

After landing Uber as client, Twin Cities tech marketing company went into overdrive

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Imprint Engine owners Travis Veit, 37; Caleb Gilbertson, 31; and Zach Sussman, 35, show off some of their marketing items.

About seven years ago, Caleb Gilbertson, an energetic techie and partner at fledgling Imprint Engine, a marketing and corporate swag fulfillment firm, learned from a blog on Uber’s website that it was going to begin operating in the Twin Cities. “I saw they were going to open in this market in 2012-13,” recalled Gilbertson, 31. “I said, ‘We gotta meet this Uber marketing woman from Chicago who is trying to set up in Minneapolis.’ We contacted her with the idea that at least we could sell Uber some swag.”

His team bent over backward “to convince her that we knew this market and that we could run it for her. Events, promotions, fliers, merchandise. Anything and everything.”

It must have been a pretty good pitch.
And campaign.

The Imprint Engine team decorated and operated the first Uber ice cream truck, rolled out the original “Uber Pride” campaign and marched with Uber workers in the 2013 Minneapolis Pride Parade. They ended up customizing Uber promotional materials nationally.

St. Louis Park Imprint Engine was the introductory “brand ambassador” in the Twin Cities for Uber, which accounted for about 30 percent of Imprint Engine’s 2018 revenue of \$4.5 million from about 200 clients.

Moreover, thanks to the growth of Uber and other clients, Imprint Engine was recognized recently as one of the fastest-growing privately owned Twin Cities companies, as ranked by the Business Journal.

Its revenue has nearly tripled over the past three years. And it recently landed a new national account with CBRE, the big commercial real estate company.

Imprint Engine, with 25 employees, will handle this year’s national rollout of Hana, the 25-market, shared-workspace subsidiary that CBRE is launching to challenge category leader WeWork.

The Imprint Engine gang is busy constructing a portable prototype of Hana workspace inside a shipping container that will be used to introduce the service on a city-by-city national tour.

“We’ve evolved into an end-to-end marketing machine,” said Zach Sussman, 35, the third partner who joined in 2018.

Sussman was vice president of marketing at Kaskaid Hospitality, the restaurant holding company that operates as Crave, Union and BLVD eateries.

Sussman, previously a client of Imprint Engine, was impressed with Imprint’s growing ability to be a one-stop shop for marketing materials; promotional merchandise such as pens, T-shirts and water bottles; design and printing; plus e-commerce and publicity campaigns.

Travis Veit, 37, founded the company with Gilbertson in 2012, originally as Everything Promotions.

Two years later they changed the name.

The pair found that the secret sauce was in being, to a great extent, a technology company that was the engine that enabled Imprint to provide clearinghouse-like service to clients for a variety of marketing-related services and products.

Imprint Engine operates from offices in the front of a warehouse full of inventory supplied by many local printing and product providers.

“We increasingly are doing more than just promotions,” Veit said. “Our focus is technology. And the products range to apparel and signage.”

The growing customer list includes Target, Life Time fitness and Facebook Marketplace. Imprint Engine also provides customized client websites.

“We don’t do trash and trinkets,” Sussman added. “We do customized, end-to-end marketing solutions. E-commerce. Employee-incentive programs. Branded apparel and merchandise.”

“From a Patagonia with a corporate logo on it to a branded water bottle,” he said.
“Not just promotional products. That’s a dime-a-dozen.”

And there’s still a lot of promotion left in these boys.

Uber, now under different management, for years was rocked by allegations of a frat-boy headquarters culture, including sexual harassment by male executives and charges by female riders in many cities that they were assaulted by drivers.

The Imprint Engine squad worked to improve that image by partnering with an animal-rescue organization to deliver puppies in the Twin Cities for 15 minutes of snuggle time.

Who doesn’t love a good puppy story?

The ride-hailing service in 2016 and 2017 invited Uber subscribers to open their phone apps for tail-wagging affection. The cost was \$30. Uber donated a portion of the fee to Secondhand Hounds in Eden Prairie.

After a user opened the app at a predesignated time and selected the “Puppies” vehicle option, a driver would bring a puppy to the subscriber for 15 minutes of cuddle respite.

Some of the featured puppies also were available for adoption.

The puppy love opportunity was first offered in the Twin Cities in 2016 on Valentine’s Day and subsequently in other U.S. cities. Uber has proved a great partner for Imprint Engine.

So far so good for three owners of Imprint Engine, two of whom started out in the bar business and the other one in logistics.