

CEO Goes in Some Unusual Directions

On His Path, Commerce Must Intersect With Community
By **JOHN COX**

Originally published February 16, 2017 at 1:51 p.m., updated February 16, 2017 at 1:51 p.m.



It took him a while, but Ryan Sisson finally found his niche — actually, several of them — when he founded Moniker Group Inc. Photo by [Jaime Scott Lytle](#).

making, real estate development, retail, events organization and coffee sales. They combined for about \$1.5 million in sales last year.

Frequently, the question arises: Where is the company’s focus? Sisson said even his father has asked, “So, what do you do again?”

It’s kind of a long story, more about serendipitous business opportunities than advance planning. But Sisson insists the core of what the company does is not as random as it may appear.

Above all, he said, it is about bringing people together as a community. He sees it as a brand in some respects, like the British multinational conglomerate Virgin Group, or as a holding company whose central administrative organization serves an intentionally flexible business model.

“We don’t have limits as to what we can do,” he said.

‘Extremely Vertically Integrated’

Despite its apparent diversity, Moniker’s ability to leverage current trends makes it an “extremely vertically integrated company,” said brand-marketing specialist Bernhard Schroeder, director of programs at San Diego State University’s Lavin Entrepreneurship Center.

San Diego — Ryan Sisson wasn’t like the people he surrounded himself with.

Everyone else in his circle of friends at church was an artist or craftsman working on creative projects like set design, fashion and experiential art. But what could he make?

It finally dawned on him: He would be the salesman, the one who enabled others to achieve their dreams — the “bulldozer driver,” as he calls himself now, clearing a path for the rest.

The company he founded in April 2010, Moniker Group Inc., very much reflects these roots. It is as eclectic as the people it employs, with four main subsidiaries and 10 brands engaged in furniture-

Schroeder, who had been unfamiliar with the company before recently reviewing a diagram of Moniker's corporate structure and other company materials, said he was particularly impressed by the way it makes use of trends such as coffeehouses, coworking spaces and reclaimed furniture, often within the same locations.

"They're all well done, yet they're all themed and connect with five or six trends that are happening in the real world," he said.

The company appears to be thriving. With about 30 employees and expectations of hiring 10 to 20 more by the end of this year, Moniker recently opened an 8,500-square-foot coworking space a short walk from the coffeehouse-retail center it opened in May at Liberty Station. It also leases, subleases and manages an 18,000-square-foot warehouse in downtown San Diego's East Village that serves as an events venue and workspace for individuals and businesses.

Though Moniker can be defined by the community it serves, it also stands as a testament to the man at its center: an engineering student-turned-business major, a soon-to-be father who wears a black hoodie at work, an idealist who left town for a calling in Southeast Asia and now promotes San Diego as a new creative mecca.

To others, Sisson, 34, comes across as a passionate leader with a knack for turning people's creative drive into productive business ventures.

"Ryan brings an unparalleled level of energy and creativity to everything he does," said Kris Michell, president and CEO of Downtown San Diego Partnership, where Sisson serves as a board member. "His entrepreneurial drive, passion and love for San Diego are evident in each project he pursues and are why he is so successful."

Cody Burkholder, Sisson's partner at Moniker Design, one of Moniker Group's subsidiaries, said he was drawn to Sisson years ago when he witnessed the way his friends were coming together like a family to put on events focused on positive causes such as water conservation.

"Ryan's definitely a very special, very unique person to sort of take that kind of risk and see the passions of the people around him have and kind of support them with that," said Burkholder, a spatial designer who builds custom furniture for interior and exterior spaces.

Wandering Path

Growing up in Imperial Beach, the third-generation San Diegan said he watched too many friends leave the area to pursue careers in film, design and photography. He enrolled at San Diego State University thinking he would become a mechanical engineer, but ended up leaving without a degree and working in real estate development at The Corky McMillin Cos. He later earned a business degree at the University of Phoenix.

When the recession cut short his introduction to real estate, he went to work for a nonprofit helping refugees in Burma and Thailand. That didn't go the direction he wanted, and he came back to San Diego, taking a digital marketing job.

But that wasn't a good fit, either, and he moved on to become one of the earliest employees at San Diego web design and technology services agency Fifty & Fifty.

On the side, things were going well with his creative friends at church. He said helping them put together fashion shows, art installations and events locally and in other cities and states became his "jobby" (job-hobby).

"We began to dream of, 'What could it be?' " he said.

Around this time, it was decided a company had to be formed to cash the checks that were coming in. Someone asked what would be the company's moniker. The term stuck.

To the Next Level

Although his friends were highly creative, Sisson noticed none had the vision he thought was necessary to take things to the next level. Needs were becoming apparent, too, like a dedicated space for building things, instead of someone's living room or the garbage bin area behind the church.

In May 2011, the company opened Moniker Warehouse in a former bakery downtown. It became home to Moniker Brand, a line of furniture. More space became available within the building, and Moniker expanded in June 2012. It did so again in June 2014, and the warehouse now hosts concerts, weddings, fundraisers and other events.

In May of last year, Moniker General opened at Liberty Station. It operates as a coffeehouse popular with students at nearby Point Loma Nazarene University, as well as a retail space selling products including some made by tenants of the warehouse — surfboards, leather goods, clothing — along with furniture and home goods made by Moniker

employees.

When a building became available nearby, there was a suggestion it might work well as a coworking space catering to individuals, small businesses and startups. Sisson said he wasn't initially convinced it was a good choice, but he yielded when he considered it was an opportunity to create another community hub — “and that's what I do best.”

Common Space

This month the space, now dubbed Moniker Commons, made its informal debut. It has a full kitchen, a copy room, showers, 35 private desks, eight offices and room for 75 drop-in members. The décor includes reclaimed wood and water-cut steel, with flat-screen televisions here and there.

Moniker's corporate structure is delineated in a way Sisson says allows investments in specific areas but not the parent company. There are four main subsidiaries, all limited liability companies, under Moniker Group, of which Sisson is CEO. Personnel matters are handled through Moniker Management Services LLC, which acts as an administrative arm apart from the subsidiaries.

Sisson sees the corporate structure as providing maximum flexibility. If the company wanted to expand into biosciences, he said, it need only add a subsidiary.

“Hypothetically, we could do anything,” he said.

Not that Moniker is about to start developing pharmaceuticals. He and Burkholder see the company working on more gathering places — coffeehouses, restaurants and the like.

“I would love to grow this to other cities,” Burkholder said.

Sisson said he's not overly concerned with growth, though eventually he hopes to take what the company has accomplished locally and make it available in other communities. His primary focus is fostering community.

“I don't do it because it's going to make a bunch of money. It may and it may not,” he said. “I enjoy it.”