

By KELLI MILLIGAN STAMMEN
+ Photo by TIM JOHNSON

Small Business

ZerOed In

Design pro finds an eager market for his stylish and functional handcrafted wallets.

Paul Westrick could save a lot of money on utility bills if he installed a revolving door at his one-stop retail shop, zerOz, which sits smack dab in the middle of one of Downtown's hottest neighborhoods on E. Gay Street.

On one weekday both new and returning customers came and went as often as the corner light changed from red to green, and Westrick greeted them all.

"It's so exciting," he says, with obvious enthusiasm and no hint of sarcasm as he glances from the back workshop space to the retail center out front. "People come here and they are so excited."

So what's exciting? Wallets.

About five years ago Westrick, who spent years as senior graphic designer and brand guru with Fitch, had an idea that today has turned the local wallet market on its head. His sleek, thinly-designed, leather cash and credit card holder is flying off the shelves, and it all started with a common frustration.

"I grew up with a fat wallet," he says. "This is what (men) all grew up with and were comfortable with.



Paul Westrick

We've had it forever."

Westrick, an avid cyclist who commutes to and from work on his bicycle everyday, started using a rubber band to hold his cash and cards instead of a traditional wallet. His idea grew from there.

What he designed is a leather-wrapped pocket, which holds dividers for credit cards, a driver's license, employer IDs, etc., as well as a pliable strap to hold cash on the outside. The wallet is sleek and small, retaining its shape after longterm use, and easy to slip into a front or back pants pocket.

Westrick, who owns both the design and utility patents on the product, says the designs often incorporate shapes or textures. He creates the wallets with 50 different colors of Italian leather or American bison.

All zerOz products are made on-site at 17 E. Gay St. Wallets start at \$38 and are available for retail immediately from the store, or they can be custom made based on a customer's specific design preferences. Those orders usually take a couple weeks to complete.

Having a retail shop for zerOz

wasn't part of the original plan, Westrick says. He had planned to sell strictly online. However, once the shop opened, his natural salesmanship and social skills elevated the vibe in the store and made the experience a fun one for customers, many of whom were making return visits with smiles on their faces.

The recent busy day is not an anomaly, Westrick says, despite the fact that zerOz does very little advertising to get the word out.

"I call it 'old-school viral,'" he says. The word of mouth spreads like this—a guy walks into a bar and when he goes to pay his tab, he pulls a zerOz wallet out of the front of his pants pocket. The question his buddies ask is, "Is that your wallet?"

"Seeing it sets the selling in motion," Westrick says.

That's what's happened to Ryan Reeder, 23, who lives in the neighborhood and happened to stop by that weekday.

"A couple of my friends have seen it and ask 'is that your wallet?'" he says. "I was going to work one day and just stopped in (the store). I bought one and I've been happy with



it ever since. It fits my minimalist style. It's everything I wanted in a wallet and couldn't find in a wallet."

Chris Dawson of Clintonville agrees, and he owns two of them. He was in zerOz before the holidays to buy a new wallet for his 11-year-old son.

“It's about simplicity and focus. People are coming in to buy a wallet, and they are excited about it. It's always fun.”

His 14-year-old daughter loves hers, he said. His wife, Laura, who works Downtown, turned him on to the product.

"She bought herself one, and I liked it and asked for one for my birthday," Dawson says. "It got me out of a regular wallet. It's small and I can carry it to work. I don't even notice it. It doesn't stick out or poke you."

Westrick notes that 50 percent of his sales come from women, buying for themselves or their significant others.

This past summer zerOz established a partnership with clothing retailer Express, which has helped spread the word about the wallet to more potential buyers. Westrick also makes a leather backing for iPhones (to match a zerOz wallet) and a business card holder. However, Westrick says he does not plan to branch out from his core business.

"It's about simplicity and focus," he says. "People are coming in to buy a wallet, and they are excited about it. It's always fun."

Kelli Milligan Stammen is a freelance writer.

zerOz

17 E. Gay St., Columbus 43215
zeroz.com

BUSINESS: Patented ultra-slim wallets handcrafted in Italian leather. ZerOz are made in the Gay Street design studio and sold in the shop and online.

OWNER: Paul Westrick

EMPLOYEES: Five