For untold centuries drumsticks were made of bone or wood. Alternative materials introduced over the past few decades appeared and, mostly, quickly disappeared. But one non-traditional product, unveiled in 1992, stands out for its unique design and unconventional success in a very traditional market. In their inaugural ad campaign proclaiming “Darwin was right,” Advanced High-Efficiency Alloy Drumsticks—AHEAD—were touted as the most advanced and “evolved” sticks on the market. Today, as the sticks turn 20, they represent bold innovation and a break from conventions that are thousands of years old.

AHEAD drumsticks were developed by Rick Grossman, a drummer and engineer at the Easton Company, the world’s leading producer of baseball bats, archery bows and arrows, hockey sticks, and bicycle components made from aircraft-grade aluminum. Because it was strong, durable, and consistent as well as lightweight, Easton aluminum had quickly become the natural choice to replace wood in the manufacture of sporting goods. Grossman figured it might also make an excellent substitute for wooden drumsticks.

With Easton’s support, Grossman designed sticks with a hi-tech aluminum core and handle, nylon tips, and a replaceable sleeve made from injection-molded polyurethane. The line became available through Big Bang Distribution, which has been its proprietary distributor since 1997.

Prior to AHEAD, non-wood sticks were developed primarily for their superior durability. According to Big Bang President Bob Kasha, the market “got” AHEAD sticks’ ability to outlast wood immediately. It also soon caught on to the fact that AHEAD sticks were exceptionally straight and consistent in size and weight to a variance of less than 1%. And hard-hitting players in particular cited their responsiveness and “power”—the speed of return off the impact surface known in the world of baseball bats as the “trampoline effect.”

Other benefits took more time to convey. For example, one of the common misconceptions about AHEAD sticks is that they transfer more impact shock to the player. In fact, says Kasha, the reverse is true. “Around the time AHEAD sticks were introduced, polyurethane was beginning to be used for a variety of automotive parts, including bumpers, because it was light and durable but also effective in absorbing shock. AHEAD sticks’ polyurethane cover is actually easier on cymbals and players’ hands.” Bon Jovi’s Tico Torres, an early AHEAD endorser, commented, “AHEAD sticks absorb the shock: no carpal tunnel, no pain. I’m very comfortable with them.”

AHEAD entered the market with a double-edged strategy: to introduce a new, unconventional product to dealers while simultaneously weaning drummers from their conventional drumsticks. Fortunately, the drum market boom of the early ’90s fueled a spirit of
adventure among retailers such as Just Drums in Toronto, Ontario, Gelb Music in Redwood City, California, and Ritchie’s Music in Rockaway, New Jersey. More recently, other influential retailers, from full-line stores like Grandma’s Music in Albuquerque, New Mexico to drum specialty shops such as Vic’s Drumshop in Chicago, have begun carrying AHEAD sticks as their visibility and demand increased. International distribution expanded quickly as well.

“I’ve been selling [AHEAD sticks] since the beginning,” says Just Drums owner Dave Hamilton. “The sticks were interesting and had great marketing behind them. At the time there were other synthetic sticks around, but they just didn’t feel very good. Also, AHEAD’s replaceable sleeves and interchangeable tips were quite innovative.”

Gelb Music Drum Department Manager Don Frank cites a less obvious corollary to AHEAD sticks’ durability. “Over the past 20 years, the price of wood has gone up,” he observes. “That gets people looking at durability and consistency [in terms of value].”

Vic’s Drumshop owner Victor Salazar concurs. “Drummers want to buy cheap sticks because they go through them like crazy,” he says. “But sometimes paying a little more for a stick that lasts longer, performs better, and is healthier for your hands is a smarter investment. AHEAD sticks are more expensive because they’re worth it. They represent a wonderful alternative to standard wooden sticks.”

AHEAD sticks have become more relevant with the rising popularity of heavier musical styles and associated high rate of stick breakage. At the same time, their durability and recyclability appeals to conservation-minded drummers distressed by the thought of discarding numerous broken sticks every week.

AHEAD’s ability to control weight and balance independently of diameter and length gave them an edge for rock, punk, metal, hardcore, and progressive sub-genres, and AHEAD responded with a broader model selection. Standard 7A, 5A, 5B and 2B models led to ROCK, Hybridx, Metal Fusion 2B, Fatbeat 5A, and Monsta Rock versions while an assortment of different tips and mallet heads, grip tape, and other accessories allowed drummers to customize the sound and feel of the sticks.

These attributes, combined with the efforts of Kasha, Grossman, and Big Bang Sales Director Jeff Moeller, have helped the company assemble a distinctive artist roster that includes legendary metal masters Lars Ulrich (Metallica), Tommy Lee (Mötley Crüe), Phil Rudd (AC/DC), Rick Allen (Def Leppard), and Tico Torres (Bon Jovi) as well as up-and-coming metal drummers such as Proscriptor McGovern (Absu), Rik Charron (Exciter), Sasha Horn (Forbidden), John Paul Andrade (Allegaeon), Henrik Ohlsson (Scar Symmetry), Zack Simmons (Goatwhore), and Mario Moreno (Exmortus). AHEAD has also become the stick of choice for modern alternative rockers including Josh Eppard (Coheed & Cambria), Vinnie Fiorello (Less Than Jake), Bobby Alt, Adam Alt, Frank Zummo, Justin Imamura (Street Drum Corps), and many others.

No surprise, the list is dominated by drummers who work primarily in harder-hitting musical styles, where stick durability and shock absorption are front-of-mind concerns. “AHEAD sticks appeal to all different ages and levels,” says Frank, “but most of their customers are youngish—the players who need a tougher stick and are most open to trying something new. AHEAD is becoming the only [alternative stick maker] in town, and they continue to create new models. I expect they’ll see steady growth in the future, especially with young, progressive drummers.”

Last year, to expand its presence in the youth and educational markets, the company launched its “Generation A” marketing initiative. Based on the principle that it’s easier to get drummers started with an alternative stick than convert them five or ten years later, the program is aimed at raising awareness and educating young drummers and drum teachers on the benefits of AHEAD sticks. Drummers who decide to play AHEAD can join Generation A’s online community by posting their photos and band contacts on the AHEAD website (aheadgenerationA.com). Declaring, “The children are the future,” Kasha suggests that AHEAD sticks’ consistent straightness, balance, durability, value, and shock absorption properties make them “ideal for young drummers—even beginners and school bands.”

In 2008, Big Bang devised the “AHEAD Challenge,” an online tutori-
al for dealers on the history, design, and benefits of AHEAD sticks. Dealers who successfully completed a brief test won an AHEAD Drumsticks T-shirt and a pair of AHEAD sticks, but the real payoff was gaining knowledge they could use to sell more AHEAD products.

Big Bang recently introduced a new sales program called “Pairs For Points,” where participating drum shop staff members earn points from the sale of AHEAD sticks that can be redeemed for free sticks and other popular Big Bang products and merchandise.

After 20 years and millions of sticks sold, AHEAD drumsticks have proven that their durability is not the only reason for the company’s longevity. Kasha is confident that musical trends and new generations of open-minded drummers will contribute to the brand’s continued growth. Asked why he plays AHEAD sticks, Metallica’s Lars Ulrich commented, “The question you should be asking is ‘Why doesn’t everybody?’ And 20 years from now, that’s a question you won’t even have to ask.”

www.bigbangdist.com