

Steve Tooker
President & CEO
Tattoo Manufacturing

PHOTOS: TOM SPITZ

Tattoos for Every Occasion

By Mary Minor Davis

What was once a prize in a Cracker Jack box a century ago is now one of the most popular couture items for consumers around the world – the temporary tattoo.

How popular is temporary tat art? Think 7 million transferable tattoos a day printed right here in Tucson.

Tattoo Manufacturing started in a garage in 1989. Today it's the world's largest temporary tattoo maker, serving 90 percent of the North American market and 70 percent of the world market, according to Steve Tooker, president and CEO, who acquired the company in 2008.

In 2012, the company reported gross sales of nearly \$25 million, with its largest customers including the likes of Kellogg's, Kraft, Mattel and Disney, to name a few.

There also are hundreds of thousands of other customers – from tiny tots to soccer coaches and wedding planners.

That's a big leap from 100 years ago when Cracker Jack promoted "a prize in every box" – often a temporary tattoo. As the popularity, quality and safety of temporary body art grew, so did consumer demand.

Today TM offers more than 7,000 images in stock – the on-line list of choices spans from angels to zodiac signs. There are cartoon characters, dragons, fairies, motorcycles, religious symbols, skulls, even wounds and scars. Custom images can be created from photos, artwork and company logos. Glitter, glow-in-the-dark and scented options also are available.

Everything is designed, manufactured and sold at the Tucson headquarters near Aviation Parkway and Palo Verde Road. TM has 100 employees.

Typically the tattoo image is transferred to the skin with a wet washcloth, then lasts for 3 to 5 days. Once it sets, the tattoo is waterproof – but can be removed at any time with rubbing alcohol.

While the majority of consumers are younger, TM offers designs and products for all ages. Recently the company launched Skin Couture, sold as a high-end accessory for women at cosmetic counters and boutiques, Tooker said.

"Women like to share these designs for showers, birthday parties, girls' night out and other social occasions. It's a way to enjoy body art without it being permanent."

Tooker said temporary tattoos allow for personal self-expression, without the sometimes painful process of a permanent tattoo. "Our customers are motivated by a desire to interact with a property – whether it's a superhero they look up to, a popular cartoon character or a work of fine art."

That's one benefit of making a trendy product that's tempo-

rary – people coming back for more.

This Tucson company has been recognized as one of the best places to work by the Advertising Specialty Institute and in 2010 by Wells Fargo's Copper Cactus Awards. In 2012, the company also received a Copper Cactus Award in the Business Growth category. In April it was named 2013 Small Business Exporter of the Year by the Arizona District of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

While temporary tattoos have grown in popularity over the last 100 years, body art has been around for centuries. Often used for religious or ceremonial purposes, tattoos have expanded to include fine art, imagery, characters and personal messaging around the world.

According to an online news story published by Dave Eisenberg in June 2012, 36 percent of 18-25 year olds and 40 percent of adults 26-40 in the United States have at least one tattoo. Pew Research estimates that 54 percent of GenNexters have at least one form of body art – be it a tattoo, hair of "an unnatural color" or a body piercing.

But temporary body art lets people be whimsical, have fun – and change their mind. There's no commitment and no worry about what a permanent tattoo might look like on sagging skin decades from now.

The company also works with nonprofit groups (the popular pink ribbon is one of the company's biggest items), schools and other organizations.

Tooker continues to watch for new opportunities on the horizon. The consumer's desire for immediate gratification has the company looking at mobile apps that would allow a consumer to send an image of what they'd like to have, and TM would design and ship it the next day.

"Mass customization is where we're headed in most markets," he said. "It began with cell phones. The immediacy of information has led to the immediacy and customization of everything. Consumer retail is no exception."

TM also plans to continue to round out its product line. Currently the company offers other products including pocket calendars, books, stickers and scratch-n-win cards. "While tattoos are a good lead in, retailers want more," he said.

Tooker intends to continue to grow the company's global reach. "There are so many markets not yet tapped," he said.

Want to learn more? Check out the company's UpFront blog on the website www.tattoosales.com to learn about trends in tattoos, ideas for special occasions and the history of temporary tattoos in more detail. **Biz**



Clockwise from bottom left: Greg Price, Lianne Rae Monreal, Steve Tooker, Alison Root, Carolyn Mills, Stephanie Bermudez, Victor Meza and Sam Gilmore.

Tattoo Manufacturing

President/CEO – Steve Tooker

Number of employees – 100

Typical in-stock unit price – 55 cents

2012 gross sales – \$25 million

Production – 7 million tattoos per day