

TANTUS: STICKING IT TO THE MAN



Unencumbered by ego, threat of competition or a need to “fit” into a new realm, Metis Black set out to make Tantus a fully realized and principle-driven toy brand. And she succeeded—on her own terms. *by Kristofer Kay*

When Metis Black founded Tantus Inc. back in 1998, she didn't think she was ahead of the sex toy curve; but helping raise the bar of an entire industry was a different story. Upon the arrival of Tantus' products, Black and her team didn't just set out to sell them blindly to retailers looking to fill shelves, but instead to sell to them products, however personal, with a distinct sense of purpose.

When did butt plugs serve that purpose (besides the obvious)? Well, when Tantus appeared. How about the time when silicone became part of the luxury discussion? Tantus helped. And the time when strap-ons came out from behind the counter and onto your mannequins? Yep, Tantus then, too.

Unencumbered by ego, threat of competition or a need to "fit" into a new realm, Black set out to make Tantus a fully realized, wholly individualistic and principle-driven toy brand. Built with innovation relating to both design and function, Tantus products had everything to prove, but compared to most, nothing to lose. Or so others thought.

"In the mid-to-late '90s, silicone toys were mainly found in selective retail stores; silicone in mass production for adult toys hadn't hit its stride yet and didn't have full distribution support," says Michael Blacksmith, Tantus' current CEO and Metis' husband. "Metis is an artist, but also had a background in feminism and wanted to create something that was healthy for the female body while still maintaining a very classy finish."

Before forming Tantus, Black was a regular on the Renaissance fair circuit, selling merchandise made of pewter (a malleable metal alloy made up of mostly tin and copper used to make decorative objects and sculptures). It was her initial thought that she would transition into high-end metal furniture, but changed her mind when she noticed a sculpture at a local art gallery that was phallic looking and thought about making sex toys with an artistic bent.

"Back in the early '90s, the majority of consumers who purchased adult toys were men," mentions Blacksmith. "They would buy them for their partner for a one-time use and throw them away. They were definitely a novelty item. But Metis was looking to make something she would use as a female. I'm not saying that wasn't already happening; you had Good Vibes and Babeland stores promoting female-friendly toys back then. But they were

very isolated and typically found in large cities. The average adult store wasn't carrying these types of products yet. So she set out to make women's sex lives better with more consciously made product from a proven material."

After years of being based in different cities across the Midwest, Tantus has now settled (corporate and manufacturing) in Reno, Nevada, with 30 employees. As far as responsibilities are concerned, Metis is the more reserved of the two, preferring to work behind the scenes (although you're sure to find her at tradeshows), whereas Michael is the company's charismatic CEO. The couple have been together for six years, married for almost two, and just recently welcomed a baby boy. The act of redundancy is apparent in Blacksmith (formerly Michael Smith) whether he is talking about Tantus or the woman who created it all.

"Metis is so intelligent. She perfected the form that makes Tantus toys unassuming and comfortable for women," says Blacksmith. "Metis has made more impact, in my opinion, than any other person in our industry. She bootstrapped herself in order to make it in the industry and brought a unique sense of health and quality to adult toys."

THE METIS METHOD

The key ingredient to Tantus, of course, is silicone. Black came up with a method to cost-effectively create and manufacture high volumes of adult toys created with medical-grade silicone. The first toys to take off for the company were the Little Flirt and Small Ripple (plugs), along with their Bend Over Beginners Kit, which became their first industry standouts. Plugs and strap-on toys are where the company began, and are still their staple products today.

Because of the way silicone molecularly bonds, it is an electrical conductor, and transmits better than any other plastic. This was a key component when Tantus moved beyond the plugs and entered the vibrator sector. Tantus uses generic bullet power in each of their vibrating toys due to a belief in the importance of hygiene.

"Consumers should be given the option to take apart our toys in order to properly clean them," says Black.



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"Some high-end toys today cannot be sterilized. Our vibrators, however, can be taken apart and hygienically cleaned."

Blacksmith goes on to mention that the biggest fault with adult toys lies in the electronic components; that is, eventually, electronics are going to break. "With our toys, a customer is spending their money on the quality material, period," Blacksmith says. "If our electronics fail, all the customer has to do is buy a bullet for eight bucks and they're back in business."

