailing. Their warehouses were near one another, and the men—both active fathers in their 40s—were interested in learning SUP with their families.

Others might have borrowed some boards to check out the sport, but Archer and Losee decided to design one instead. The team's prototype board was wider, longer and more stable than a traditional SUP board, a decision that contributed to YOLO's success.

"We think 85 percent of the market is coming from beginner paddlers, and we wanted those people to be able to stand up right away, when stationary, go out on the lake and see an eagle or paddle with the dolphins their first time out," Losee says.

YOLO, itself an acronym for "You Only Live Once," now sells 18 different boards to accommodate various types of water, as well as different paddler body types. Prices start at around \$700 (near the industry standard for

an entry-level board) and peak at \$2,000 for the premium model.

Other YOLO revenue streams double as marketing tools that reach recreational paddlers and racers, pros and other hard-core surfers. Losee leads YOLO-branded stand-up paddling demos and lessons, and offers board rentals at a resort community in Florida. YOLO, a sponsor of well-respected national races and events, created an iPhone app to help people find SUP events. "They really embody this sport," says Andre Niemeyer, president of social networking site SUPConnect. "They are reaching one stand-up paddler at a time."

The company has carefully built relationships with about 70 exclusive dealers across the U.S., Costa Rica and other international points, preferring to expand slowly. In the future, YOLO may branch out into apparel (in addition to the T-shirts it now sells), boards for land paddling and other products that fit with the YOLO mindset. The team is looking to solidify the market in the Southeast, particularly in non-coastal areas.

"In the U.S. we've built this regional strength in the Southeast and we're sowing the seeds for the West and Midwest," Archer says.

YOLO won't disclose revenues, but in the second quarter of 2010 it turned a profit, and, four years after launch, Archer and Losee no longer had to fund the company from their savings. Sales in the first quarter of 2011 were double those of the same period in 2010, Archer says.

Losee, a former owner of Hub City Coffee Co. in Hattiesburg, Miss.—which boasted the city's first drive-through coffee shop—sees a parallel between that effort and what YOLO has pioneered. "Just like I turned people on to lattes and bagels in Mississippi," he says, "I am turning them on to stand-up paddling." —MARGARET LITTMAN



Visible words, invisible people

Why anonymity and the internet just don't go well together

"We already know that anonymous letters are despicable. In etiquette, as well as in law, hiring a hit man to do the job does not relieve you of responsibility." —Judith Martin

In last month's column, I offered the reasons why I don't allow anonymous comments on my blog. The quote above from the modern-day Miss Manners offers some additional food for thought on anonymity in the digital age. As members of a civilized society, we have a responsibility to own our words.

TREAT YOUR WEBZ LIKE YOU TREAT YOUR BUSINESS

I've heard many a writer, Twitter user and Facebook friend spout iterations of, "I don't say anything online that I wouldn't want my mother to read." My mom is my friend on Facebook. By now, she's come to understand who her daughter is and loves me for me. But many don't enjoy that level of understanding with their audiences. We all operate under different sets of rules. Find yours.

When we treat our online interactions as if they can be traced back to us at anytime, we (might) think twice about what pours out of our keyboards. I don't have invisible people in my business—I have real ones who help me deliver solutions. Sometimes they cause problems (and sometimes I do, too).

Real people make mistakes, and we own them. An LCD screen doesn't make us invisible. I'm firmly of the belief that one requires us to be more responsible about what we share—and with whom, and in what voice and in what language.

THE (LIMITED) VALUE OF INVISIBLE PEOPLE

Does being invisible mean you're not real? In many cases, yeah. It diminishes your contribution (positive or negative) because you're saying

you don't want to own your words. However, businesses that operate in service- and product-oriented industries can't skip the opportunity to get as much customer feedback as possible, even if some of it is anonymous.

While online shopping is more the norm these days, it doesn't mean everyone's comfortable with the process. Credit card numbers, e-mail addresses, names, phone numbers ... that's a lot of information floating around. If you give your customers the opportunity to provide feedback without the burden of identifying themselves, you're gonna get the jack-wagons. But you'll also improve your service and selection and help your audience understand that they're the most important part of why you're able to do what you love.

Give your bottom line a voice, and make the blank for filling in a name optional. Some people just want to be heard, and our job is to listen.

STEP INTO THE LIGHT

As businesspeople, there's little reason to be invisible as we skip about the interwebz. We're not whistle-blowing. We're not trying to bring down an oppressive regime. It's good business to own our words. By being seen and counted (and if we're bloggers, requiring others to do the same), we're establishing a higher standard for communication. With all the digital mumbo jumbo, we live in a world where too many people are invisible (check out invisiblepeople.tv).

They'd love to be heard. Seen. Recognized. We have that privilege each day, and I know that it's my responsibility to honor it. Maybe you feel the same way. —ERIKA NAPOLETANO

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