

In Good Spirits

Constant communication and cohesive brand vision define this distributor-distillery relationship.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park is comprised of more than 500,000 acres that lie across the Tennessee-North Carolina border. It's famous for its endlessly undulating hills of deciduous forest, beautiful tiered waterfalls and 800 miles of hiking trails. In fact, it's the country's most visited park in the National Park Service system, welcoming over 11 million visitors each year, according to National Geographic. That's twice the number of the second most visited park – the Grand Canyon.

Just five minutes from the park's headquarters and visitor center is Gatlinburg, TN, home of Sugarlands Distilling Company, which manufactures and distributes house-made moonshine across the country. Over the past four years, Sugarlands has grown its employee number to almost 100 in order to serve the massive foot traffic it contends with since it occupies coveted real estate on the main drag that leads into the park.

Of course, along with its house spirits, Sugarlands has branded merchandise for sale. Nearby distributor Threds Inc. (asi/344356) was at first just one of seven vendors for the distillery, procuring apparel and glassware. But Reede Copeland, general manager of Sugarlands, says it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a cohesive brand image with so many cooks in the kitchen. "It was a headache," says Copeland. "We looked to our branded merch to help identify our brand, and we found it was still hard to identify. And we were paying a full-time merchandising manager to monitor all these relationships."

Threds recognized this, and suggested to Sugarlands that they handle all of the distillery's merchandise needs. "It was a bit fractured before," says Kelby Shymlock, vice president of Threds. "Some things just didn't fit their brand. But now we have five in-house designers who work on it, and we do everything from keychains to apparel, glassware, custom headwear, hoodies, magnets, stickers, openers and more."



Reede Copeland of Sugarlands Distilling Company (left) and Kelby Shymlock of Threds Inc.

Now that Sugarlands has put its brand into Threds' capable hands, it was instantly more cohesive. "When Threds stepped in, it was the answer we needed," says Copeland. "They helped us with a collective identity. And they're not as concerned about minimums as other distributors. They just want our items to move. When I hear that, it's music to my ears. We communicate almost daily about product needs and inventory levels."

Since Threds has brought its expertise full-time to Sugarlands, sales with the client have grown by double digits each year. "We don't want to be a product vendor, because then it becomes transactional," says Shymlock. "We plan with them, we launch new items, we bring new ideas. And they're a great company to work with. They're open to our ideas, we listen to each other, we talk about what's working and not working. The trust level has to be high. We talk to them almost on a daily basis."

That always-open line of communication comes in especially handy when rush orders are needed. Copeland remembers a time when they experienced what he calls an "inventory snafu," leading to a critical shortage of the custom wristbands used to identify customers who are of legal age and have paid the tasting fee.

"We use them every day," says Copeland. "They're very unique items, so we can't just pick them up at Staples. It was so urgent I

"We listen to each other, we talk about what's working and not working. The trust level has to be high."

Kelby Shymlock, Threds Inc.

called Kelby directly. In four hours we had a new proof, and in four days we had 100,000 pieces delivered, which is unheard of for a custom printing job. It's a testament to their level of customer service and agility."

It comes down to the pride that both parties take in the respective products they offer. "We want to produce something we're proud of, and in distilling that's very important," says Copeland. "Threds also takes a lot of pride in the product they put out, and there's no sacrificing quality. We're growing rapidly, and Threds is definitely poised to grow with us, no matter what comes."