

SCA alumnus customizes hair care

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By News-Item Staff | on April 24, 2017

CATAWISSA RR — Leaving a promising career at Amazon to commit full-time to a start-up customized hair care company is a gamble many wouldn't take, but for Function of Beauty co-founder and Southern Columbia Area alumnus Joshua Maciejewski, it's a gamble that paid off.

Function of Beauty offers individualized, custom ordered shampoo and conditioner created for a person's specific hair care needs based on an algorithm created by MIT engineers. What is perhaps even more impressive about the beauty line is thanks to Maciejewski, it's produced right in Catawissa and employs around 50 local people, many of whom walk to work.

Prior to Function, hair care was not something Maciejewski would consider himself an expert on, but from an operation, engineering and equipment side, he knew he had the abilities and skill set to make it work.

Beginning of Function

After graduating from Southern in 2003, Maciejewski spent five years at MIT, earning two bachelors and a master's degree. It was during that time he met Function co-founder and CEO Zahir Dossa, Ph.D. He was younger, but the two bonded over similar interests.

Maciejewski joined the Navy after MIT while Dossa continued working on his Ph.D and starting multiple companies, including Argan Tree. Dossa recognized the market for customized beauty products while working on product development, and came up with the beginning basis for Function of Beauty.

Co-founder Hien Nguyen, the lead cosmetic chemist at a leading national lab, became involved with Dossa asked her if she could tell him what needed to be in the bottle if they knew exactly what a customer wanted. As it turns out, it is easier to customize a product than to create a product that 50,000 people would all like.

In 2015, Maciejewski was finishing his time on active duty as an assistant professor of naval science at Purdue when Dossa approached him to learn if they could accomplish running the company from a technical side.

"After I stopped laughing about shampoo and realized the actual size of the market that was there, within a day I had a quick design and drawing for a way to fill the individual products and basically do all of the customization work we do now," Maciejewski said.

Maciejewski said the products are made based on a computer algorithm he created from Nguyen's work. "When you fill out your profile, when you choose your goals and pick the color and scent of your product, all of that is fed into the algorithm that says given all the choices you've made, this is exactly what we think needs to be in the bottle down to .1 gram precision."

While at Purdue, Maciejewski and his wife had triplet girls join their four-year-old son, and the family was ready to set off for Philadelphia, where he was accepted into the University of Pennsylvania for a three-year joint JD/MA program.

He was committed to Penn with his deposits paid and a down payment put down on a three-year home lease, but a call from Amazon in July 2015 for a post MBA job position at their Hazleton fulfillment center opened the opportunity

for his family to move home to Catawissa.

During his seven months at Amazon, Function of Beauty was accepted to Y Combinator, a start-up incubator in Mountain View, California, that was behind airbnb, reddit and Dropbox. All founders were expected to be there, but Maciejewski was still working at Amazon and Nguyen was running production in a Connecticut lab.

Maciejewski said Amazon was great to him throughout the process and he was able to make several trips to join Dossa in California. It was during that time that the group decided to move forward with Function, and he gave his two week notice to Amazon.

After going home and telling his wife his decision, she told him she was pregnant with number five. He said he laughed the entire evening, and woke up the next day fully committed to the success of Function.

At that time, they were filling 30 to 50 orders a day, and then a 15 second segment on The Today Show lead to their email servers crashing as it aired in each time zone. The plant left Connecticut and moved to Catawissa with a backlog of 6,000 orders, no equipment to fill it and no production staff to support it.

Hiring his in-laws and family members, they powered through a tough couple of weeks and ended in a strong position. He said, "We were a lean operation and things were efficient because we didn't have room for waste."

In late September, as his wife went into the hospital to give birth to their fifth child, Maciejewski said Function had no orders to fill. That same morning, the new marketing campaign launched and by the time he came out of the OR, there were 2,000 orders that needed to be filled.

He said, "While at the hospital, I designed the changes in the new fill machines we needed, and we came home on the third day and I basically lived in the production facility building the new equipment."

Within two weeks, the three full-time employees grew to 30 or 40, many of whom Maciejewski knew his entire life. He hired a production manager to oversee employees to remove himself from the challenge of having those personal connections.

Function benefits from running production out of Catawissa more than he does, Maciejewski said. His family moved back to Catawissa specifically so his kids could attend Southern Columbia Area School District and be closer to family, but the area also provided him with a strong business argument for setting up production here.

"The work ethic in our area is really tough to match anywhere else," he said. "You have a group of individuals who are willing to do manual labor or tasks that are a combination of thought and manual labor, and they do it generally without complaint."

If there wouldn't have been a business argument, he would not have been able to convince the investors to allow production to happen out of Catawissa. He said, "Our investors think it's great that we're here and think it's great that we have the impact we do on the community and that we offer the employment opportunities that we do."

Maciejewski didn't doubt that he made the right decision in moving his family home and then leaving Amazon to dedicate himself fully to Function of Beauty. With rave reviews everywhere from The New York Times to Cosmopolitan and Vogue, there are only good things on the horizon for Function.

The business plans on creating new products and growing, but for now, they are focused on making their current products as perfect as possible.

Maciejewski said, "You order the product and within 10 days you get a little survey email. If you rate us anything below almost perfect, we want to know why and how can we fix it for you."

Feedback allows them to tweak the formulations in hopes that the issue can be addressed before the next person with the same concerns orders.

“We want everyone who purchases to be a customer for life,” he said.

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