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MEET THE YELLOW RIBBON GUY

POPULARITY OF 'SUPPORT OUR TROOPS' MAGNETS SURPRISES N.C. DISTRIBUTOR
JEN ARONOFF, STAFF WRITER

When **Dwain Gullion** picked up his first batch of magnetic yellow "Support Our Troops" ribbons, he thought they might sell well around Winston-Salem. What he didn't expect was that the rest of the country would follow suit.

Since April 2003, the Chatham County resident has sold more than a million of the ribbons now decorating cars nationwide.

"The car magnet is upon us," **Gullion** jokes. "I couldn't have even imagined it could get so big."

Although the self-effacing 34-year-old didn't create the ribbon magnet, he was one of the first to sell them, and his marketing strategy helped propel the product to prominence.

Gullion initially purchased 1,000 magnets from Chris Smith, whose Winston-Salem area print shop, King International, still manufactures the screen-printed ribbons. He planned on selling them to local school and youth groups, as well as in his family's small chain of Christian bookstores. He also stayed up late teaching himself how to design and operate a Web site, and named his new business "Magnet America." Within its first week online, orders began to trickle in.

"We thought there would be a two- or three-month life on this thing, but then it just grew and grew," **Gullion** says.

Gullion began promoting his product as a fund-raiser in the military community, where the ribbon's patriotic message and easily removable design helped sales soar.

"Everybody wants to invent something (that takes off), and the yellow ribbon was like that for us," says Smith, who was inspired by a newspaper article about, ironically, a shortage of yellow ribbon.

By early 2004, the popularity of the ribbons - which Magnet America sells for anywhere from 55 cents to \$3 each, depending on the number purchased - had spread across the country. As the trend peaked during the summer, other companies took note, too. Gas stations and craft, convenience and discount stores began to stock cheaper, lower-quality foreign-made versions. Magnet America cut its prices to compete.

"I do think people tried to jump on the money-making bandwagon," says Chris Hales, who helps manage Magnet America's call center in Pfafftown. "But, that's America. Even if it wasn't our magnets, we're glad the message was getting out there."

That message is simply to support the troops, not an endorsement of the war.

"The political thought never occurred to us," says **Dwain**'s brother Brian **Gullion**, who helps run the company. "It's just a patriotic product, and we believe you can have a patriotic product without it being a political product."

Magnet America has donated thousands of magnets to a variety of groups, as well as \$42,000 to Freedom Calls, an organization that helps troops overseas communicate with their families. The company also contributed \$4,000 to local cancer relays, and plans on giving to additional charities at the end of the year.

It's been a whirlwind journey for a business that began as a one-man operation, with **Dwain Gullion** fielding orders and monitoring his Web site from the farmhouse in rural Bennett he shares with his wife, Heidi, daughters Anna Brooke, 3, and Sarah Hope, 17 months (both adopted from China, **Gullion** proudly notes) and a big black dog named Sydney. He still does most of his work there, and the thought of moving elsewhere has never crossed his mind.

"Our goal is to keep our company going and keep jobs in North Carolina," **Gullion** says. "That right there is patriotic. If we can provide jobs, these people pay taxes and can help support the economy."

Because of increased competition and slowing sales, the call center has had to reduce its staff from 55 to 25, and Magnet America's shipping office has faced similar reductions.

Meanwhile, the magnet's designs continue to multiply with different shapes, colors and styles. Most new ideas come from customer suggestions. One recent introduction promotes autism awareness with "an exclusive puzzle design." Magnet America has also had a lot of luck with miniature ribbons, and Christmas magnets are forthcoming.

Gullion hopes such variety will help keep the company afloat even if the yellow ribbon fever subsides. At the same time, he knows his products risk becoming overexposed in a culture where even the most heartfelt idea can become a fading fad.

So he keeps his standards high and practices moderation, displaying only one ribbon, the original yellow, on his black Impala.

"We all know that God has blessed the business to allow us to be in it," **Gullion** says. "Hopefully, sticking with quality is going to help us stay around."

Illustration:PHOTO:1

1. JEN ARONOFF - STAFF PHOTO. **Dwain Gullion**'s marketing has made the yellow, magnetic "Support Our Troops" ribbons a familiar sight on cars across the country.

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