



What would it take for Chicago's messenger bag companies to go nationwide?



A Chicago flag-inspired messenger bag by New York's Vaya Bags – all photos in this post courtesy of Vaya Bags

I believe that one sign that you're in a great city for cycling is a proliferation of successful bike-related businesses. For example, a study done Mia Birk when she was bike coordinator of Portland, Oregon, found that the local bike industry has contributed \$100 million and 1,500 jobs to that city's economy in recent years.

There are a currently a handful of folks here in Chicago making great handmade bike products. You can find their bags, caps and other accessories listed in our gift guide. But it bothers me our city doesn't have its fair share of independent bike-oriented businesses, and I'm not exactly sure why we don't. It probably has something to do with the fact that, while we who live here know this is a great city for urban riding, the cold winters and lack of easy access to country roads and mountain bike trails prevent this town from being a magnet for bicycle entrepreneurs.



Back in the Nineties when I was a cycle courier, it always bugged me that every bike culture Mecca worth its bearing grease was represented by at least one well-known messenger bag company, except for Chicago. It was like that article in Vibe magazine during our pre-Kanye/Common hip-hop drought calling this “a city of three million [individuals] who can’t rap.” Was Chicago really that lame?

Nowadays there are two locally owned messenger bag companies in town, Chicago WIG and Steadfast Bags, (am I missing anybody?), but I believe they’re one-person operations that don’t distribute nationally. Are these entrepreneurs interested representing Chicago nationwide and, if so, what will they need to do to take their businesses to the next level?

In the near future I’ll be contacting WIG and Steadfast for their perspectives on this topic. To get some background on the industry, I called Tianna Meilinger, owner of a Vaya Bags, a small New York company that makes colorful, handmade messenger bags and other bike accessories out of recycled materials like scrap and surplus sailcloth and old inner tubes.

Vaya sells their products in stores around the globe, including Chicago’s Renegade Handmade. Meilinger gave me the history of how she turned her hobby into an international brand, but also shared her views on the importance of supporting local bike businesses in your city.

How did you get started making messenger bags?

I started making bags around 2005 out of the necessity for one. I was going to college in Boston and commuting by bike to school and work. I needed a bag and I decide to make myself a bag that was suited to my needs, waterproof with a stabilizer strap, padded shoulder strap and all those things. People really liked the bag that I made for myself and wanted me to make one for them.

I was an environmental science major in college. So at first I was thinking, oh, I’ll make bags until I find a real job [laughs] in my environmental science field, and then I just kept making bags, and that became my real job.

I moved home to New York in 2006 and sold my bags to friends and at little craft shows, things like that. I had a workshop out in my garage and started making bags from home then, selling them at art and craft shows and also selling them online.

So when you were at the stage where it was basically a cottage industry, just making bags for friends out of your home, what happened between then and now? How were you able make that next step to it becoming something where you had multiple employees and were selling bags around the country?

I think it was mostly the fact that I created a business the way I wanted it to be. I didn’t follow any business models or have any business background. I basically wanted a small business where everything’s completely handmade, and we get to interact with the customers, which is really rewarding. We love to see customers with their bags, love to get their feedback and also for them to be involved in the creation of their bag, such as picking colors and designs.



I started doing bigger craft shows and more people started ordering from the website. I was able to keep costs down by using recycled materials, and I didn’t

invest a lot from the beginning. I just had kind of a go with the flow, let's see how it happens attitude. By keeping my costs down I was able to save up money to keep it going and eventually I got a storefront in Queens and had enough interest that I needed to hire employees.

How many people are working for the company and what's the breakdown of who does what?



My friend Grace Kim and me make all the bags by hand. My friend Angie Boylan does the office work, taking orders and dealing with the paperwork and contacting people. She also helps make stuff when things are slow in the office.

Your bags are distributed all over the world now, in Tokyo and London, and several U.S. cities.

Yup, but most of our sales are from online orders. We get them from everywhere – Germany, Singapore, all over. We also do shows like [Renegade Craft Fair](#) in Chicago

every year, and it's one of my favorite cities to hang out in and do craft fairs. Everyone's so awesome and really nice.

So the Renegade Handmade store is the only store that sells your bags in Chicago right now?

Yes. I'm interested in finding others. It's just a matter of getting the time to go out there and talk to people.



So, do you think it would be a positive thing for all the major bike cities in North America to have a messenger bag company that kind of represents their town?

Yeah, I think it's important to support local businesses. If each company has a small, local following I definitely think it's great. But it's also important to have a healthy variety, because not every bag is perfect for every person. So I don't think someone should think any less of somebody who buys something that's not local. But I definitely

support people buying local, handmade goods.

You know, it's hard sustaining a messenger bag company. It's a lot of work and a lot of ups and downs. It's definitely not for everyone, because there's a lot of competition out there. I often get people asking why they should buy a handmade bag from me when they can get it for less from Timbuk2, who has them made in China. But I think a lot of people these days are into supporting local, handmade products, which is awesome. It really gives back to the community.

What do you think are the strengths of Vaya bags, the selling points?



There are several things that set us apart. One is the use of recycled bike tubes, and scraps of sailboat awnings and old banners. I think that the fact that they're waterproof is also a really good feature. And I think that while they're awesome looking, they function really well for the purpose of riding your bike around with stuff, being comfortable and not getting your stuff wet if you get caught in the rain. And I use materials that come in a variety of different colors, so people can really customize them – the possibilities are endless.

I checked out the photo gallery of custom bags and you guys have done some great work. I really like the one you did based on that old Japanese print of the waves crashing near Mt. Fuji.

The Great Wave off Kanagawa? Oh, thanks so much. That one was a challenge. I was really happy with the way it came out.



It must have been tough to translate such a complicated image into cloth.