

## Birth of a brand

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Tim Ozgener is now running C.A.O. International, sold earlier this year to the ST Cigar Group. When he's not running to a trade show, or a store promotion, or checking on the C.A.O. sales team or working with the cigar producers who make the C.A.O. brands, he writes a piece for the "Ozblog" on the C.A.O. website.

Last January, he posted a revealing note about how brands are created and in specific, how the now-shipping C.A.O. Vision brand was developed. It's worth a look:

"The CAO Vision has been in development for over two years now. I remember reading the Wall Street Journal article on Dell Computers and how they identified a new burgeoning market. A niche segment had emerged of high end laptops that were faster, smaller, more efficient and intelligent that also looked "high tech." The article noted that so many people are "on the go" and want to maintain a competitive edge, and buying a laptop that saved time had strong appeal.

"This made me think back on CAO's history. We started with pipes, now cigars dominate over pipes. Why? Pipes are a hassle. They take too much time — light, fill tobacco, light, smoke, pat down the tobacco, fill more tobacco, light, and repeat — too much!! Cigars are easy: cut, light, smoke, done . . . buy another. We were also in the humidor business. I used to sell them to all the retailers in California. Humidors are also a hassle. Buy a humidifier. What percent humidity is the right percent? How do I maintain it at that humidity? How much water do I need to fill it with? What is over-filling and how much is under-filling? I can't tell you how many humidors I've had to take back because someone over-filled the humidifier with water which caused the box to swell and split.

"I was inspired to make the most intelligent travel humidor in the cigar industry's history. This concept consumed me for two and a half years. The Vision cigar had been decided a year ago. We had been working with my friends at La Aurora, SA on our sub-brand, "flavours by CAO" since 2001. I'd visit Guillermo Leon who would always ask, "Eeh, Tim, when can we work together on a non-flavored CAO line?" "Send me samples," was always my reply, which they would then send. We received tons of samples from them, and we sincerely wanted to work with them to produce CAO's first Dominican cigar.

"Four and a half years and over 200 cigar samples later, a blend called #7 came across my desk. I had described the kind of cigar we were looking for in a Dominican blend. I was searching for a full flavor profile with notes of sweet spice in the family of cinnamon, nutmeg (among others) and balanced with white pepper. I was looking for a mouthful of textured, thick smoke that expanded through the palate slowly. I was looking for a cigar that was subtle, complex and expansive and that would leave a pleasant finish. We also wanted an oily, flavorful Dominican wrapper. The #7 blend had all these qualities and I knew it was the blend we had been looking for. . . .

"After many conversations and debates in house and with La Aurora, we decided that CAO Vision would be released three times a year. The wrapper would have its time to ferment, the fillers were all already well-aged, and then once the cigar would be rolled, it would rest for six months in a highly aromatic Spanish cedar room. The tobacconists who believe in us and trust our track record on delivering excellence would sign up for the product and be willing to wait for the sake of quality. Since the cigar was so special to us and was going to be fermented and aged in a very specific manner, we wanted the box to essentially guarantee that the cigars would be maintained at an optimum level. Each Vision box would contain a 60 gram Humidipak that would regulate the cigars at 69 % humidity. Once the Humidipak became firm to the touch, it'd be time to replace it with a new one. The decision was also made to assign a serial number to every single cigar to ensure its authenticity and to go towards preventing any potential counterfeiting."

That's a long time and a lot of work to produce a limited-production brand. But the Vision has been well-received and at \$12-16 per cigar (depending on size), it's also adding to the C.A.O. bottom line.