

Beating Up Prototypes To Build Better Products

The next time you stomp your trick take a moment to give thanks. Not for riding away clean but for the unsung heroes of the snowboard industry—the teams of riders, designers, engineers, and product managers who have worked relentlessly to drive innovation and develop your gear. —**Michael Sudmeier**



Scott Stevens looks for the breaking-point at the local ball park.

The riders are at the core of it all," says K2 Global Brand Director Hunter Waldron, who also spent a decade assisting with K2's research and development. No matter what products a company creates, the feedback of riders—combined with the insight of designers and engineers—is essential in turning an idea into something ready for shops. Phil Notheis, Giro's snow category manager, explains that "As products move through the development process, we constantly supply riders with prototypes, record their feedback, and adjust accordingly."

These riders—which often include a blend of pros and bros—are encouraged to not only use, but also abuse prototypes. "I love giving my team kids a proto board and saying 'beat the hell out of this thing,'" says Sean Tedore, who heads product development at Capita. Brands

then carefully sift through tester feedback while also examining the durability and performance of these prototypes. Walker Ferguson, Patagonia's product testing coordinator, says, "You see common threads and what's resonating with people." This feedback guides brands as they continue to test and tweak ideas—and the process is ongoing. Scott Barbieri, VP of Burton Hardgoods and Anon says that "for innovation, there's no best time of year—it happens constantly." Brands often spend upwards of eighteen months perfecting an idea before it hits the shelves.

To ensure they can quickly develop prototypes and test them, a number of companies even have in-house labs and production facil-

ities. Patagonia's The Forge, for example, features a lab for testing new materials, as well as a development facility loaded with the latest technology for sewing, taping seams, and welding fabric. Burton has its own facility—named Craig's in honor of legendary rider Craig Kelly—for refining ideas for all of its products. Craig's is packed with everything from custom-made machines for creating new fabrics to 3-D printers that can make prototypes for bindings, helmets, goggles, and boot soles. The company relies on several different types of these printers. Some are best suited for creating complex shapes and details, while others are used to develop prototypes—like

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goggles and boot outsoles—that feature various flexes. Yet these research and design centers create not just products, but also new perspectives on how to develop them. According to Barbieri, Craig's has led Burton to find new processes for creating many of its products, which its team of engineers has then introduced to the brand's factories.

Once companies feel they have perfected an idea, "we begin discussing where it lives in our current line and we start the commercialization of the product," explains David Appel, DC's Director of Snowboarding Hardgoods. This involves examining everything from the price of raw materials to trends before brands move forward with manufacturing a product. According to Ferguson, before products reach the public "we've done our homework." And needless to say, it's all about improving your gear to better the ride.