

# (Cross)Road to Success

BY LYNN PETRAK



Remarkable double-digit growth and commitment to its customers makes Crossroads Original Designs red-hot.

**T**hey may have made a name for themselves as Crossroads Original Designs, but the 2010 *Country Business* Vendor of the Year has built its business more along the lines of a two-way street.

Since its founding in Bucyrus, Ohio, in 2003, the family-owned and -operated manufacturer of scented candles, reed diffusers, room sprays, framed art, and home decor accessories has continually reported double-digit growth, even during troubling economic times, something the company's leaders attribute as much to their customer-centric business philosophy as their product line.

"From the beginning, we really set out with a main focus of creating unique, quality products and giving great customer service at a great price. We started with those core values and stuck with them over the years," says president/owner Jason McMullen, who launched the business with brother and current vice president/owner Justin McMullen. "We were just looking to make candles, and we built it from zero to over 3,000 customers today."

The Crossroads credo of adhering to a vision is echoed by Justin McMullen. "One of the things we try to do is build a relationship and partnership with customers. I don't mean



Brothers Justin and Jason McMullen (left to right) have continually grown Crossroads Original Designs' product line and services with customers in mind.

just receiving an order and shipping it as quickly as possible—we do that—but we also want that customer to be a customer forever and create value for them," he says. Part of this value is providing merchants with selling tips, marketing strategies and display ideas, among other merchandising and support tools.

## It Starts with a Flame

Before beginning Crossroads Original Designs, the McMullen brothers were in a warehousing, packaging and distribution venture. When the two began bandying about ideas for a new gift business, they kept returning

to the core concept of giving to their customers. And, they listened to the advice of their sales and marketing man, Dave Kuns, who had worked in the gift sector previously and understood the marketplace trends and needs. "As we were sitting around the table one night, we threw out the concept [of a new gift and decor business], and he came up with ideas that would make an impact on the gift industry," recalls Jason McMullen.

Kuns says that top-notch service was part of those early brainstorming sessions, as was the group's desire to work with independent retailers looking to distinguish their stores from others. "We wanted to work with the independents because we didn't want a customer for one order. We want to have customers who are as loyal to us as we are to them," he says. Through the years, Crossroads customers have remained loyal, appreciating both the company's service and quality product. Kuns notes that more than ever, customers were looking for exclusivity.

For Crossroads Original Designs, exclusivity came in the form of jar candles, pillar candles, votives and



The Crossroads team operates out of an 80,000-square-foot facility in Ohio.



Retailers can customize a variety of products by adding licensed artwork.

mini melts crafted from a blend of paraffin wax, premium fragrance and color, and featuring a unique double-wick design and one-of-a-kind artwork from licensed artists. “When Crossroads came into the market, we saw an opportunity to take licensed artwork and put it on jar candles. That helped us get visible in a competitive market that was dominated by larger competitors,” remembers Kuns.

Director of Sales Todd Niemeyer agrees that no one could hold a candle to Crossroads’ offerings in those early years. “What got our placement was the novelty aspect of being able to customize our candles with artwork and the fact that our candle is second to none,” he says. “Now, people are looking specially for the Crossroads brand.”

### Lighting the Way

As the McMullen brothers continue to build their company, they focus not only on distinctive products but strong customer service. The company operates out of an 80,000-square-foot facility in Ohio and is represented by more than 50 sales reps in the United States and Canada. Continual introduction of new products, including reed diffusers, framed art and home decor pieces, allows the business to branch out.

At the same time, the catalog of images for the line of candles continues to expand. Now, estimates Jason McMullen, Crossroads offers more than 400 images from its licensed artists. Its private-label business also has taken off and exemplifies the company’s desire to work with retailers to better everyone’s sales and profitability. There is no setup fee for private labeling, a low minimum order, and customers can work with the company’s in-house graphic artist.

The private-label line is just part of the service and promotion programs that have

grown along with the company and helped the business earn the *Country Business* Vendor of the Year award. Retailers who work with Crossroads’ service and sales reps can get tips for display vignettes and other merchandising ideas through the company’s monthly newsletters, up-to-date website and regular phone discussions. Storeowners also can see what’s new at showrooms in Atlanta, Seattle, Chicago, Columbus, Minneapolis and Denver and at various trade shows. Through regular specials, the business shows appreciation to retailers, notes Kuns.

The McMullens and other Crossroads leaders also work closely with merchants to help them choose products that suit their own store’s needs and parameters. “We have a minimum opening order of \$100, which is pretty low compared to some of our competitors, and which is good for us and our customers. It allows them an opportunity to jump in with limited risk, and it’s an opportunity for us to get product into their stores,” explains Justin McMullen. Crossroads makes it easy for customers to order through the company website and

catalog as well as by phone, fax or in person at trade shows. Social media is another emerging tool Crossroads uses to communicate with merchants and shoppers; the company has an active Facebook page where it introduces new products, holds customer contests and more.

### Continuing to Burn Bright

As is true with any successful business, the McMullens are always looking ahead. New product development is ongoing, as are discussions on how to meet retailers’ needs.

Given such evolution and branching out, it’s a good thing that the McMullens didn’t name their venture Crossroads Candles, as they had briefly discussed. “We started out strictly as a candle company, but the long-term vision was to be able to diversify into other markets. We wanted a name that would allow us to do that,” says Jason McMullen.

So does the name “Crossroads” refer symbolically to the brothers’ new venture at a crossroads in their careers? No, laughs Jason McMullen, it’s much simpler. The name is simply a nod to the street on which the company headquarters is located. “Most people think the road was named for the company, not the other way around,” he says.

Either way, the Crossroads name has become linked to its founders’ ideals of quality and service, say supporters. As Cindy and Art Larivee, who distribute the company’s products in Canada, enthuse: “Crossroads makes our job a delight by being so innovative and forward-thinking, while at the same time sticking to the values, designs and comforts that the country market requires.” ■

*Lynn Petrak is a freelance writer based in La Grange, Illinois.*

## Facts at a Glance

**Company name:** Crossroads Original Designs

**Address:** 115 Crossroads Blvd., PO Box 149, Bucyrus, OH 44820

**Phone:** 866-247-0156

**Website:** www.crossroadscandles.com

**Date established:** 2003

**Number of products:** 25 to 30 product categories that can be customized with more than 400 different images

**Average wholesale prices:** \$7.50–\$23 with prices up to \$95

**Minimum order:** \$100

**Best-selling item:** Buttered Maple Syrup jar candles

**Trade shows:** Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, Market Square (PA) and Philadelphia