

Making it Timely business

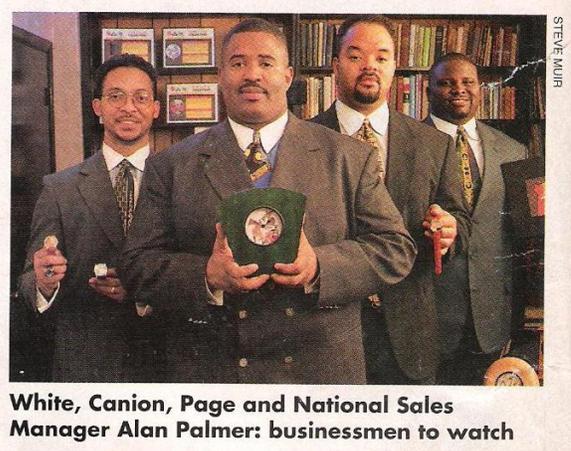
Black Art Gear combines fine design with quality

An idea for unique wristwatch designs and some black art has turned a neat profit for a new company, Black Art Gear Inc. (BAG), whose sales should reach \$450,000 this year. What's behind the success of this Greensboro, North Carolina, specialty watch and clock company?

Determination, perseverance, a little faith and the fact that "we are always evolving" is the formula, says 31-year old Kenneth Canion, BAG president and co-founder. It's no accident that the company is based in the Tar Heel State. In the early '80s, Canion and business partners Eric Page, Phil White and Ernest Riddick met while students at North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University. The foursome was always experimenting with business ideas, says Canion, and so they created a novelty balloon company, which saw only marginal success. But in 1992, things started to turn around when the partners formed Avant Garde, an ad agency, where the seed was planted to market specialty watches. BAG was born a year later. After seeing some watches with characters, Canion wondered if "anybody would buy a watch that featured black art on the face." Canion with his business partners, a professional artist was convinced to use some of his existing works on the watches, and a manufacturer was secured. Selling about 300 of the watches to family and friends at \$30-\$40 each, the partners felt they had a sure winner. But disaster struck when the watch band fore, forcing BAG to make about \$5,000 in refunds.

Reviewing their strategy, the partners conducted more research, and located a manufacturer with a better reputation to a Las Vegas trade show for novelty items. "We took \$10,000 in orders and didn't have a dime to make watches and fill the orders," recalls Canion.

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**White, Canion, Page and National Sales
Manager Alan Palmer: businessmen to watch**

Undaunted, they approached Wachovia Bank of North Carolina and secured a \$75,000 loan, along with a \$21,000 personal loan from Canion's father, to start production. The watches are packaged in decorative boxes with attached explanations of the art. Now selling for \$50-\$60m they have been featured on cable shopping channels, in Sears and Spiegel catalogs, at select Sears retail outlets and through various distributors nationwide.

"The watches are moving like hotcakes. People I sell them to say they fashionable, appealing and education," says Demetrius Harrison, president and founder of DAH Distribution. Harrison markets the watches in Milwaukee.

In addition to watches, BAG plans to put black artwork on everything from clothing to plates. The company is also looking for independent representatives to help with its expansion plans.

-Harold Lamar