

## WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YER GONNA GET

Aaron Draplin's straightforward, no-nonsense approach to design drives the success of Draplin Design Co. And it's earned him at least 15 minutes of internet fame.

BY MICHELLE TAUTE

If you recognize Aaron Draplin's face, it's probably because you're one of the people who racked up 78,000-plus views of him in the viral video "America is F\*cked (graphically at Least)." He's wearing a trucker hat and sweatshirt and saying the f-word so much that even the regulars at a dive bar might take offense. But between expletives, he's also giving his unvarnished opinion about an overpriced, poorly designed sign.

Draplin's fury about Blippo bold, gradients and cheesy line drawings struck a nerve with creatives. So much so that the video, a side project initiated by his filmmaker friend Jess Gibson, significantly raised Draplin's profile in the design community. His blog traffic, already at 2,500 unique visitors a day, nearly

doubled. And he's fielded requests for media interviews, too-famous-to-name clients and AIGA speaking appearances.

But who, exactly, is Aaron Draplin? Based on the video, he's definitely someone you'd want to have a let-it-all-fly chat with over beers. But it may not be as obvious that he has the serious design chops—and natural business instincts—to back it all up. He's run Draplin Design Co., essentially a one-man shop in Portland, OR, since 2004. He's best known for his work on snowboard brands, especially Coal Headwear, Union Binding Co. and Snowboard Magazine.

In 2008, he formed a loose partnership with two other designers, John Phemister and David Nakamoto under the banner Wilderness. The three share office

### MEET DRAPLIN

Designer Aaron Draplin (left) gives a big thumbs up to working with startups. "I like the fact that there is just so much trust and so much fear," he says. "But you have to be hungry because it could go bad. You better be smart about how to do this right. There's just something fun about it. There's something scrappy. It's as if you are inventing it."

### INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH

Since Union Binding Co. is all about making the strongest snowboard bindings possible, Draplin created a brand look with a decidedly industrial feel. He's behind virtually all the graphics for Union, from catalogs and packaging to advertising and point-of-purchase displays.

## GET TO KNOW UNION TRUEFIT™

### FIBERGLASS INDEX

When building out a snowboard, there are three main areas to consider: the deck, the core, and the fiberglass. Each of these areas is made up of different materials and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. The amount of fiberglass used in a snowboard is measured in grams per square meter (GSM).

Layer	Material	Weight (GSM)
LEADER LAMIN	Fiberglass	1.5
REGULAR LAMIN	Fiberglass	7.5
TRAIL MIXTURE	Fiberglass	7.5

### DAMPENING BUSHINGS

Each binding has its own damping system. Some use shock absorbers to absorb the impact of the snow. Others use shock absorbers to absorb the impact of the snow. The amount of damping is measured in grams per square meter (GSM).

Material	Weight (GSM)
LEADER BUSHING	1.5
REGULAR BUSHING	7.5
TRAIL MIXTURE	7.5

### CONTOURED STRAPS

Each binding has its own strap system. Some use shock absorbers to absorb the impact of the snow. Others use shock absorbers to absorb the impact of the snow. The amount of damping is measured in grams per square meter (GSM).

Material	Weight (GSM)
LEADER STRAP	1.5
REGULAR STRAP	7.5
TRAIL MIXTURE	7.5

### MULTIZONE HIGHBACKS

Each binding has its own highback system. Some use shock absorbers to absorb the impact of the snow. Others use shock absorbers to absorb the impact of the snow. The amount of damping is measured in grams per square meter (GSM).

Material	Weight (GSM)
LEADER HIGHBACK	1.5
REGULAR HIGHBACK	7.5
TRAIL MIXTURE	7.5

**TRUE COMFORT/TRUE PERFORMANCE**

This collage features a variety of Union Binding Co. branding elements. It includes the company logo, product names like 'MAGNESIUM', 'DuPont Zytel', and 'ASYM', and technical specifications. The design is a dense, grid-like arrangement of orange and black shapes, text, and icons, creating a strong industrial aesthetic.

# UNION BINDING COMPANY

## YEAR THREE

The graphic features the Union logo, a stylized 'U' with a small arrow pointing upwards, centered within a large, concentric circular pattern. The background is a gradient of orange and black, matching the brand's color palette.

