

Sconnie On: How Two College Freshmen Embraced a Lifestyle and Won

By: Alex Verbeten & Brian Burke

It is not every night that new business endeavors are dreamed up in a dorm overlooking Lake Mendota on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus – or is it? For the founders of Sconnie Nation, an apparel company dedicated to representing the state of Wisconsin, this was exactly how it happened.

Ben Fiechtner, co-founder of Sconnie Nation, says it was a Wednesday night like any other when he and friend and now business partner Troy Vosseller, came up with the idea for Sconnie Nation. Sitting in their dorm room, they talked about the widely varied backgrounds of University of Wisconsin students. “You see students coming to Madison anywhere from the East to West Coast, and the amazing thing is once they are here they all seem to embrace a similar lifestyle,” says Fiechtner. The two friends began to think about what unites Wisconsin students and the term “Sconnie” was born. According to Fiechtner, “Sconnie is a way of life, it is an identity that is happy to embrace and celebrate any ‘Wisconsin-esque’ value or tradition. It can range from attending a Badger game and enjoying a brat, to relaxing on the terrace with friends and your favorite pitcher of beer.” With a few hundred dollars and a batch of t-shirts, a company to market this lifestyle was born.

As college freshmen, Fiechtner and Vosseller did not have experience running a small business, let alone starting one from scratch. Fiechtner had encountered the small aspects of being an entrepreneur in high school. While a senior at Okemos High School, he printed custom t-shirts for some of the big sporting events that year and sold them to the student body in order to drive up support for the school’s teams. Given his previous

knowledge of students and t-shirts, he and Vosseller decided to combine their savings and print a few hundred t-shirts with “Sconnie” on the front to see how they sold. After only a couple of weeks, they had run out of their first order and had students and friends asking if they had any more.

When asked how he feels he became an entrepreneur, Fiechtner said, “I would say it was not like the way most get their start in a new business. It was just two kids that had an idea and tried it out, but I think after those first couple months Troy and I began to think like entrepreneurs and realized the opportunities that were in front of us. Seeing the chance we had, we decided to begin to plan the way we wanted Sconnie Nation to grow.”

Having found that they could sell Sconnie t-shirts, the formation of the company was soon underway. After securing an apparel trademark on the words “Sconnie” and “Sconnie Nation,” they created Sconnie Nation LLC and began expansion. Adding a website, and a few other t-shirt designs, the company Sconnie Nation was up and running. Shortly thereafter, Ben and Troy realized they were on to something even bigger. Fiechtner recounted a time in the fall of 2004, after getting their website up and online, when they received an order from someone in the 90210 area code. When mailing the Sconnie hat to them, Vosseller wrote a letter asking how they had heard about Sconnie Nation. “We never received a response,” Ben said, “but at the same time, we knew that if someone in Beverly Hills even liked our product, we were on to something.” Moving forward from they realized Sconnie Nation was not just a t-shirt stand anymore, and the expansion of the company might be bigger than expected.

After this realization, Fiechtner said Sconnie Nation developed into the business it is today. The two entrepreneurs had found that there was a market for creative t-shirts

and apparel that expressed Wisconsin ideals. Catering exclusively toward this, they currently have 11 different t-shirt designs, as well as a few sweatshirts, hoodies, and sweatpants also adorned with Sconnie Nation logos. In addition to selling their designs, Fiechtner saw an opportunity to further grow Sconnie Nation. As he was actively involved in several student organizations on campus, he witnessed the high purchase of t-shirts these groups order each year. Seeing this Fiechtner decided to offer custom screen-printing services to these groups through Sconnie Nation's distributor. This final addition to the business is what has brought Sconnie Nation to where it is today, and is what has required them to use four interns each semester. Last year the company had over \$75,000 in revenue and has become a campus icon, with Fiechtner and Vosseller gracing the front page of both student newspapers and the business section of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, they've appeared on the local news, and recently were panelists for an Entrepreneurship Week event highlighting Badgers who have started their own company.

This is not to say that the road to success has been straightforward for them. There were definitely some lessons to be learned from the start-up experiences at Sconnie Nation. First off, Fiechtner stresses the importance of a "just go for it" attitude. Sconnie did not start with a business plan, and did not start with an idea of where it would go; it just started with a few t-shirts they were hoping to sell. Fiechtner thinks that had they sat down to try and think it out too much they might have been discouraged, and Sconnie Nation might not be where it is today.

A second and more important piece of advice that Fiechtner had for aspiring collegiate entrepreneurs is that, "Even though you are young and do not have any

experience, this does not mean anyone else has a right to push you around, and it does not mean that anyone can tell you how you should be running your business. You are the professional here, you are calling the shots.” Case in point was when the William Kuether Brewing Company sent a cease and desist letter citing that its line of Sconnie beers already used the word Sconnie, and Ben and Troy’s little apparel company had to stop. “We were a little worried at first,” Fiechtner said, “but we had filed for a copyright on the word Sconnie and were pretty sure we did not have to stop.” A quick call to a law professor that Troy knew, and their thoughts were confirmed, they had the right to use the term Sconnie on their apparel. So instead of stopping, Fiechtner and Vosseller simply wrote back, informing the brewery that they held the trademark for the word ‘Sconnie’ and were going to continue to market apparel. And with that, they never heard from the brewery again.

The last piece of advice Fiechtner gave to aspiring entrepreneurs is to “Just have fun.” Sconnie tries to live that motto, hosting pre-game celebrations for Badger football, and getting on television with their fan support of UW basketball. Yes, they are starting a business, but as Fiechtner put it, “it is less about starting a business and more about having fun. At times it might feel more serious, but we really cannot lose sight of the fun, because that is part of who we are as a company.”

Leading their lives with an entrepreneurial mindset, both Fiechtner and Vosseller are still always looking for additional resources. Fiechtner now a senior at the University of Wisconsin – Madison is hoping to find opportunities and resources, both for Sconnie and himself, as he enters a first year sales position with General Electric this fall; Vosseller looks to do the same as he continues to broaden his academic horizons at the

University of Wisconsin Law School. According to Vosseller, “Being an entrepreneur is not like following a class schedule, you do not wake up each day and say “I’m going to be an entrepreneur from 1:00 to 2:15 today.” It is a part of you that is with you every moment of your day, every day of the year.” When asked about the future of the Scennie Nation, Fiechtner just smiles and says, “We hope to make it bigger.” We hope so too.