

## Product Ventures celebrates 15 years

*Clarke's company brings national brands to Fairfield*

By Rita Papazian

Have a conversation with Peter Clarke and you'll never walk down a supermarket aisle the same way again.

Clarke thinks outside the box. He thinks inside, upside, around and atop the box. He looks at the downside of a product's packaging and comes up with the right form, feel and material that will place a product on a consumer's shelf. Of course, he doesn't make these product design decisions alone; he has 35 employees whose talents contribute to the design decisions leading to the company's success.

Founder and CEO of Product Ventures, Clarke is celebrating the company's 15th anniversary this year and during a recent conversation on the fourth floor of the corporate building at 55 Walls Dr., he marked the firm's milestone as he talked in his corner office with spectacular views of the town's rolling hills. Here, he shared the inner workings of how his company improves a product so that a client can maintain or take hold of the competitive edge in the marketplace. His company's success is not only based upon its talented staff but also the innovative technology where an idea can go from concept to prototype all within the 14,000-square-foot office and workshop facility.

Clarke is proud that his designers and engineers work to improve products for leading national manufacturers and "it is happening right here in Fairfield." There is no doubting his success as a visitor peruses the products standing tall on showcase shelves lining the reception area of Product Ventures. These are the same products that any average consumer will find lining the shelves of a refrigerator or pantry, or under the sink or in a supply closet. Next to the showcase, a wall displays framed awards given to Product Ventures.

Standing in front of the products, Clarke explained some of the design features that his company designed to improve the product's visual appeal and functionality. For example, he picked up Similac, the baby formula and pointed out its design elements that make the product easier for the consumer. These elements include a grooved panel on the side for easy grasp; an attached lid so the lid can be opened and closed with one hand; and most important the scoop is attached inside the lid so an adult doesn't have to put hands inside the formula looking for the scoop. The result is efficiency — a major component for busy consumers.

Next, Clarke picked up a can of Folger's



Christian Abraham / Staff Photographer

**Peter Clarke, founder and CEO of Product Ventures, headquartered in Fairfield, poses with a display of various products the company has designed for companies like Heinz, Folgers and Similac. Clarke's company is celebrating its 15th anniversary.**

coffee. "No more can openers," he said, as he demonstrated the peel-back lid.

With another product, International Delight, a non-dairy coffee cream, Clarke pointed out his company's new design improves the pouring and offers a sophisticated look with its new design.

Another successful design is represented in the supply of erasers, brushes, rulers and scissors for Westcott, a division of Acme United, which is also located in Fairfield. The supplies, which also include a caddy for storage and carrying, are designed with bright colors adding to the attractiveness.

"No more wooden rulers," said Clarke, as he picked up another product, a utility knife designed for Clauss. Product Ventures designed the knife with a cartridge-based system to allow for one-hand changing of the blade.

The Heinz ketchup bottle stands tall on the display case and rightly so. Product Ventures' new design has led to the company's "68 percent increase in consumption," Clarke said. "There's a lot of ketchup and less packaging he said, as he noted the de-

sign "aesthetically brings back the design of the old bottle" but with a wider lid, so when inverted allows the ketchup to come to the top. Also, the design allows for a better grasp and for the bottle's easy storage on a refrigerator shelf.

Clarke comes from talented family stock. Peter Clarke's late father, Peter Leslie Clarke, passed away three years ago at age 83. Peter Clarke Sr. was a respected painter and watercolorist who served as art coordinator for the Fairfield Public Schools throughout his teaching career. His grandfather, Linton Leslie Clarke, was a master cabinet-maker with a fine furniture shop in Darien.

The CEO believes a major factor in his success with Product Ventures is his family genes. He's a product of his father's fine art background and his grandfather's craftsmanship; a winning combination for bringing attractive, innovative and functional products to the marketplace.

Clarke admits to being a little selfish in his decision to locate his company in Fairfield, instead of Manhattan, but he has close ties to the community; the space is

ideal; and he has managed to attract very talented individuals — "major, major talent," is the way he describes his staff.

Growing up in Westport, Clarke graduated from Staples High School in 1983. He admits to having been a bit rebellious in his youth. He got into "music and drumming" and then joined the Marine Corp where he played in the Marine Band in the South Pacific. After his military service, he returned home, attended the University of Bridgeport where he became very interested in industrial design. The entrepreneurial spirit of wanting to do it better took hold and he started working for leaders in the industrial design industry. Clarke founded his company in 1994 with the approach to bring a more thoughtful design to the marketplace. The issue became: "What type of package to put out into the world?" Is it recyclable? Does it have a potential for biodegradable? How much material will be used? Is the shape easy to store and transport? Is it well designed?

The Product Ventures founder cites the discipline he gained in the military and the creativity he inherited from his family to his company's success. He said it takes a "blue sky, out-of-the-box creative mind" coupled

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**Peter Clarke**  
Founder and CEO, Product Ventures

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with discipline in working with a demanding client who Product Ventures' designs need to satisfy. "You have to be a hybrid," said Clarke, also adding, the importance of storytelling. "Our job is to tell the brand's story."

Much of the company's success is not only in the talents of its designers and engineers but also in employees, such as Gail Ritacco, vice president of strategy and insight, responsible for the consumer research and working with focus groups to determine what they are looking for in a product, especially when they respond to a prospective design. Through online research, blogging and in-house focus

groups in which employees talk with consumers and also watch them through one-way windows as they interact with the products, Product Ventures is able to ascertain the product's success. In this way the company gains insight into making the brand better, Clarke said.

Many factors go into the decision of package design. These include needs, desires, economics, technical feasibility and environmental concerns. In fulfilling these needs, a company like Product Ventures is meeting the needs of the client looking to maintain the brand's leadership in the marketplace or is looking to meet a need that consumers may have.

Product Ventures is a state-of-the art facility with open-designed work stations for designers and engineers complemented with offices, consumer viewing labs and workshops where the designs go from concept to prototype.

James McCay, chief industrial designer who has been with the company 12 years, summed up Product Ventures work as meeting the "physical and psychological" needs of the consumer.

Times have changed in the product design industry. In the past, manufacturers focused on making their products with little concern for the consumers' needs. Today, manufacturers have to look for any way possible

to please the consumer. As Rictacco noted, "You want the consumer to be loyal to your product" without having a coupon to sway their buying decision. "Most manufacturers look for loyalty."

Loyalty is no stranger when it comes to Clarke; it's evident in the many ways his father contributed to the town through his teaching and his artwork that still evident in the community and through his own decision to grow his business in the community where he was raised.

As he commented in the interview, "My clients fly in from Chicago, LA and Europe to come here to Fairfield."



Christian Abraham / Staff photographer

**Peter Clarke, founder and CEO of Product Ventures, poses in the company's design studio in Fairfield. Here, designers put together new ideas for companies packaging.**