

# Brands on the Verge

## Dude, Here's My Car: Founder Went From Ranch to Wrench

Wanna moisturize while modifying that Mustang? Busted Knuckle Garage sells skincare, clothing, garage decor and novelties for mechanics who are pro—and not so.

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Our car story begins, ironically, at a location where no vehicles dare

### NEW BRANDS

unique niche as a hot, hot rod brand with a retro design aesthetic.

drive. The bottom of the Grand Canyon is only accessible by mule, foot or raft. But that's where Warren G. Tracy was living and working as manager of the Phantom Ranch guest facility in August 1996, when inspiration for his Busted Knuckle Garage ignited. As a doodle.

An avid car and motorcycle enthusiast—whose rebuilt tinker toy vehicles sat in a garage 130 miles away at the time—he woke up one night from a sound sleep and sketched an injured hand clenching a wrench and then promptly returned to bed.

For weeks, he just couldn't get the mystery doodle out of his head. He decided to trademark it, and paid some cowboys to drive it 80 miles to the closest FedEx overnight bin. A year after he got his trademark, he still wasn't sure what he was going to do with his fancy intellectual property.

Then one day, he met a man making distressed wooden signs and decided to commission some featuring his doodle design, along with the name "Busted Knuckle Garage."

"So I made a couple and put 'em in a magazine called *Hemmings Motor News* and asked \$119 bucks or so, and we sold 100 the first month," Tracy said, recalling his shock. "The next thing you wake up to is that life is no dress rehearsal, that what we're doing today is real life. Two years after the trademark, I quit that job [at Phantom Ranch] and I did everything that I wouldn't want to do too early: I mortgaged our house, I ran the credit cards up to the red line and I went to every stinking car show from Pittsburgh to L.A. and back. And we've had a couple breaks here recently."

When Tracy says "a couple of breaks," he's being modest. Over the past decade, he's built Busted Knuckle Garage into a private label lifestyle brand for gearheads. Through direct sales at [www.bustedknuckle-garage.com](http://www.bustedknuckle-garage.com), specialty catalogs such as MAC Tools and six licensee deals that have gotten his goods distributed in Sears, Checkers Auto Parts and HomeDepot.com, Tracy has carved out a

With the tagline "Repair and despair under one roof," Busted Knuckle Garage is positioned as a fun, approachable brand with an escapist aspect. "The Garage is located at the end of your driveway," Tracy said. "We let customers define their experience, and they recognize it because they *have* experienced it."

"A lot of men from the ages of about 18 to 60 are collecting and refurbishing cars," said Caroline Rothwell, president of Caro Marketing, Los Angeles, and former vp-marketing for blue collar fashion brand Von Dutch. "I think there's a lot of potential for breaking brands; there are only so many pairs of Dickies and Levi 501s you can own."

While Busted Knuckle sells 250 SKUs, clothing and herbal skincare are the lead items. For the latter, Tracy noted how nobody targets the mechanic market.

"When I go in and see a buyer at an automotive store, I ask them how many of their customers work with their hands. And they answer, '100%,' of course," Tracy said. "Then I ask,



Garage brand:

Warren Tracy's Busted Knuckle is a gas, gas, gas.

'How many of them injure their hands?' and 'What do you have for them in the store? Why are you letting them take \$5 over to CVS?'"

This is followed by a reminder that mechanics work with oil and gas so a petroleum-based product won't do. Also, "Skincare



Grease monkey moisturizer: Along with decor and novelties, BKG sells skincare for 'mechrossexuals.'

**Brand:** The Busted Knuckle Garage  
**Headquarters:** Prescott, Ariz.

**Product:** Gifts & gear for the garage  
**Launch date:** 1998

**Sales:** \$1.3 million last year (\$650,000 in direct sales, \$500,000 in licensing)

**Target demo:** Primary: Any man who has ever picked up a tool; Secondary: the women who love them

**Competition:** Everything from specialty hot rod company So-Cal Speed Shop to Dodge, Chevy and Ford's licensed *tchotchkes*

**Distribution:** Sears, HomeDepot.com, Kragen Auto Parts, Ace Hardware

**Claims:** "Repair and despair under one roof"

**Secret weapon:** "We're two quarts low, but motorin' along . . ."

**New product:** The trapper cap, Elmer Fudd-style headgear that Tracy has dubbed "the fast and the furriest"

is a gateway product, it brings people into the brand at \$2.95," Tracy argued.

It's not just boys buying the stuff. Tracy said 70% of store sales come from women buying gifts for guys. The company will soon expand to other blue collar trades and segment the audience by trade occupations, such as welders and plumbers. For now, Tracy's content to remain relevant to the custom car crowd. He described overhearing two buddies talking at a hot rod show when they spied his Busted Knuckle Garage logo, which is based, of course, on that original late-night doodle.

"One guy goes, 'That is me,'" Tracy said in a solemn voice that would normally be reserved for, say, soldiers bonding over war wounds. "Then his friend goes, 'That ain't you, dude—that's all of us.'"

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