

Bringing a boutique touch to the overlooked garage

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Chad Haas had a six-figure job in sales and marketing that offered much-appreciated autonomy. But success felt empty without a job that inspired passion.

So two years ago, the Beaverton man swapped a regular paycheck and the comfort of being part of a giant international company for the thrill of creating his own business.

Now he's storming the home improvement industry's final frontier: the garage.

His firm, **Vault Brands Inc.**, designs and installs high-end garage furnishings and though it is new, it has attracted major attention from **BASF Group**. The multibillion-dollar German chemical product manufacturer teamed with Vault to sell Garrazo, an acrylic floor system based on industrial technology used in food manufacturing and other plants.

The home garage edition can be made to resemble granite and other polished finishes suitable for both working garages and the showroom variety.

The partnership gives BASF access to a developing new residential market and Vault gains cache by associating with one of the world's largest manufacturers.

Haas left Federal Way, Wash.-based **Weyerhaeuser Co.** two years ago to start Vault. He formally launched the business in September and tallied \$100,000 in revenue in the first two months.

But Haas said he's taken Vault Brands as far as he can on a bootstrap budget. He needs investors. He is soliciting \$1.5 million to \$2.5 million in venture capital to fund a showroom and design studio.

A showroom will give would-be clients a chance to see what a well dressed garage can look like. For the time being, a client in Wilsonville is allowing Haas to use his two garages to demonstrate the concept.

The Wilsonville car collector wanted two separate garage spaces. One is a working space with a lift, tools and a giant TV. The other is a clean showroom for his multimillion-dollar auto collection.

The working garage has extensive cabinetry and the trappings of an auto shop. The showroom has muted colors, high-end lighting and the barest of decor. The cars are the stars of the show.

The idea of furnishing a garage is so new Haas said he needs a showroom to convey that it can be more than the clutter space where old cans of paint, kids' toys and abandoned sports gear gets unceremoniously dumped.

His inspiration is **Waterworks Inc.**, a Connecticut company that started as a plumbing supply business and morphed into a full-service bathroom remodeler and supplier.

Waterworks' showroom sold the public on the idea of a bathroom as an oasis of luxury. And did the job better than a million lines of advertising copy, Haas said.

The BASF partnership seems to indicate Haas is on to something. Rob Justus, business manager for BASF's performance flooring division, said the company seldom partners with such a small concern, but was impressed with Haas' business plan.

"We thought that Chad had an extremely interesting approach to high-end garages," he said.

Flooring, however, is just one piece of the puzzle for Haas, whose enthusiasm for everything related to motoring is infectious.

To set himself apart from the competition, he is aiming for the luxury end of the market.

He designed a line of garage furnishings to appeal to wealthy car collectors -- like the car enthusiast in Wilsonville -- and executives who want designer garages to equal their designer kitchens.

His steel cabinets are ultramodern and sturdy enough that each drawer can support 350 pounds. They can be configured to any garage, and finished in any color and with any countertop. In

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Vault's founder Chad Haas offers luxury concepts and designs to transform the residential garage experience.

Wilsonville, his client went with a gleaming wall of Ford blue cabinets built around a sturdy work bench.

Vault's other offerings include specialized lighting and even carriage doors. He'll eventually sell hand tools and similar products to fill those drawers and cabinets.

To Haas, the garage is the most unappreciated and neglected room in the house, and the one with the most commercial potential.

"I think it's where home theater was 10 or 15 years ago," he said. "It's the last bastion of the home. It's been ignored. It's been neglected."

Jennifer Adams, president of **Jennifer Adams Design Group LLC** and one of Portland's best-known designers, believes Haas is on to something big.

"I think it's a long time coming," she said, adding that she believes people will spend money if they have good options.

Right now, she said, the most people can really find for the garage are spray-on floor coatings and pre-manufactured cabinets.

Vault Brands' cabinets are a "phenomenal" addition to the market, she said.

Haas conducted some of his earliest market research interviewing shoppers outside the downtown Portland **Williams-Sonoma** store.

That research identified an opening in the market.

He wondered why a nation of car lovers hadn't spawned a Williams-Sonoma-type lifestyle business centered on cars and the garage, the way Williams-Sonoma is centered on the home and kitchen.

"We would become that destination place for men," he said. The garage seemed like a natural place to start.

When Haas looks at the typical new home, he sees two- and three-car garages with extra space for work benches. He sees garage doors that dominate the front of the house. "What does a disorganized garage say about the homeowner?"

His vision has attracted early supporters.

Sean Kuni, a director of the Kuni Automotive chain of car dealerships, invested early in Vault Brands after meeting Haas through business acquaintances.

Kuni said Haas' connections and business savvy impressed him. Developing a lifestyle brand around cars and the garage appealed to him on a personal and professional level.

"I've always looked at the garage as a great part of the house ... and the only part of the house I've been able to decorate," Kuni said. He jokes that if Haas would just add a urinal to the list of must-have amenities for the luxe garage, he'd have the perfect man cave.

"You'd never have to go inside," he kidded.

Vault Brands, Inc (<http://www.showroomgarage.com/>)

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