Since silicone is sempiternal, Tantus' product guidelines are dictated by health and wellness. "Everything we do is designed to help the human body with healthy ergonomic materials," says Blacksmith. "Some of our products aren't lookers. For example, we have one particular product called 'The Charmer' that the head of our production politely dubbed, 'Fuck me gently with a chainsaw.' But in reality it is one of the best g-spot toys ever made. It's not made to catch bass on the weekend, nor is it sparkly with 400 speeds; but it'll teach any woman where her g-spot is and how an orgasm should work. When a woman sticks that in her body, she'll know exactly where her money went."

TODAY'S TANTUS

Today, Tantus has 200 SKUs available, with 80 different shapes and styles to offer retailers. From fetish gear, like gags, to external accessories for him, c-rings, c-slings and strokers, to the core products which are harness-compatible silicone dongs and other toys in varying sizes for men and women that can range up to \$300 MSRP. Never one to blush or back down from a challenge,

Tantus' female-friendly dongs are countered by their toys for men, going all-out with perhaps their most notorious male-centric product, the Mr. Universe. At three inches in diameter and seven inches high, Mr. Universe is built to challenge even the most experienced p-spot players.

More recently, Tantus has found a newer market to explore in metal toys. Their Alumina line is made from high-quality aluminum and molded in Tantus' specific design, no doubt fostered by Black's history with metal.

"With Alumina, we wanted a toy that could be sold in a lingerie boutique that wanted to carry toys, but would never consider anything phallic," says Black. "We're proud to have created a metal line that shares the essence of art and beauty and can be sold next to the highest forms of other fashion merchandise."

These are what some retailers might call "glass case items," but according to Blacksmith, that label has been a slight drawback for the metal toys.

"Expensive toys have been always guarded by lock and key; but for our toys, it really has to be placed into a customer's hand to make an impact and guarantee a sale," he says. "There are no seams with any of our toys; they're solid, smooth and multidimensional. Also, the approachability factor with Tantus is amazing; customers are drawn to the styles and want to feel what we're about before purchasing them. They really sell themselves once they end up in the customer's hand."

When toys are in glass cases or are closely guarded, they tend to sell less and sometimes are inadvertently given that look-but-don't touch-stigma. Blacksmith encourages all retailers to allow their customers a tactile experience with Tantus' products before they are purchased.





"I think placing toys in a glass case is an old way of doing business," Blacksmith says. "Retailers are doing touch and feel sections in their toy department, which creates a successful sales method inside their business and where our toys thrive."

A PLAN TO "STICK IT TO THE MAN"

Sexual health shouldn't have to come with an agenda. After all, since it is such an intensely subjective—and intensely personal—experience, sex toy manufacturers tend to have a soft, if not vague, approach to the marketing of their products. Happy. Non-threatening. Euphonious sex toys are what sell now.

Tantus, however, is going against customary marketing scripture with their deliberate new "Stick it to the Man" campaign, which seems to state that the products they make, and the tastes that they cater to, are just another form of freedom of expression. And if you don't like it, then just back away. Or kiss their ass. Probably the latter.

"We're a hard product to sell; our dongs have an MSRP of \$80," mentions Blacksmith. "But we're passionate about providing products that can last a lifetime, which essentially 'sticks it to the man.' Is it political? Yeah, in a way it is. We're making products that break down the stigma of using an adult novelty."

Blacksmith also thinks that this is the company's best chance to get their philosophy across to both retailers and end consumers. "Sure, (Stick it to the Man) is about pegging, but it is also about other things," he says. "It is about the country's point of view on sex, especially this

notion of the adult novelty industry being the fringe of eroticism and being lewd and lascivious. We're looking to take our brand of sexuality to the mainstream. That's one way to stick it to the man. Tantus is making things with such high quality that it's bound to get attention beyond the reach of our industry."

In 2012, Blacksmith suggests that the largest improvement for Tantus will be the reinvigoration of their brand. From the POS collateral and signage to retailer training, Tantus has partnered with Cisco for a sales and marketing system created to help familiarize not only Tantus products, but also the Tantus philosophy. Sixteen years ago, the woman Michael Blacksmith would eventually marry entered the industry alone with enough character and conviction to sustain an entire corporation though a singular vision. While the company Metis Black built isn't as large as some other manufacturers, they don't adhere to anyone else, either. You don't see them with facsimile products or riding on the crest of trends. They don't stand apart—they stand alone. And comfortable. They walk their own path, create their own products and look to nobody else but themselves come win or fail.

"Tantus has remained true to itself and has never questioned our purpose in the adult toy industry," says Blacksmith. "We are who we are, and now we are looking forward by helping retailers get to know us a better. But what they already know is that Tantus creates customers for life because we're a lifelong partner, for both retailers and customers." **E**

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