

July 8, 2007

CONSUMED

Mass Appeal

By ROB WALKER

Threadlines

From [Wikipedia](#) to “American Idol,” shifting control from experts to the masses has never been more popular. As an example of what this can mean for consumer companies, the herd of anti-expertise experts often points to [Threadless.com](#), which has sold millions of dollars of T-shirts by not hiring star designers. Founded in 2000, Threadless asks for designs from anybody who wants to submit them. These days, according to its chief creative officer, Jeffrey Kalmikoff, Threadless receives about 125 submissions a day. These are winnowed by the site’s hundreds of thousands of user-voters to half a dozen new T-shirt offerings a week and sold in batches of 1,500. Winning designers are paid \$2,000; almost everything sells out. The site has evolved to include a variety of clothing for kids; the owners are dabbling in other products through a new brand called Naked & Angry; and in July, the first Threadless retail and gallery space will open in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago.

It’s a crowd-pleasing story, but there has always been more to Threadless than mere mobocracy. For instance, it also offers a line of Select T-shirts, featuring the work of well-established designers like Cody Hudson. The voting system is straightforward: users rate each submission on a 0-to-5 scale and offer comments that range from the constructive to the unprintable. Still, some submissions never make it to the voting stage, usually because they ignore format rules, raise copyright issues or, sometimes, are simply “awful.” (Kalmikoff says that eliminating ugly designs before a vote is an infrequent but sometimes necessary measure to “protect the experience” of Threadless voters.) While most winners have scores of 2.6 or higher, one recent batch included a design with a score of 2.0. That’s because the final decision about which T’s actually get made and sold has always involved a bit of nonpublic number crunching. For example, Threadless looks at how many 0s and 5s a design gets; designs that inspire passionate disagreement often get printed because they tend to sell, Kalmikoff says.

Even these limits leave plenty of power in the hands of users. And the really interesting thing is what they do with it. The casual viewer of Threadless.com cannot help being struck by the surprising degree of consistency — maybe even similarity — in the designs. “It’s a barometer of what’s going on in art and design right now,” Kalmikoff suggests. He likens it to a school of fish moving in a particular direction until a new leader suddenly emerges, everything shifts in that direction and somehow the crowd arrives at something close to an aesthetic.

Perhaps even more surprising is something else the Threadless audience does together: create stars. Glenn Jones, the creative director of Dashwood Design in Auckland, New Zealand, has won 17 times. He regularly gets fan e-mail, has been featured on the cover of the New Zealand magazine ProDesign as the “King of the Tees” and is often asked why he doesn’t start his own shirt company. (Jones says he is too busy at Dashwood, which does packaging and corporate-identity design.) But he has begun to sell occasional prints of his Threadless works from his own Web site. His closest rival, the 16-time winner Ross Zietz, started submitting designs when he was a student at Louisiana State University. He now works for Threadless, helping to oversee production. “You get kind of a following, almost,” Zietz says; in his case, that has helped him get freelance gigs designing shirts for the Dave Matthews Band and other musicians. Both he and Jones have also submitted designs under different names. “You want to make sure you’re getting printed because it’s good,” Kalmikoff says, “not because you’re a Threadless celebrity.”

Threadless celebrities, it turns out, are part of a new shift in the formula: letting winning designers select a certain number of shirts to be printed every month, regardless of the voting results. That doesn’t sound particularly democratic, but Kalmikoff says it will give designers “more of an incentive to try different things.” That is, it will help offset a tendency of submitters to echo whatever has been winning lately. “We envisioned Threadless at first to be this level playing field, where everyone gets an equal shot,” Kalmikoff says. “But you start to realize that leaders and popularity and all those things are quite possibly an organic, natural part of any community.” What Threadless has done is try to keep exploiting the benefits of those natural tendencies while avoiding their potential pitfalls. Even a design democracy needs a few checks and balances.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)