

TRI Races to the Top of Licensing

by Paula Pou

Since opening for business in 1999, Trademarketing Resources Inc. (TRI) has serviced the world of corporate trademark licensing with programs that often stand out for their uniqueness. With a roster of brands that includes Polaris, Citgo, Saleen, DaimlerChrysler's Mopar performance parts division and Pratt & Whitney, a pioneer in flight technology, TRI has established itself as a licensing agency with a knack for maximizing brands through innovative deals.

"I'd had a desire to do something entrepreneurial for a long time and at that point, seven years ago, my father had just passed away and I was at a point where starting my own venture felt like the right thing to do," says Bob Horton, president and CEO of TRI. "I had been a licensee, a licensor and an agent and I thought I had a good perspective of everyone's role in the licensing process. I thought I'd be able to add value by bringing that combined perspective in the form of an agency and that's what I did."

Horton's multi-faceted perspective of licensing is the heartbeat of TRI. The company operates on the belief that, for a corporate licensing program to even exist, there has to be a strong emotional attachment at all levels of the licensing process — but recognizing that attachment is not enough for Horton; it has to be understood before it can be used.

"What we attempt to do is really understand what makes [a brand's] hardcore enthusiast so passionate about the brand and then we highlight those equity attributes in the licensed product bringing in a broader audience to the brand," explains Horton. "For example, with Polaris one of our strong brand extensions is the rugged outdoor footwear at Target stores. Polaris had never been in footwear before, but our research showed that



THANKS TO TRI, SALEEN VEHICLES HAVE BECOME A STAPLE OF VIDEO GAMES LIKE *PROJECT GOTHAM*

90 percent of the people who bought the footwear had never bought a Polaris ATV, snowmobile or motorcycle. We've transferred the ruggedness and the 'outdooriness' of the brand into an ancillary category and now the Polaris brand is getting tremendous incremental exposure outside of its traditional channels of distribution to consumers that aren't the traditional Polaris consumer."

If it all sounds a little Machiavellian, that's because, according to Horton, it is. TRI is very much focused on not ignoring the hardcore enthusiasts of a brand, but it realizes that any licensing program searching for success needs to continually learn to reach out into broader demographics.

"We ultimately try to communicate to our clients that TRI views licensing as a product development process," adds Horton. "A lot of people view licensing as a revenue generating process, or a way to milk some pre-existing equity. We view it as a way of being able to make the most of a client's under-utilized asset to get product out to market that meets the needs of the consumer."

The wise voice ruling over TRI isn't a lucky fluke, but rather another carefully thought-out layer of the company. According to Horton, TRI has no junior associates — only senior

management with years of upper management experience. Each proposed licensing agreement receives the full scrutiny of the entire company. In addition, licensees are polled annually with a satisfaction survey that further ensures their goals match those of TRI's clients, keeping all parties involved on the same page.

"When you come to TRI, you wind up having people, partnerships, processes and practices that, all together, create a melting pot that you won't find anywhere else," says Horton.

Anywhere else, you might also be hard-pressed to find a CEO with drag racing experience on his resume. Horton, who is abiding to speed limits these days and sticking to restoring a 1971 Challenger convertible, points out that even his days as a speed demon play a role in TRI.

"I can relate to a brand like Mopar, because I *am* an enthusiast, and I've drag raced and been in and around fast cars all my life — I can relate to the companies that service that industry and also to the young consumer better than most," he says. "Because I have this background, it helps in communicating with them and in making sure they can maximize their brands in the best way."