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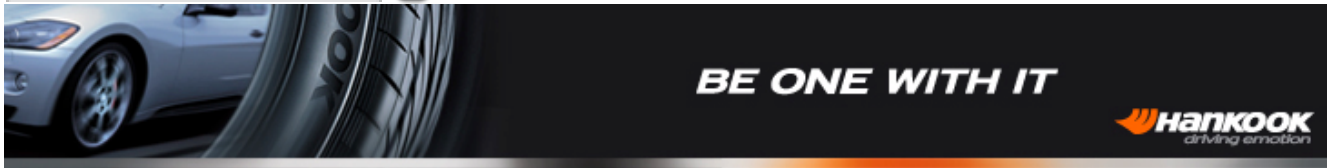
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Dhani Jones gets creative sans football

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By *Kyle Stack*
 Special to *ESPN.com*
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Dhani Jones likes to channel his inner-"Mad Men" while at his second job.

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Courtesy of Dhani Jones Dhani Jones has drawn up a number of post-career plays, including his advertising and design firm.

"Welcome to the office of Luke Raymond slash Don Draper," Jones said, referencing his friend/business partner in the same vein as the fictional advertising executive from AMC's popular show.

On a warm June day in New York, Raymond and Jones find their seats in a conference room -- not Raymond's office -- at [VMG Creative](#), an advertising and design firm two blocks south of the Empire State Building in midtown Manhattan. The office environment doesn't quite hark back to the 1960s era that "Mad Men" celebrates; it has its own sense of hipness present in many modern-day advertising firms. This is where Jones, an 11-year NFL linebacker, spent a chunk of his time during the offseason. He'll be here more often to help build the 1.5-year-old firm if he doesn't play a 12th season.

Jones didn't hook up with a team after the lockout, so the NFL career of the former sixth-round pick from the University of Michigan is uncertain after four seasons with the New York Giants, three more for the Philadelphia Eagles and another four with the Cincinnati Bengals. Although the free agent is working out and available if a team calls him, Jones gave every indication in August that a life without football wouldn't bother him.

"Ideas and thoughts and creativity is more of who I am than football," he said. Which is a good thing because VMG dabbles in a little bit of everything. The work they do for companies primarily in the sports, fashion and hospitality industries ranges from brand and website development to social media marketing to interior design for clubs and restaurants. It encapsulates Jones' broad range of interests.

Their nine core clients include Proctor & Gamble, Michael Kors and Capital One, the latter of which was lured to VMG by Jones. As Jones explained in the conference room, he met Roger Ferguson, Capital One's vice president of advertising and sports sponsorships, at an ESPYs after party at a W Hotel in Los Angeles in 2010. They chatted about VMG's goals, then reconnected shortly after at a presentation in Brooklyn, N.Y., for Capital One's Mascot Challenge. Three months after that ESPYs after party, Capital One became a VMG client.

Raymond said Jones' willingness to chat up a high-profile executive, or practically anyone else, isn't a regular occurrence. "I've never seen someone work a room like him," said Raymond, who put that comment in perspective by noting that his brother is a lobbyist for General Electric.

Jones and Raymond founded VMG in January 2010 after Raymond left Office of Air, an art direction and design firm in New York that he founded in 2007. He explained that a business in the branding and advertising industry appealed more to him; he contacted Jones once he had the idea to form VMG and Jones immediately joined him in founding the company.

The two have known each other since 2001. Jones, then in his second NFL season, had been discussing setting up a nonprofit company with Raymond's father, whom Jones had met while speaking on a panel at the International Civic Leadership conference. It was Raymond's mother who suggested that Jones get in touch with Raymond, who graduated from Michigan in 1997. They hit it off as soon as they met. "It's [been] a damn decade," Jones said.

They had discussed various business ideas through the years before VMG Creative became a reality. Jones has always been intrigued by the possibilities that existed for him beyond the gridiron. Likewise, Raymond saw a shift in the advertising and marketing industries, including how athletes were gaining awareness of their "brand," and he wanted to capitalize on it.

"This agency is about taking all the merits and validity of having [a brand's] direction and putting that toward the digital word," Raymond said.

“



Ideas and thoughts and creativity is more of who I am than football.

