

TALK=ACTION

BY RUSS BENGTSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BOYKO

Sandy Bodecker led the SB revolution with dialogue.

Sandy Bodecker's office on the Nike Campus in Beaverton, Oregon is not a safe place for a sneakerhead. As the head of SB and 6.0, Nike's action sports programs, Bodecker gets all the latest samples. Yet-to-be-named Dunks, so many colourways of the upcoming P-Rod 2, different collaborations with a variety of companies, and the toys and other promo items that go with them lie strewn across the office. Given the insane amount of product that's been stacked on the shelves and on the floor, it's amazing to think that SB is only five years old. Before launching the program in 2002, Nike did try its best to get into the action sports (read: skate) market. But it failed miserably. Enter Bodecker. With a youthful appearance and a corresponding energy that belie the fact that he's been with the company for more than a quarter-century, it's almost like the man's initials appropriately and successfully led Nike towards its current place in skate culture.

Talk about the SB revolution. It seemed like it became the collectible God almost overnight.

That's not something we ever planned at all. I mean, we believed that we could actually bring innovation that was relevant for skaters. Skaters do need cushioning, they do need protection, there are real performance attributes to shoes. Not necessarily in the same way you would bring it to a running shoe or a basketball shoe. We also knew that we had to earn respect, and we still do. This is not something that you earn it once and you kind of go away. This is an ongoing commitment to the core skate community. So we really continue to spend a lot of time listening to what the community is looking for from a company like Nike. We're not gonna be a small company like Girl/Chocolate, or any of the companies that sort of blew up vertically in that world back when it was a cottage industry. People kind of laugh, but Billabong is over a billion dollars. Quiksilver is closing in on three billion dollars. So the industry is dramatically different than it was five years ago, ten years ago. Where we want to go, and what we want to be with this community, is a core skate brand. We're fortunate that we had some product that people could reference, the Dunk. That's where we started; we started with one shoe. We decided we were gonna put Air in the heel and we're gonna put padding in the tongue to make it a little more appropriate to skate. And for some reason, probably we were the first one to bring storytelling to the skate community when we did the original work around some of the graphics we took off of some of the boards and applied it to the shoes, and went from there.

But a lot of the people that line up for the shoes don't skate.

Initially? That's true. I think today probably a much higher percentage of the people coming into SB are coming through a skater's perspective.

There were 100 people in line for the Day of the Dead, and I wasn't hearing it's so good to skate, I was hearing it's worth \$400 on eBay.

There is that part of the sneaker community. I guess I would characterize it this way: we've had a lot of e-mails and letters and face-to-face Thank You's from skate shops for 'helping us keep the lights on' because we were able to make good money off some of the SB storied product. And if that's one way we can contribute to keeping the community going, that's great. Our intention is to try to tell great, relevant stories through really good product execution. At the same time, you know, that's a small percentage of your actual business. For us, we want the 12-year-old kid who's just super-down for skating to come in and be able to skate. And so we started with something new, something fresh for people, but now so much more of our business is driven by the core skate community.

Of course, this wasn't the first time Nike tried to enter the skate market. How did you change your approach so that it would work this time?

I think two things. One, we went in very humble from the perspective of admitting we screwed it up the first couple times. We really do want to commit to this community for the long term. We're willing to pay our dues. We want to listen to what you have to say. And we're willing to take the sh*t that people throw at you, because in a lot of respects we earned that. We said we're not gonna try to reinvent the wheel, and we're not gonna go out and try and buy our way into the market. If you look at our original team you know they were all well-respected skaters. But we didn't come in and throw big bucks down for Tony Hawk or [Eric] Koston or [Geoff] Rowley or take that kind of approach. We spent a lot of time working with them to try and develop innovation within the skate world. Now, people may have not liked the visuals of some of the stuff that has come out, like the E-Cue, however no one would say it was

a bad skate shoe. So I think we allowed ourselves to engage with the core community and establish a dialogue. We spent a lot of time actually thanking the retailers that gave us an opportunity to be there. Because without them giving us that benefit of the doubt - the third time? - we wouldn't have had a chance.

So what does it take for a retailer to get an SB account?

We set ourselves up to say we're gonna service the core skate community. There are a few exceptions where you have a more boutique-oriented shop, but it has a very very strong tie. It's either owned by a pro skater like Huf in SF, or has a huge history in skate like Supreme, for example, on the East Coast. We're not gonna go outside that core chain of distribution. Also, we basically said we don't want to try to make this something; we want the retailer we work with to be successful. We don't want to overburden you with too much product; we want to build this relationship over time. So if you're a good core skateshop, you have a very good chance of getting an SB account.

So what happens if, for example, you're at Livestock and then you have Goodfoot opening a store in Vancouver. Do they both get it?

Not necessarily, no. I mean, I think you have to be careful of...just because you are the de facto door in one location, if you move into somebody else's city and you become the competition for that original skate shop, we're going to be loyal to our original skate shop. I think Goodfoot's a great account, and they do really good stuff, but maybe skate's not the place for them to be in Vancouver. They may actually work out fine. They may go into a location where the competition just doesn't exist. But if I was to be honest, the account I'd want to open more than anything in Vancouver is Antisocial. You know, and hopefully at some point they'll be comfortable



enough with us in this industry to do that.

When a SB shoe comes out how do you decide how many shoes Canada gets compared to the U.S.? Is it based on per capita?

No, I think it's based on sort of penetration, how many shops you have, what type of shops that you are dealing with. Some shops are really tiny, and the

last thing we want to have is excess product for them, because they're almost living month-to-month. So you go to the sales team up there and they work with the shops to come up with what's the right strategy. There's some stuff that we purposely are only going to make so many because it is what it is. And sometimes we say, like the Day

of The Dead, the person that initiated the project used to be the skate sales rep in Canada, and now he's in Mexico, so he wanted to take care of his Canadian friends. And we said that made sense.