## FORCE-MC

2008 2009

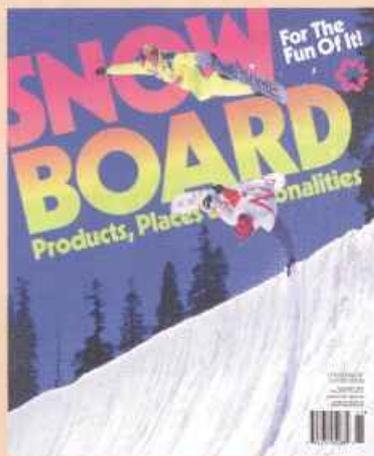
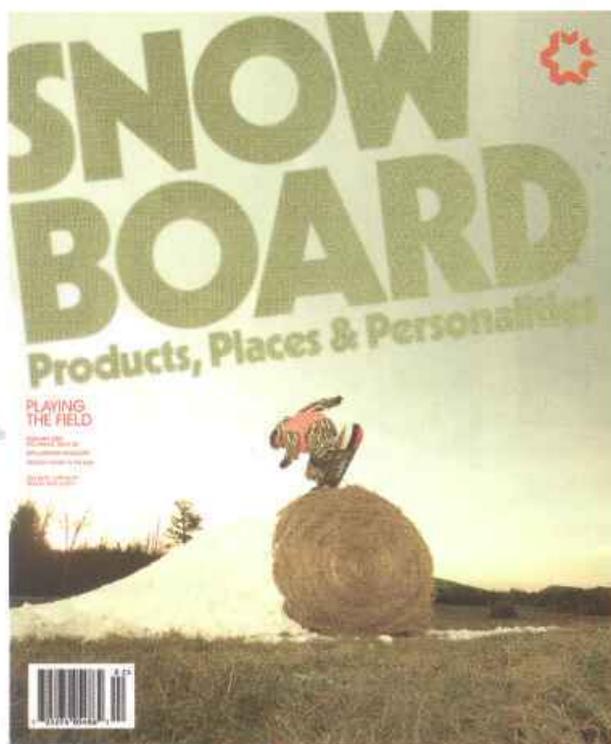
The image shows a pair of Force-MC snowboard bindings, which are orange and black. They are shown from a side-on perspective, highlighting the highback and the straps. The background is a dark, textured surface.

### THE BENEFIT OF MACHINE-CORED STRENGTH

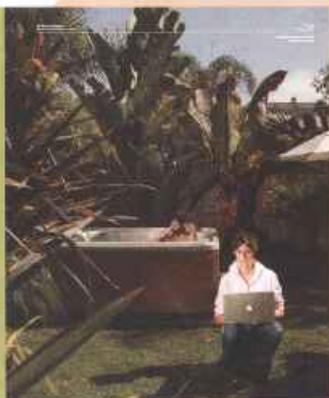
2008 2009

The diagram illustrates the internal structure of a snowboard binding, showing the various layers and components. It highlights the machine-cored strength of the binding, which is a key feature of the Force-MC model. The diagram is presented in a clean, technical style with orange and black accents.

**VERSATILE LOGO**  
For Union's logo, Draplin combined the letter "U" with a small arrow to reinforce the idea of one thing fitting into another—just like your boot snaps into a snowboard binding. It's a mark versatile enough to work in a variety of sizes and applications. The logo looks great as a pattern, on a catalog cover or on the back of a binding.



**SPIC AND SPAN**  
 Draplin created a tight grid and clean look for Snowboard to contrast with the raw, crazy approach being taken by other extreme sports magazines. One of the other design philosophies for the book: The best photo always wins the cover.



space and collaborate on big projects, but the venture only accounts for about 10% of Draplin's profits. Another 70% stems from Draplin Design Co., also known as the DDC, and the other 20% comes from self-directed projects. He sells more merchandise than your average band, hocking everything from self-branded posters and T-shirts to socks and coin purses. Plus, he's partnered with Jim Coudal of Coudal Partners to market Field Notes, a line of pocket-sized notepads modeled after agricultural memo books.