” -- *Dhani Jones*

Their confidence in VMG's strategy was heightened when they noticed Steve Nash on the February 2010 cover of *Fast Company*. The story's angle regarding Nash's success in basketball *and* in business emboldened Raymond and Jones' belief that athletes had, as Jones called it, "power over creativity." In other words, an athlete can control his brand identity. Jones should know.

He has a show on the Travel Channel, owns several restaurants and bars in Cincinnati and New York City, started a line of bow ties and recently released a book. Ideas are constantly flowing from him, and he applies that mindset to VMG. His role there varies, but it centers mostly on building relationships with clients and potential clients and helping determine strategy for VMG's ongoing and future projects.

While Jones has a 25 percent stake in VMG and Raymond owns 75 percent -- they funded the company by landing a campaign for Proctor & Gamble's Febreze Sport six weeks after opening VMG -- they emphasized the input between them is equal. However, their approaches differ.

Jones is always thinking of big ideas. Raymond often reins those in with a practical mindset.

"His ideas are sometimes all over the place, but he's learning the process of the agency world," Raymond said.

Jones scoffs at the word "process" by proclaiming he doesn't believe in it. He thinks of how VMG can evolve, in part, by considering the people he knows and the ones who he'll meet. "How do you create great opportunities out of fantastic relationships," Jones said.

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Scott Boehm/Getty Images Like VMG Creative, 11-year NFL veteran Dhani Jones dabbles in a lot of things.

The opportunities created have netted VMG that nine-company core clientele, whose budgets range from \$40,000 into the millions. The decision to focus on fashion and hospitality, in addition to sports, was natural to them. The areas interest each of them, and it's where they identified plentiful opportunities. A recent addition to their clientele list highlights that point. Aerin, a fashion and lifestyle brand launched by Aerin Lauder, a granddaughter of Estee Lauder, awarded their account to VMG over 10 other firms, Raymond said.

Raymond said VMG is close to contracting with four more major clients. Their prospective client list for 2012 numbers 10 to 15. That's also when they hope to start VMG Management, which would be the brand-building service for athletes that contributed to VMG's initial methodology.

"If someone is excited about brand partnerships and how to build their brand, then we're excited to work with them," Jones said. VMG wanted to commence VMG Management in September, but the uncertainty of Jones' future in the NFL put the idea on hold.

Raymond said that VMG Creative expects to do \$3 million to \$3.5 million in revenue in 2011. Not a monster figure but one that Raymond said is satisfactory, given how recently the company was started. Yet there is skepticism with at least one executive in the advertising and marketing industry about how VMG will progress.

Ed O'Hara, a senior partner at [SME Branding](#), a brand consultant firm with more than 20 years' experience, explained that VMG must be careful to not be too reliant on Jones' status as a professional athlete.

"[VMG] can certainly grow," O'Hara said by phone. "As Dhani gets further away from football, does the halo lose its touch? That would be a concern."

O'Hara raised the point that VMG also has to be careful about having its hands in too many areas. He emphasized how effective a company can be to identify a niche and perform expertly in that area.

VMG is a small firm, but Raymond and Jones take pride in the pace and quality of their projects. Ten full-time employees churn out what Raymond said was a workload comparable to much larger firms. Jones' presence as a professional athlete and persistence in forming relationships continues to pay dividends, at least for the time

being.

He recently called an old college acquaintance who works at Recyclebank, a New York City-based green rewards program which works with corporations to reward consumers for 'green' living habits. He pitched the company on how VMG can help their branding; they became a client in late July. Raymond said the deal should net VMG \$40,000-\$50,000 for 2011.

Another deal set up with New York Yankees second baseman Robinson Cano's baseball academy was fueled by Jones and his money manager, Mark Doman. Doman introduced Raymond to Chip Sloan, who is on Cano's business management team and is a partner with Cano in the academy.

Raymond, Jones and Sloan formed a deal for VMG to create a logo, design a website and design baseball and training shirts, bags and baseball hats for the Dominican Republic-based academy. That project will likely be completed by October.

While VMG Creative hasn't attained the success of the advertising firms portrayed in "Mad Men," its versatility has delivered it a well-rounded core clientele. That diverse set of interests and talents utilized to attract those clients is why VMG is such a reflection of Jones' personality.

Kyle Stack is a freelance writer in New York City who also contributes to ESPN The Magazine.

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