

Really good marketing + 5 experts weigh in on the stimulus plan

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HOW TO RESHAPE AN INDUSTRY

**Firewire's strategy:
a new subculture,
a new technology**

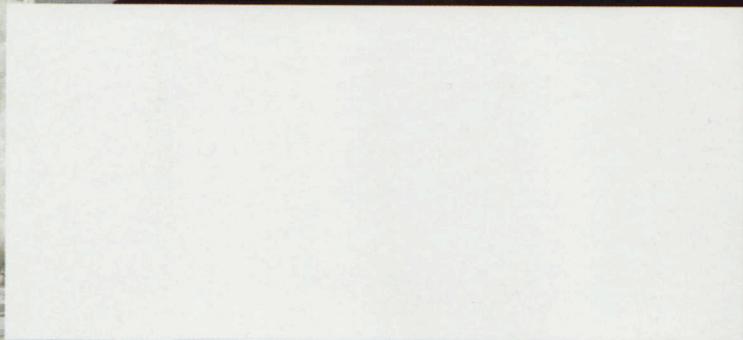
**AND A
\$2.65 BILLION
MARKET**



Mark Price
CEO
Firewire Surfboards



**SHINY OBJECT
OF THE MONTH**
PALM PRE



innovators+



Mark Price
of Firewire
Surfboards

Surfing's

A photograph of a bamboo forest with a surfboard in the foreground. The surfboard is light-colored with a dark graphic on the nose. The bamboo stalks are tall and green, with sunlight filtering through the leaves in the background.

**FIREWIRE
HOPES ITS
INNOVATIVE
BOARD
DESIGN WILL
CONVERT
A NEW
GENERATION
OF SURFERS**

*By Dennis Romero
Photography by Jeff Clark*

In the first years after World War II, a Caltech dropout named Bob Simmons had pretty much pioneered all the elements found in today's surfboards. He sculpted blanks of foam for hydrodynamic efficiency, wrapped the core in fiberglass, placed multiple fins at the rear, and "glassed" it all in waterproof resin. By 1949, when most surfers were still lugging around wooden boats and balsa planks, Simmons and his partners churned out 100 prototypes that were so light and easy to ride surfers called them "girlfriend boards." >>

next safari

Simmons' platform helped open the gates of Malibu to a riot of *Gidget*-inspired wave-riding, but he wasn't around to see it happen. His designs and techniques didn't really stick until after his death by surf in the fall of 1954.

Simmons' is a cautionary tale for any entrepreneur: Being first sometimes means being before your time. In battling for the hearts and minds of often intractable consumers, product pioneers sometimes do brush clearance for the competition.

Like Simmons, San Diego-based Firewire Surfboards has blazed a bold new trail in surfing—but it's not clear if core enthusiasts will follow.

Firewire boards, launched in Australia in 2005, are far lighter, stronger and more flexible than the polyurethane-foam-based competition. Although Firewire uses unorthodox and high-tech materials such as bamboo and carbon, the real advances are in the factory, where, over the last two years, Firewire has developed a high-capacity computer-aided process that includes environmentally friendly lamination. The result is a featherweight product that suggests new ways of riding waves. "When Firewire came on the scene, it was a disruptive technology," says company CEO Mark Price, a former wave-riding pro. "It represented a real threat to the entrenched surfboard manufacturing interests."

In fact, the biggest hurdle for Firewire is the past: Surfers prefer their gear old school—custom-shaped to order, just like Simmons offered. Firewire's products come in off-the-rack sizes, but that too is about to change: This fall, the company is introducing its first custom board line.