Draplin talks a million miles an hour, and even over the phone he gives off more energy than the Tasmanian Devil. But what's more amazing is his effortless sense of authenticity. Draplin's excitement level about design ranks right up there with that of little kids on Christmas Eve, and he always sounds like a real person, never lapsing into brand speak or censoring himself. "I love my job," he says. "Is that a business philosophy? I don't know. When someone comes in here, I give them everything I got, because they're trusting me with their logo or their record cover or a catalog to sell millions of dollars of gear, you know what I mean?"

## SNOWBOARDS AND A BURRITO CART

This renegade approach makes a lot more sense if you back up roughly a decade and a half. After earning an associate's degree in visual communications, Draplin left his hometown of Traverse City, MI, in 1993 to hit the slopes in Bend, OR. He and five friends headed out and "lived like animals" as they pursued snowboarding. Draplin washed dishes in Alaska during summers and took on freelance design gigs in Oregon during the winter. "My very first job was lettering a burrito cart," he says. "I knew them through a buddy and they said, 'Would you like to make our sign?' So I went out and did it, and I think we got free burritos for two weeks."

After the first summer in Alaska, Draplin bought his own computer—previously he'd been sneaking into a college—to do graphic work. But after five winters in Oregon, he wanted more in his life than snowboarding, so he gave away all his gear and headed for Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1998. During his last year in school, he was slated to do a work study at Carmichael Lynch Thorburn in Minneapolis, but a friend called and offered him the chance to art direct Snowboarder Magazine in California. So he headed west again, and the job experience finished off his graduation requirements.

In 2002, he made his way to Portland to work for Cinco Design, then went out on his own in 2004. Why make the break? "Here's your answer, you ready?" he says. "When your freelance spoils rival your salary, it's time to reconsider the whole working for someone else thing." So he bought a house with a great basement for his studio and went out on his own with a few clients. During the first year, he managed to triple his full-time job income.

The DIY start-up made a go of it with equally hungry clients. His first big retainer client was Coal Headwear, a line of hats for snowboarders and other young folks, that a friend had started the year before. Draplin created all the graphics from the get-go. He also partnered with a couple of friends to launch Snowboard Magazine. It has since sold to another company, but Draplin still does all the design for the extreme sports publication. Eventually, Coal Headwear led to Union Binding Co., a new company in the same building as the hat purveyor.

And logo projects and other work filled in the margins. "I got to pick my own clients," he says. "I got the chance to work for all kinds of different stuff and then set my own damned schedule, work all the time or take off on the road and go do whatever I wanted, and, on the biggest note, work for guys I loved like friends."

## ALL THINGS DRAPLIN

It might seem like the DDC didn't start until 2004, but it's actually a term Draplin began throwing around during his days in Oregon. The term started out as almost a joke and slowly evolved into a successful business, though Draplin's quick to point out that he'd be doing design work even if no one paid him. He's tackled all kinds of personal, offbeat projects under the banner and completed freelance client work under the name through the years, everything from snowboard graphics and logos to clothing trend packages.

There's a certain shtick surrounding the DDC that effortlessly doubles as a memorable marketing device. Draplin will tell you that Eric was employee No. 1 and Gary was employee No. 2. Eric is Eric Lovejoy, who worked part-time as Draplin's assistant from 2004 to 2008, and Gary is Draplin's Dachshund, a studio dog that makes frequent appearances on Draplin's blog ([www.draplin.com](http://www.draplin.com)). This online journal is where Draplin chronicles everything from music preferences and cross-country road trips to new projects and vintage design gems he uncovers at weekend estate sales. The blog shows how Draplin thinks about design without him having to spell it out through promotional copy.

Then there's the endless bright-orange DDC merchandise, which takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to pencils, T-shirts, plastic hair combs and small wooden rulers. [In 2008, sales of DDC merch paid Draplin's mortgage for the year, all while promoting the business and giving him a self-directed creative outlet.]

