

Dialogue



An Ax to Design

To get people out of the office and into the woods, designer Peter Buchanan-Smith founded Best Made Company, which connects design to the great outdoors. **by Steven Heller**

I first met Peter Buchanan-Smith when he joined the first class of School of Visual Arts' MFA Design: Designer as Author program, which I co-founded with Lita Talarico. He always had an entrepreneurial bent that was underscored by artistic passions. These manifested in a variety of postgraduate endeavors. Buchanan-Smith published his first book, *Speck: A Curious Collection of Uncommon Things*, right out of school, and co-founded an independent publishing house. Then, he became art director of *The New York Times*' OpEd page, design consultant for Isaac Mizrahi and creative director of *Paper* magazine. Every time he got comfortable, he started something new.

The New York City-based, Canadian-born designer founded Best Made Company (www.bestmadeco.com) in 2009 because he saw a need for a better ax—"an evocative tool that played an indispensable role in his life working on cattle farms and paddling and portaging the lakes of Northern Canada," as his site explains. Today, Best Made has expanded to sell a variety of outdoor accessories and fashions, and is primed to be the next big thing. I spoke to Buchanan-Smith about entrepreneurship, design and blades.

How did you become a design entrepreneur? There were many catalysts, but the driving force was just a love/need to make things. Since my first book *Speck*—my thesis for my MFA—I've always been fascinated with the role objects play in our lives. With Best Made, I set out to create the stage where my own objects can play off one another. And now, I'm busy crafting that story, keeping the actors in motion and the audience entertained.

You began as a graphic designer. What element of graphic design do you maintain with Best Made? There's the literal day-to-day graphic design that I'm still connected to, and then there's the art of designing a company or brand. Now that I'm CEO of Best Made, I'm less career-focused, and more company-driven. I use my skills and the mindset of a designer as I shape and grow the company. We're now seeing just how good it is for a company to have a designer—or one with a design mindset—as its founder and leader. Just ask Apple.

What triggered your interest in a well-made ax? You can either hate an ax or love it, but I'll be damned if you can deny how useful it is at starting a fire. Around 2009, I was going through a divorce and an overwhelming series of calamitous events, and I thought: *If all I had was completely and utterly lost, what's the one thing I'd need most?* And the more I came to reckon with the ax, the more it made sense as a real part of me: my tool and perch for many greater things.

How did you bridge this ax fixation into Best Made? I bridged the fixation by not fixating and keeping the mission bigger than myself. I set out to get people to the campfire, and for that, I knew they'd need a well-made ax. And once they had the ax, maybe they'd need the first-aid kit, the warm wool blanket or the right waxed jacket, and so on.

What has the process of building a business entailed? Setting realistic expectations while constantly striving to improve the reality we're in.



You currently have a store in New York City and have produced a print catalog. What's your business structure? The best virtues of small business—and the envy of all big business—are freedom and agility. As a designer, I'm fortunate in that I'm trained to make things materialize, often under tight deadlines. I take all of the product photography, I write the copy, I design the website and the catalog, and that makes my job thrilling, and it gives the company soul.

Best Made has certainly grown. Do you foresee more growth? We're just getting started. Between clothing, home goods, edible products, camp gear, books and accessories, we've spanned so many categories in just five years. [We've learned from] all that hard work, and we're becoming better masters of these domains. Now, we're perfectly poised to start drilling down and continue to expand upon our mission and reach more people.

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Have you had to hire various specialists? We've hired photographers, filmmakers, lawyers, clothing designers, bag designers, type designers and graphic designers, and I hope many other characters as we grow. Having a clear and consistent mission is critical to working with so many people. Everyone's got to be on the same page, from the top down.

Do you push your comfort zone, or are you happy where you are? As we grow, I seem to have little choice in the matter—my

comfort zone is automatically challenged, all the time, and every quarter it seems like I'm running a new company: new staff, new product, new customers. They all change the dynamic. They can throw dirt on me when I get too comfortable!

Can you describe how you're branding Best Made? The Best Made 'X' is above all a mark of authority, but it should impart some sense of humanity and even playfulness. I want Best Made to be that place most of us only knew as kids: when possibilities were endless and expertise was for the grown-ups.

Is there a goal at this point, or are you focusing on the here and now? The goal is to keep the momentum driving forward and our intentions good and grounded. Then the fun and excitement will follow. We're just about to turn five years old, and that's a major milestone. I try not to think too far out or look too far back. ■