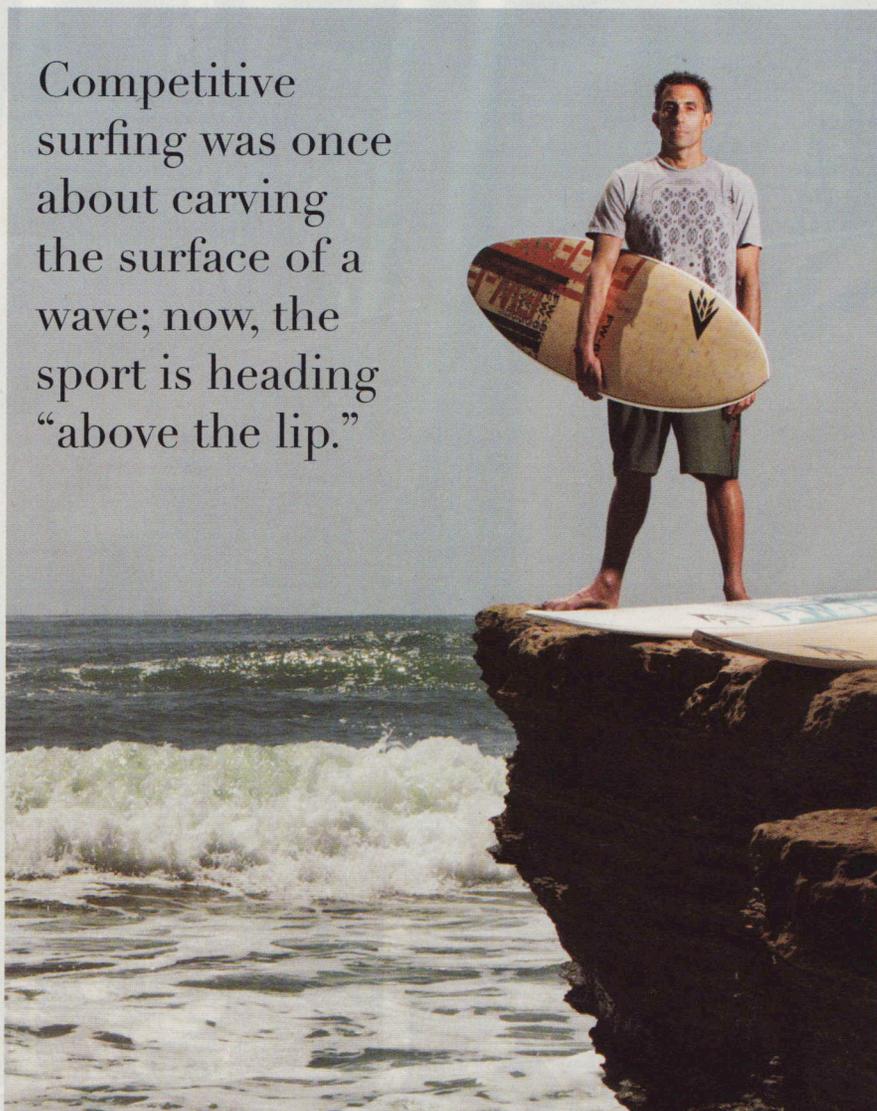
The made-to-order products will cost a little more than the company's standard \$600 sticks, which already come in more than 90 models, from longboard cruisers to shortboard scalpels. Price, 48, notes that an off-the-rack board from Channel Islands, which he calls the industry's "gold standard," costs \$650. The difference, he says, is performance, with Firewire offering flex and maneuverability never seen before. He likens the Firewire board to a race-car you can drive on the street. "You're buying a Formula 1 surfboard here," he says, "and I think that's an important distinction vs. the competition."

The CEO might sound hyperbolic, but Firewire's capabilities were on display when teen surfing sensation Dusty Payne was awarded \$50,000 this spring for winning the Kustom Air Strike best-aerial contest. Payne shot off a wave, spun 360 degrees in the air and landed with nary a hair out of place. The jaw-dropping, skateboarding-style trick, caught on video on the North Shore of Oahu, could shake surfing the way Tony Hawk's two-and-a-half-rotation "900" helped to launch ESPN's X Games into popular culture 10 years ago.

Indeed, Price says, competitive surfing was once about carving the surface of a wave; now the sport is heading "above the lip"—in the air—where skate-style moves are becoming de rigeur for a new generation of riders.