Jim Coudal, president of Coudal Partners in Chicago, says that with Draplin, what you see is what you get. There's no hidden agenda to his design work, and if you read his blog, you really get to know him. "I think perhaps the part that doesn't come across in the video is how much he thinks about this stuff," Coudal says. "The emotional part comes across but not the intellectual part. Aaron is a designer—as in, a craftsman."

## NOTES AND DOODLES

Draplin added personality to his *Field Notes pocket notebooks* (opposite page, top) with his humorous copywriting. Inside the back cover, a list of practical applications includes: inspired ramblings, shoddy sketches, treasure maps, loose promises and gambling debts.

## BIZ TIPS STRAIGHT FROM DRAPLIN'S MOUTH

### 1 REMEMBER THAT DESIGN ROCKS

"No. 1, be excited about what you get to do. You get to make graphic arts for a living. I mean, we're just lucky. Of course, you lose your shit every now and again, but this whole jaded thing ... jaded? Jaded from what? It's like, there's nothing to be jaded about the fact that I get to come in here all day long and work on incredible stuff."

### 2 DON'T BE AFRAID TO WORK HARD.

"Blow the client's mind. Don't show him three things, show him 30. Be gracious when a client rakes you over the coals. Realize that you get to move on to the next project when you're done. But you did your best. You met the challenges."

### 3 BREAK OUT THE MOXIE.

"Have the balls to go after exactly what you want. It's like starting Field Notes. I thought, 'I'm just going to put \$2,000 of my own hard-earned money into making 2,000 books on my own, and we'll see what happens. If I don't sell one, it doesn't matter. At least I can give them to all my friends for years and years.' But Jim Coudal came on, and it's suddenly turning into a business. But it came from the right source: invention."

### 4 EVERYONE LOVES SCHWAG.

"Shameless self-promotion can be fun. You don't have to be so smart like you have business talk on your website and all the process talk. Seal the deal with a hat or a T-shirt or some cool pens and pencils and stickers. Like in Iowa, if you go down the street and you go to the little implement shop where you buy a tractor, you know that that old guy there is expecting a hat when he buys that tractor.

"On one level it's subversive. I'm going to put my name out there as much as possible. But really, it's just fun to see people's eyes light up when you give them a keychain or a coin purse. At last count I had 40 different things for sale on my website."

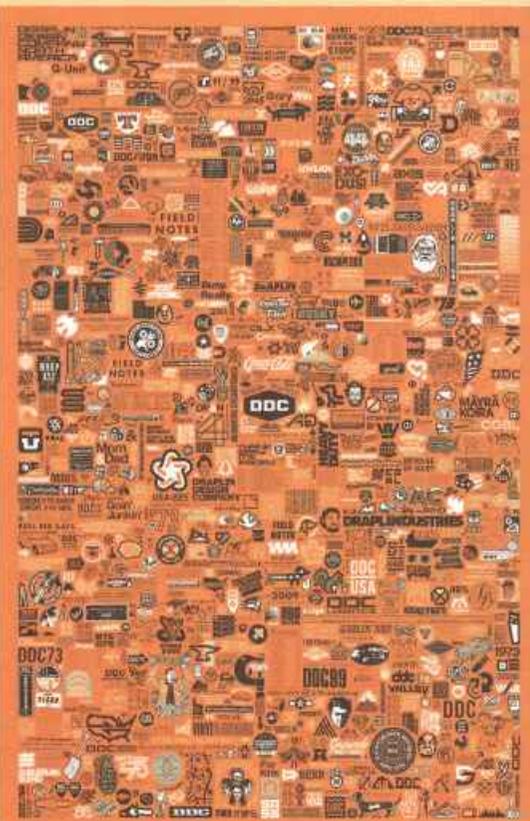
### 5 MEET YOUR HEROES.

"It's all about being appropriate. I cold called Aesthetic Apparatus and said, 'Guys, I want to come in and meet you because I love what you do.' With House Industries, I was in Delaware and I thought, 'I'm just going to show up.' They told me, 'You're the first one to ever just show up and want to buy a font.' But they took me inside and gave me an incredible tour. Since then, every now and again, I'll talk to Andy Cruz."

