

U.S.-Russian Paper Startup Sees Massive Success Despite Political Tensions

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One of the largest office supply retailers in the United States has offered a group of young Russian and American entrepreneurs an exclusive distribution deal for a new sticky note developed by the team after raising almost \$250,000 on crowd-funding site Kickstarter.

Founded in January by two Russian cousins and their American business partner, Tesla Amazing has grown fast. The company is marketing a product they call Magnetic — a digital age take on the classic sticky note that clings to any dry surface without messy adhesives.

Available in a variety of sizes, Magnetic sticks to surfaces using a patented static film developed by Dmitry Samoylovskikh and his cousin Alexei Bragin in Moscow. Not content with simply being a Russian start up company, they invited their American friend Elizabeth

Bagot in to work as their international marketing chief and launched a Kickstarter campaign in January.

“One of the main reasons for us to go global was the circumstances that we faced when we were ready to launch. When everything around you tells you that it's not the best time for the ruble, you should use it as a challenge rather than be afraid of it,” said Samoylovskikh, the company's CEO.

Bagot told The Moscow Times that Tesla Amazing set out on their crowd funding drive with a modest goal to raise \$12,000 to finance production of Magnetic, and by the end of March had raised \$240,000 in funding.

“The beauty of Magnetic is that it is a product literally everyone can use. We've had interest from teachers, artists, facilitators, agile developers, programmers and anyone else who visualizes their ideas on paper,” Bagot said.

Small Team

Tesla Amazing prides itself on being a small team that has turned an idea into an internationally marketed product in less than a year.

“A lot of companies have 100 or more employees, but less than 10 percent of them actually do the work and add value, while the rest just pretend to work. It's different with us. There are just six people on our team, and they do an enormous amount of work,” said co-founder Bragin.

Since launching their Kickstarter campaign in January, Tesla Amazing has signed deals with about 20 distributors on five continents and delivered Magnetic products to their 6,000 Kickstarter backers and customers in 85 countries, and has won international recognition at trade shows in Japan and the U.S.

This recognition is now turning into commercial success. Tesla Amazing boasts at least \$100,000 a month in revenue from sales via the company's website and deals signed with distributors around the world.

After visiting an innovation convention organized by major U.S. office supplies firm Staples to show off their product, Tesla Amazing has received an exclusive distribution offer from the company.

“The idea of exclusivity was brought up by Staples just last week, but nothing has been signed yet,” Bagot said. Staples is testing the product in two stores during the seasonal back-to-school shopping spree in mid-September.

“The original idea was that if it goes well, they'll consider boosting us to more stores. But then, last week, they told us they were so bowled over by the product that they may want to sign an exclusivity contract with us soon,” Bagot said.

Russian Roots

Amid the crisis in Ukraine, which has seen relations between Russia and the West fall to a post-

Cold War low, Tesla Amazing has been forced to navigate a complicated business environment by expanding from its Russian roots to becoming an international company.

“We registered in Estonia in order to avoid skepticism from Western distributors,” Bagot said. “One Australian prospect asked us if we were registered in Russia, because he was afraid to sign with us in light of the sanctions.”

Tesla Amazing has overcome this initial skepticism by spreading their efforts to Finland and Ukraine as well. The company's web developer, Slava Kornienko, is based in Ukraine and production of the Magnetic sticky notes takes place in Finland.

"And we don't even have an office. We often work together while spread across different countries,” said co-founder Bragin.

Though the team has run into trouble crossing borders to work together, they found that political tensions have had little impact on developing their business beyond skepticism from Russia-weary distributors.

“When we arrived at the Staples Innovation Council Event in July, we were nervous about potential backlash for our Russian origins. But we were relieved and thrilled to find that nobody cared,” Bagot said.

“The Staples executives only cared about our awesome product — Magnetic. In fact, when they learned that two of our team members were Russian, they got excited and welcomed us to the U.S. It seemed that our Russian roots were a point of pride — we traveled all the way from Russia to visit Staples!”

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