Timing has been on Firewire's side. In 2005, the year the company took flight, a Laguna Niguel, California, concern called Clark Foam, which supplied as much as 90 percent of surfboard-makers' core materials (chemically toxic "foam blanks") shut its doors. Owner Gordon "Grubby" Clark was wary of environmental regulations that he said would invite crippling lawsuits. The loss set off a mad scramble for new sources of foam and new ways of making boards. Surftech, a Santa Cruz, California-based company that peddles Asian-made, plastic-like epoxy boards for beginners, took flight. Firewire is aiming its manufactured boards at daily surfers, a fickle bunch who even Price says "can be very myopic at times." It's another challenge.

Competitive surfing was once about carving the surface of a wave; now, the sport is heading "above the lip."



"Hardcore surfers, who surf weekly or more, ride boards made for them specifically," says Steve Pezman, publisher of *Surfer's Journal*. "When the performance outweighs the advantages of the custom shape, the manufactured surfboard has a chance to make deep inroads."

Matt Biolos, co-founder and head designer for San Clemente, California-based Lost Surfboards, liked Firewire's products enough to order 250 of them when they debuted. He was denied. Firewire wanted to establish its own name, instead of supplying outside brands. Last year, however, Biolos finally struck a deal to have Firewire make a run of Lost-branded and -designed Firewires. Biolos is a believer, but he says it's hard to get other surfers to convert. "As long as we remain steadfastly spoiled with our ability to order custom surfboards, Firewire will always come in second," says the 40-year-old.

Firewire has a 10,000-foot warehouse in San Diego, but it makes virtually all of its boards in a factory it opened in Thailand in 2007. Price says developing the step-by-step board-making process from months of trial and error was Firewire's most challenging feat. "It was unbelievably torturous, stressful and expensive," he says.

Its latest line of sticks, Rapidfire, has a core of basic, beer-cooler-type foam. Carbon rods are inlaid at the bottom for flex; the top is lined with gorgeous finished bamboo for strength and stiffness. Vacuum bags are used to bind the inner materials before they're glassed in epoxy.

Price says the process and materials mean his boards are "50 times less toxic and emit 2 percent of the volatile organic compounds found in a traditional polyurethane surfboard."

After riding a Firewire design, marketing manager Chuy Reyna quit his job of 14 years to join the company in 2007. "It's rare to have that much difference in a product," he says. "This marketplace has been saturated with a level playing field of boards. This is so overdue."

The gear has its share of converts, to be sure. The company signed Taj Burrow as its signature rider in 2007, and he rode his Firewire to a No. 2 world ranking that year. And Biolos notes that seasoned professional Shea Lopez has



\$2.65
BILLION

Sales at U.S. surf shops (includes equipment and apparel)

\$5.5
BILLION

Sales at U.S. surf and skate shops combined

\$190
MILLION

U.S. surfboard sales

[All figures: "Surf Industry Manufacturers Association 2006 Retail Distribution Study"]

ridden a Lost-branded model and raved about it. "You could buy one and say it's the best board you've ever ridden," Biolos says.

Long Beach Surf Shop in Long Island, New York, caters to core city surfers for whom 43-degree water in spring is like a walk in Central Park. The store carries Firewire boards proudly. The gear-maker, says shop owner Luke Hamlet, "is using technology to benefit surfers rather than its own costs."

At the factory in San Diego, boards are lined up like soldiers in marching formation. Price shows off a board that's been sliced into pieces. It's elegant and organized—its stacked materials beckoning like a piece of high-tech layer cake. Per-

formance art rarely comes from a factory, but here it does.

"Materials have always led the advances in surfboards," says Pezman of *Surfer's Journal*. "If they get into lighter, stronger, more flexible dynamics that make the performance more desirable over hand-shaped boards, then those older boards will be toast."

He says that when foam boards finally took over surfing, it happened in 12 months. "That was 1959." It was the year of *Gidget*. It was the year that Hobie Alter, using Clark's original foam, launched a brand dynasty by churning out easy-to-ride, easy-to-carry longboards. It was 10 years after a man named Simmons invented the modern surfboard. 