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**Michigan State University's** licensing efforts support student programs.

**The Ohio State University** licenses products so alumni can show their support.





MSU stresses that each purchase of licensed products goes toward helping MSU students.

## MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

# Spreading Spartan Pride

Michigan State University's licensing allows students, staff and alumni to show support year-round while financially supporting student programs and scholarships. **BY JIM HARRIS**



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**T**he Michigan State University Spartan is more than just a representation of the school's nationally known athletic programs. The Spartan is a symbol of the pride that students, staff and alumni take in the university – a pride that extends well beyond football and basketball seasons.

"Our students and fans have a vested interest in the university, are passionate about it and want to continue supporting it not just during a season, but year-round," Director of Licensing Samantha Stevens says.

Established in the mid-1980s as a way to protect the university's image by making sure the Spartan brand and related marks and logos were being used properly, MSU's licensing program has evolved into a way for the public institution of higher learning to

tell its story beyond the East Lansing, Mich., campus.

"We see licensing as an opportunity to showcase our brand outside of the university setting," she adds. "The more we can grow the brand in the retail space, the more recognition the university receives."

Profits from the sale of licensed products directly support MSU student scholarships and student programming. "Whether it's a \$3 keychain or a \$1,000 Spartan necklace, each purchase is going toward helping MSU students," Stevens says.

### 'Cradle to Grave'

As one of the top 10 universities in the United States in terms of enrollment and with more than 500,000 living alumni, MSU has a large potential audience





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for licensed products. “We have people who support the university from the cradle to the grave,” Stevens says, noting that MSU’s brand extends from baby clothes to funeral urns.

MSU’s biggest licensing category is apparel, which, in sales terms, typically makes up 70 to 75 percent of the total licensing business. Apparel items include men’s t-shirts and fleece, which combined are the top sellers in the category, as well as youth and women’s t-shirts and other clothing. The university’s non-apparel categories include housewares, gifts, novelties and sports equipment, among other things.

Although shoppers are most likely to find MSU licensed products within the state of Michigan, the university also has a major presence online with national retailers such as Fanatics, Kohl’s and Amazon. “These are retailers where fans all over the country can have access to a robust array of Spartan products that fit the needs of every fan,” Stevens notes.

The university’s longest-lived licensing partners include Nike, MSU’s sideline partner and exclusive licensee of performance apparel and replica jerseys. “Being associated with one of the largest, most recognizable brands in the world lends legitimacy to the Spartan brand,” she adds.

Another of the university’s veteran partners is Knights Apparel, a division of HanesBrands Inc. Knights Apparel is



MSU’s exclusive licensee to the mass distribution channel, which includes retailers such as Walmart, Target and Costco.

The Northwest Company, which sells collegiate bedding, room décor and blankets, is one of MSU’s top-five non-apparel vendors. It distributes to key retailers such as Bed, Bath & Beyond; Kohl’s; Walmart and Meijer. Northwest increased its wholesale shipments of MSU product 278 percent in July to August of this year compared to the same period in 2015, reinforcing growth of the MSU brand.

### A Strategic Approach

MSU maintains its relationships with existing licensing partners and builds new partnerships by taking a business development approach to licensing. “For us, relationships are absolutely everything,” Stevens says, noting that the university’s business development department regularly fundraises and hosts events. “We believe that in order to grow your business, you have to go out and build those relationships.”

The licensing department frequently travels to licensee and retailer sites and regularly hosts retail summits. “We bring in our top licensees, retailers and other partners to talk about business and the unique things MSU does and what our school is all about,” Stevens says.

MSU in January will host a retail appreciation event at the Sports Licensing and Tailgate Show in Las Vegas in January. This is the first time the college has hosted such an event at the Tailgate Show. “Most of our top retailers and licensees will be there, so we’re taking our show on the road and developing business in a place we know everyone will be,” she adds.

The university also takes a strategic approach to its licensing and marketing efforts. MSU is aided in this effort by its licensing agency, The Collegiate Licensing Co. (CLC), which it started working with in July 2015. CLC is provid-







ing MSU with data about consumer behavior and trends that the university is using to improve its market presence. “We’ve already seen a significant increase in shelf space since partnering with CLC,” Stevens says.

The university is also partnering with CLC on marketing campaigns such as College Colors Day, which encouraged

students, faculty, staff, alumni and fans to wear their school’s colors in advance of a national event in early September. MSU is also participating in CLC’s Holiday Cheer campaign, which highlights products during the holiday season.

Other ongoing marketing efforts include its “State Your Loyalty” program – [www.stateyourloyalty.com](http://www.stateyourloyalty.com), which educates consumers about how to identify officially licensed MSU products; “Stripe the Stadium,” which encourages football fans to wear MSU’s colors of green and white in certain sections of the stadium during games; and the “College Vault” program, which capitalizes on MSU’s long history by licensing products with vintage logos and marks.

MSU continues to seek opportunities to build its licensing program. “We are strategically managing our brand and looking for best-in-class partners who are interested in investing with MSU, whether through exclusives or longer-term agreements,” Stevens says. 📦

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