

MARKETING

Using Reality TV To Sell Crazy Clothes

Apparel outfit TapouT rides the mixed-martial-arts craze—and pumps up its gear with a hot cable show

By Mark Hyman

Imagine a reality show built around a company whose founder wanders the country in a tricked-out bus searching for unknowns to endorse his products. Hardly sounds like the next *Dancing with the Stars*. But add a few plot twists and see what happens. The company is TapouT, the apparel outfit that sets fashion rules for the up-and-coming sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). The unknowns are hungry MMA fighters. And the company's founder? Just another camo-wearing, face-painted, former jujitsu-fighting dude who calls himself Mask.

That quirky backstory not only has made *TapouT* an unlikely TV hit—the second season begins on cable's *Versus* on July 30—but has helped catapult the company into an impressive lifestyle brand leveraging the red-hot interest in MMA. The company that Mask started from the trunk of his Mustang in 1997, hawking T-shirts at "any startup gym I could find," now sells its workout gear, combat togs, and even skimpy ladies' swimsuits in 10,000 stores worldwide.

Last year privately held TapouT posted sales of \$25 million. This year they'll be closer to \$100 million, predicts TapouT President Marc Kreiner. The company in October brought in talent and sports marketing heavyweight Creative Art-

ists Agency to help plan new ventures. Next up: TapouT branded shoes, sunglasses, energy drinks, and even a comic-book series based on the life and times of Mask, aka Charles Lewis, and his real-life buddies and raffish business associates.

The question is how long TapouT's adrenaline rush will last. The company's fate is tied to a spectacle that's still young and, in some quarters, unproven. Two MMA pro fight leagues recently admitted they might run out of money before the end of the year, an

indication that the sport's growth is far from certain. There's also the specter of competition from bigger apparel brands. Everlast already has made a foray into the MMA market. Is Mask scared? He scoffs at the idea. "We're respected. We were there before MMA was popular."

For now, TapouT's timing would appear to be impeccable. Interest in MMA, a sport that was born in the U.S. in the early 1990s, has never been higher. A surprising 35% of Americans call themselves fans, according to the ESPN Sports Poll. Although young white males are its core audience, 22% of women say they follow it.

MMA itself defies easy explanation. Fighters climb into an enclosed ring and pummel each other with moves borrowed from jujitsu, wrestling, boxing, and kickboxing. In the professional ranks, there's big money at stake. The sport's superstars earn hundreds of thousands of dollars for a night's work. Watching a glitzy bout in Las Vegas can set you back \$400.

That would have been a splurge for Lewis when he started TapouT. At the time, he was living in his hometown of San Bernardino, Calif., stuck in an uninspiring job. Daydreaming about a new career, Lewis—who declines to give his age or say what his job was—came up with a plan to sell shirts to muscle-bound gym rats. He gave the company a catchy name, "tap out" being MMA lingo for the act of surrender in a match. Then, with no money for marketing, he invented his alter ego—a character he calls equal parts "vampire, rock star, and pirate"—to help pitch.

Tough times followed. After a year, Lewis/Mask was nearly broke. His car was repossessed, and his girlfriend dumped him. "She said I was crazy and that she didn't want to be with a loser," he says, laughing. Bad move: TapouT now boasts a workforce of 85 at its headquarters near San Bernardino, and it seems to have parlayed its early-entrant MMA advantage into a solid sports apparel franchise. Can anyone say "chokehold"?

