



Blake Mycoskie Highlights CAEDA's Annual Dinner

By Jennifer Scott, CAEDA

CAEDA was fortunate to host dynamic young entrepreneur Blake Mycoskie, Founder & Chief Shoe Giver of TOMS Shoes, at its Annual Dinner, held at the Casper/Natrona County International Airport on February 3, 2010. What is TOMS Shoes and how did it become an amazing entrepreneurial success story? Blake outlined his journey for the audience. In 2006, while traveling in Argentina, Blake met a group of Americans who were delivering a shipment of shoes to poor children. He learned that shoes were required for attending school and also help cut down on diseases. But he wondered, "What happens when these shoes wear out, what then?" This led to the idea for TOMS Shoes: providing a pair of shoes directly to a needy child with every pair purchased by a customer. This innovative "One for One" business model successfully demonstrates that consumers can use their individual purchasing power for the greater good. So far TOMS has distributed 400,000 pairs of shoes to children around the world.

Once back in the States, Blake discovered that it's not easy to break into a new industry. After being turned down repeatedly, he happened to be in the right place at the right time. He met with a purchasing manager in an upscale LA store, who was actually waiting for another distributor. After talking with Blake she bought 80 pairs of shoes. Coincidentally a *LA Times* fashion writer spotted the shoes and ran a story about TOMS. The unexpected publicity skyrocketed the demand for the shoes and caused some serious supply and demand issues. "When the *LA Times* story ran we received orders for 22,000 pairs but we only had 140 in the apartment...it was the classic good/bad problem that growing companies face," he said. A *Vogue* feature followed and stores such as Nordstroms and Urban Outfitters began calling. Blake decided it was time to focus on TOMS and quit his day job with a tech company, using his buyout money as starting capital. Then he recruited experienced industry professionals and learned everything he could about shoes and retail.

Blake shared some of the business lesson he has learned along the way. First he explained why he chose to create a for-profit business rather than a charity: sustainability. A business is much more sustainable than a charity, which relies strictly on donations; it can serve more people for a longer period of time and provides a greater return on an investment. Another important factor is incorporating giving into the business model. According to Blake, "people like to be a part of something good, bigger than one's self." This is true of both customers and employees; they become passionate marketers of a product. He also discussed benefits of association: not only do good people want to work for you, but other companies want to be affiliated as well. For example, the Chairman of AT&T told Blake that the ad campaign featuring TOMS Shoes was one of the most popular in the history of the company; it greatly benefited both parties. "You never know who will get behind you," he said. To learn more about TOMS Shoes please visit www.tomsshoes.com.