

ADWEEK

# Southern Tide's Best Marketing Asset? College Students

The apparel company's ambassador program increases brand awareness and loyalty

*By: Diana Pearl*



For Southern Tide, a Greenville, South Carolina-born apparel company and retailer, its strongest marketing doesn't come from the minds of the world's top agencies, or even its own in-house team. Instead, it comes from a small army of college students that serve as the brand's ambassadors during their university years - and sometimes, beyond.

*Pictured is Alec Kitch, a Southern Tide Ambassador*



Southern Tide first introduced its college ambassador program in 2008, and since then, it's developed into one of the brand's most powerful marketing assets. The primary thought that led to its development was the age of Southern Tide's prime customer demographic: that post-college, young adult demographic of 22-to-35-year-olds, the company's CEO, Christopher Heyn, said. By connecting with students on college campuses, the company could early on establish a brand loyalty that would continue throughout their young adulthood.

Since its inception, the program has become highly competitive; Heyn said that last year, Southern Tide received 2,000 applications for just 20 spots. The primary qualification for one of these coveted ambassadorships is hard to describe: It's all about finding people who embody the brand - Heyn used words like "coastal" with a "Southern perspective" to characterize their ambassadors. Though that descriptor may be relatively vague, he said that when you find the right person, it's obvious.

"We're looking for a leader on campus, someone who is authentic in their passions for... sport, events, communications, marketing, athletics, all those kinds of things," he said.





Right now, Southern Tide has around 40 college ambassadors. They are not paid, and because of the unpaid nature of the program, the hours are flexible and rarely tally up to more than five or six hours in a week. When busy times in the semester pop up - such as finals week - the hours will be less.

An ambassador's main job is simply to create content around the products that Southern Tide sends them. Southern Tide, in turn, takes these photos and uses them on its own social media accounts and in its marketing. "I would challenge anybody to not think it's professional," Heyn said of the photos the ambassadors capture.

Oftentimes, it's as simple as the ambassadors snapping photos in Southern Tide gear while traveling or spending semesters abroad. Those sort of photos provide adventure-filled moments for the brand to use, and because they're created by customers themselves, they have an authentic quality that's hard to replicate. "It's real and the consumers get it," said Heyn. "Whether it's someone flying a plane where there's someone shooting the river gaps with someone skiing... whether it's someone tobogganing, you name it, our folks are out there doing it, living and experiencing it."

In addition to visual content, ambassadors also work with Southern Tide's retail partners in their respective college towns, and help out when the brand (or these partners) host events in the area. Ambassadors will even weigh in on Southern Tide's designs when the team sends them over for feedback before they're on store shelves.



College ambassador programs have become an increasingly popular way for brands to connect with college students, increasing brand awareness on campus and hopefully, making these young adults into customers for years to come. The commitment level and perks of these programs vary from brand to brand, and Heyn said that Southern Tide's is a more "active involvement." The Southern Tide corporate team is communicating with the ambassadors on a weekly basis.

"It's not one of these things where we send them a couple of drinking cups and blanket and say go have fun," he said.

As you might expect, with a name like Southern Tide, the majority of the brand's customers - and ambassador applicants - come from the Southeastern United States. And though it's important for the brand to remain present in the areas where it's already popular, having ambassadors from across the country allows Southern Tide to expand into new regions, where the name recognition might not be as strong, too. As Heyn said, "Our ambassadors are our pioneers out there in these uncharted markets."

Of course, most college ambassador programs are just that - for college students. Heyn said that the majority of people stop working with the brand after they graduate, but not all. There are some, he said, that "stayed on just because they're passionate about it and we couldn't part ways." Today, there are 10 of those, whom they call "lifestyle ambassadors."

For those who don't become lifestyle ambassadors, Heyn said they often still stay in touch with the brand after graduation. And a key perk? They're able to use their Southern Tide connections as referrals for their first jobs.

