

In Profile



Siana Hristova / The Chronicle

Golden Goods designer Jeffrey Levine (left) and President Jeff Scult set up the company's design studio in Levine's San Francisco live-work space.

COMPANY FITS BRANDS TO A T-SHIRT

Golden Goods, started in 2009, gives promotional merchandise a makeover

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By Regan McMahon

Three years ago Jeff Scult had an epiphany after he went to a corporate party and brought home a swag bag. "They gave away a company T-shirt that no one would wash their car with, much less wear," he sniffs.

After nearly 20 years of working in corporate branding and advertising, he knew there had to be a better way. So he talked to his friend Jeffrey Levine, who had been working in graphic design and retail fashion for 15 years. Levine had designed and manufactured T-shirts for rock bands and Levi's and eventually created his own clothing line.

Together they came up with a bold concept: to elevate promo apparel to the level of contemporary retail fashion and make branded wearables that people actually love to wear — made from better fabric, with better graphics and a better fit. The two friends formed Golden Goods, and the company has taken off "like a rocket ship," says Scult, 46, reflecting on their success from Levine's Cow Hollow live-work space with a fabulous view of the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge.

They started at the end of 2009, doubled their business from 2010 to 2011, and are on track to do the same this year. They now do merchandise for Google, Facebook, Virgin, SalesForce, Pandora, DODOcase and the San Francisco Zen Center, in addition to yoga studios, spas, restaurants, bars, wineries, and the rock bands Black Crowes, Citizen Cope and Third Eye Blind.

"The best thing I can say about them is they make the first band merch that we actually wear ourselves," says Third Eye Blind drummer Brad Hargreaves.

The San Francisco Visitor Information Center has exclusively commissioned Golden Goods to create a brand for a line of official tourist T-shirts. And Scult and Levine just signed a deal with Joe Montana to create a custom apparel collection.

"We make somebody's favorite T-shirt that happens to have a corporate logo on it," says Levine, 42, who oversees all the design and production. He got his start mak-

ing bootleg T-shirts to sell on Grateful Dead tours in the 1990s, when he was still in college in Vermont. His designs weren't psychedelic tie-dyes, but had a distinctive, clean graphic look. He says someone from the band eventually contacted him and said, "Stop doing it, or come work with us." That's what led him to relocate to San Francisco, where he's been ever since.

Client Keith Belling, founder and CEO of the snack food Popchips, was sold when Scult

brought a couple of T-shirts to a baseball game they were going to. "As soon as I saw — and felt — them, I knew they were exactly the kind of T-shirts we'd been looking for."

But how do you make a logo look cool? One way is by going big. The old-school approach was slap a small, discreet logo over the left side of the chest. But Levine splashes an oversize logo across the middle, making it more akin to a fashion T from a fine boutique. Another trick is using a distressed printing technique to give the logo a vintage look.

"When it's distressed, it ceases to be a brand and becomes a piece of art," Levin says. "It becomes timeless and looks more like fashion." More than 95 percent of their shirts have distressed printing.

Quality of materials and ink are key, as well. For their shirts, all made in San Francisco, Levine selects bolts of very soft cotton (organic on demand) and uses eco-bleaching, in which custom water-based inks lift the dye out of the shirt for a super-smooth feel.

"Feeling is believing," Levine says.

And Golden Goods doesn't just make T-shirts. It will develop a company's whole brand and marketing strategy and make any kind of wearable.

Says Nate Valentine, owner of Vintage 415 and partner in several San Francisco restaurants and bars, "They made onesies for babies when I wanted that."

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Golden Goods

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Golden Goods:
www.golden
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