

▼ **100 FASTEST-GROWING PRIVATE COMPANIES**

Promo company's birth wasn't Compleat chance

By Elaine Porterfield
Contributing Writer

The story of The Compleat Company is much like many others: Mix together an idea and a motivated entrepreneur, sprinkle in a dash of serendipity, and bake with a good measure of dedication.



Matthew Mason and Glenn Leimbacher

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE COMPLEAT COMPANY

Matthew Mason was working at Nordstrom Inc. and designing T-shirts on the side when he ran into an old friend from high school, Glenn Leimbacher, at the 1991 Bumbershoot arts festival in Seattle.

"It was a chance meeting," Mason recalled. "He said, 'Hey, what are you up to?'"

As it turned out, both men were in the business of selling T-shirts. From that chance encounter came a business devoted not just to shirts but to promotional products as well. Its revenue climbed to \$2.7 million last year, up from \$1.9 million the previous year.

Mason and Leimbacher say the mission of their Seattle-based business is to provide promotional merchandise expertise to companies seeking to increase their name recognition and brand awareness. Their massive product line of 700,000 items ranges from apparel and hats to games, toys, tools, watches and travel goods. The Seattle Mariners is one major client.

Starting the company was an exhilarating, but often exhausting time, Mason said. "Basically, the way it started was me designing T-shirts while working at Nordstrom," he said. "I designed some T-shirts for the employees' relief fund. It took off."

Leimbacher became the first full-time employee in 1991 -- after the

pair saw each other at Bumbershoot -- while Mason continued his day job in the Nordstrom import office.

"It was absolutely crazy," recalled Mason, who is now president and CEO. "I was working during lunch breaks, running down the street during coffee breaks." But his family has a strong streak of entrepreneurial spirit, and Mason had a good idea of the challenges and skills needed to start a business. That kept him going.

"When I was in college, I worked for my father's packaging company, Packers Plus," he said. "I did definitely get some of that spirit from him. And my mother is a CPA, and she did give some guidance as well."

Mason left his job at Nordstrom in 1994. "We were ready," he said. "I probably waited too long. But I had some lasting friendships I made from Nordstrom."

Today, his company has 12 employees.

"What makes a difference is the people," he said. "They're great people, very hard working, very dedicated."

Leimbacher, now vice president of sales and marketing for the company, wants The Compleat Company to remain nimble and technologically advanced as it grows, but with a great deal of individual attention and high-level service for

each customer. It's mantra is "Merchandise Intelligence," he said. That includes making clever and creative product suggestions to clients.

"We must embrace change and adapt to our clients' demands," he said. "I often compare an enjoyment for gardening and nurturing plants to client (care)," he said. "You have to plant them, water them, talk to them and then, they'll eventually bloom for you."

But it certainly doesn't end there, he said.

"Every day is a new battle on timeline, price and quality," Leimbacher said. "Trying to get the client all three sides of the sales triangle takes a lot of negotiating."

Said Mason: "Our past successes in part have always been to respond quickly to the customer. It's important not to lose that sense of urgency to deliver information as quickly and accurately as possible. We want to be partners and not just vendors -- there's a big difference."

THE COMPLEAT CO.		83
Seattle		
Promotional merchandising agency		
2002	\$1.67M	8
2003	\$1.94M	10
2004	\$2.74M	12