

two

find your story

Here's a story I like about two young men, Adam Lowry and Eric Ryan, who had been friends since high school. As young adults, they lived with five other roommates in a San Francisco apartment they described as "the dirtiest in the city." Adam, tall and thin, was a chemical engineer and environmental scientist who once studied climate change. Eric, short and thin, was a marketing professional for brands like Gap and Saturn.

Very occasionally the two *would* attempt to clean their apartment, and when they did, they would puzzle over the scary warnings on the package labels of cleaning products, which seldom even listed the ingredients. Using the prod-

ucts would make their skin burn and eyes water and it made them wonder whether the cleansers were safe at all, for themselves or for the environment. One day the two friends did a Google search on the items to see if other people shared their anxieties. They found that a surprisingly large number of people had been irritated using them.

So they decided that they would make a better product themselves, one that was kinder to both the environment and to the people using it. Given that Adam was temporarily unemployed, and gifted at mixing chemicals, the duo turned their kitchen into a laboratory, cooking up concoctions like mad scientists. Soon the apartment was filled with plastic beer pitchers brimming with mysterious brews and covered with "Do Not Drink!" warnings written on masking tape. They slowly started to develop functional cleaning products from nontoxic ingredients.

Eric then found a nearby business that made cleaning products for other companies and an expert in the field who was willing to work with two inexperienced guys who wanted to create an environmentally friendly alternative.

In 2000 they launched their line under the name "method" (intentionally lowercased), and their first creation was a hand soap that they packaged in a beautiful teardrop container. Eric was skilled at packaging, and from the start method's products were distinguished by excellent design, an important signal to the consumer about the care taken with the production of the contents. But as good as their environmental pitch and design were, Eric and Adam had trouble getting their merchandise into stores. Of course,

they were also wildly understaffed, understocked, and underfunded; at one point they had only sixteen dollars left in their bank account.

When they finally did get a local store to carry their brand, they didn't have enough of their shower cleaner on hand to satisfy the store's orders. They had to think quickly: Remembering that they'd given samples to many of their friends, they called them up, hunted them down, collected their house keys, ran to their apartments, gathered whatever cleaner they could find, ran back to their own place, poured the contents into new bottles, and then dashed to the store with the order. They arrived just moments before the customer was ready to give up on them.

But because the two had a compelling story to tell about who they were, why they wanted to create this product line, and how environmentally safe it was, they were eventually able to attract attention from the press, including coverage in *Vogue*, *Time*, and other publications, which caught the attention of store buyers. Along the way, they were also creating a loyal cadre of customers who not only found the product useful but felt connected to a story that moved them and a movement that became part of *their* story.

To keep things simple and transparent, the company also created what they called the Dirty List. If they discover that any commonly used ingredient is unhealthy for homes or for the planet, that ingredient is banished from ever being used by method. For instance, beef fat is commonly used as a softening agent in dryer sheets across the industry, but beef fat is a "dirty" ingredient: Many people would be horri-

fied to know that their clothes get a little softer in the dryer because cattle were slaughtered. Beef fat is banned from method products. Instead, method dryer sheets are embedded with plant-based oilseed. The story of method is also one of their favorite slogans: "People Against Dirty."

Today, method is one of the world's largest eco-friendly cleaning brands, selling its merchandise in national stores including Whole Foods, Target, Costco, Duane Reade, and Staples. It has been featured on the Home Shopping Network, and its liquid hand soap is number three in the category in sales. *Fast Company* magazine ranked method as the sixteenth-most-innovative company in the world; in 2006, *Inc.* magazine ranked it the seventh-fastest-growing company in the United States: Sales rose from less than \$90,000 in 2001 to around \$100 million in 2010.

Not only that, but Eric and Adam were named PETA's "Persons of the Year" in 2006 and were featured in *Time* magazine's 2006 "Who's Who Eco Guide."

All this happened because Eric and Adam had an idea, a story to tell, and, eventually, a product to sell. From their very first sale, they led with their story—the personal story of two guys worried about the toxicity of the products they cleaned with, and the professional story of a company that approached cleaning in an environmentally friendly way. These stories allowed them to funnel excitement about the brand to consumers, who otherwise don't spend much time thinking about cleansers—and for good reason. Method gave them a reason to make a previously thoughtless decision into a meaningful one.