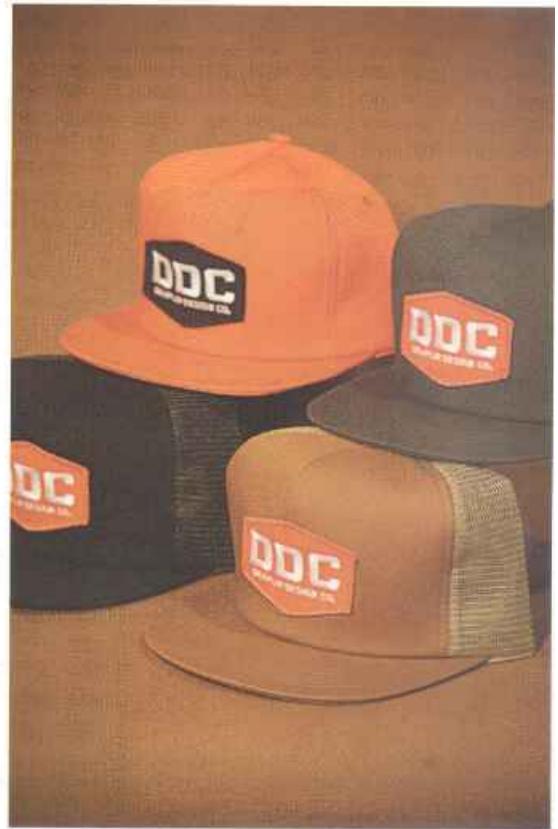
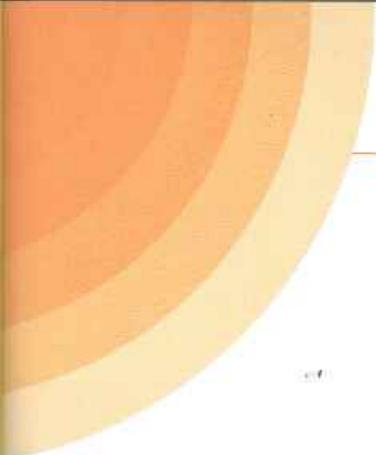


#### EXTREME PROMOTION

To coincide with an art show of his work at OFFICE PDX in Portland, OR, Draplin created the "Pretty Much Everything Up To May 27th, 2009" poster. He sells this crash course in Draplin design on his website for \$25. Also available: the DDC Brand Hair Organizer for \$3.99.



Pretty Much Everything Up To May 27th, 2009  
Draplin Design Co.



### THE FINE BUSINESS PRINT

But behind all the fun and the big personality, there's a serious approach to the business of design. No, Draplin doesn't always talk like a sailor as he does in the video. "My clients no, but my friends yes," he says. "I can be as appropriate and professional as anybody else, but remember that's me and Jess in a room at my studio." His core clients—Coal, Union and Snowboard—are three distinct and established brands he built the graphic looks for from the ground up.

These days, however, he's starting to look beyond the snowboard world. Since he no longer personally pursues the sport, Draplin thinks it might be time to pass the design torch to the kids snowboarding right now. "They should be doing it because, before I ever made a living with this stuff, I was that kid traveling and doing it, and it was pure," he says. "Now I feel like it's just not mine anymore. Maybe I'm being a little hard on myself, but I don't know what's next."

At least some of Draplin's clients seem to be walking through the studio door on their own. He started doing graphic design work for a famous movie director who loved his site, and a local web design firm tapped him to do their branding. Draplin worked with Mode Project and Chris Glass on two new government logos

unveiled earlier this year by U.S. President Obama. The first mark was for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the other for the U.S. Department of Transportation's Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery group.

When asked about the high-profile government gigs, Draplin laughs and replies, "It's a matter of national security." We're guessing the job came with a heavy non-disclosure agreement. But if so, that detail didn't stop the work from being attached to Draplin's name on a host of design blogs.

He's also working on seven or eight more episodes of that little video project with Gibson that should make a big internet splash soon, if they haven't already hit your Mac screen.

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### DDC MERCH

Offerings at the Draplin Design Co. online merch store include crew socks (\$8.50) with the inspirational message "Live free or die" across the toes, and a "DDC Factory Floor Issue Action Cap" (\$22) in four colors. Both are made in the U.S.