

## Helping big brands keep market share is the goal

By Rob Varnon  
STAFF WRITER

FAIRFIELD - Hard economic times and distrust of big names is testing brand loyalty like never before. That's fine with Peter Clarke, who says his industrial design firm is ready to help the big brands keep their market share.

Clarke's company, Product Ventures, at 55 Walls Road, Fairfield, employs 35 workers who are dedicated to creating new packaging and sometimes products for a list of clients that includes Proctor & Gamble, Schick, Duracell and Acme United.

His firm is growing despite the economy, he said, but he would not reveal any revenue figures for the privately owned company.

The reason he cited for growth has as much to do with his company's expertise and the environment we're in.

"Consumers are getting savvier," Clarke said, especially as store-brand product quality has improved.

Households, under a lot of stress from a recession that's claimed millions of jobs, have a reason to try the less expensive store brands, he said. But the problem goes deeper than just economics, he said.

"There's a lot of psychology to it."

People aren't as trusting of big names in the wake of scandals like Bernie Madoff's, he said.

While Madoff, who was sentenced to more than 100 years in prison for a multi-billion financial scandal, isn't immediately connected to the consumer product market, he had a good reputation in his industry for years before the scandal was uncovered. If it's possible in the financial industry, Advertisement Quantcast then it's not such a big leap

for consumers buying laundry detergent to wonder about the trusted brand they've been purchasing for years.

Clarke said his firm alone can't save a brand. The product has to deliver what the company promises it will.

But he can improve the company's product. What's innovative about Product Ventures, he says, is that it sees the package for not just something to carry the product but as an integral part of the product that increases its worth to the consumer.

Clarke is passionate about what he does and says one of the pillars of the company is to improve products to help people.

Javier Verdura, vice president of design development, echoes that sentiment.

When asked what he was most proud of in his 12-year career with Product Ventures, without hesitation he said, "The Duracell hearing aid project."

"It felt so good," he said, of Product Venture's design that makes it easier for people to replace a hearing aid battery.

Hearing aid batteries are thin and small like watch batteries,

making them difficult to handle. Product Ventures created packaging that in effect creates a handle for the batteries to make them easier to hold and place in a hearing aid. Verdura is part of Product Venture's international talent. Born and raised in Mexico City, he's well-traveled. He and Clarke worked together in a Hartford design firm before Clarke quit to found Product Ventures, and Verdura followed two years later.

He said the company has lots of opportunities to improve people's lives. Besides packaging, it has also designed medical equipment.

*"I wake up every morning and I love coming to work."*

Peter Clarke  
PRODUCT VENTURES



PHIL NOEL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
A display of a few of the product package designs developed by Product Ventures in Fairfield. Examples of its work can be found in most U.S. homes.

"I wake up every morning, and I love coming to work," he said, explaining that the job is important, and his co-workers are good people.

If he has any complaint, it's the cold. He still vividly remembers leaving California, where he received his design degree, and landing in Connecticut in the winter of 1992.

"What am I doing here?" he said he thought as the cold wind whipped around him. But it's turned out well for him, he said.

Another manager, Gail Ritacco, vice president of strategies and insights, has

been on staff for three years. Like Clarke and Verdura, she talks easily and eagerly about what the company is doing and the constant opportunity to innovate.

She said it's particularly a good time to work in packaging because corporations want to reduce their environmental impact and can do that through new designs.

But Clarke also hopes companies make good decisions about packaging.

Please see FAIRFIELD on B2

# Fairfield firm designs brand loyalty

Continued from B1

He questioned the decision by some companies to reduce the amount of product in its containers while maintaining the same price and overall package size. He picked up a plastic bottle and said the company pushed the bottom up to reduce the amount of peanut butter in the container.

He said people are too smart to fall for that.

And it is, after all, his business to know how smart consumers are.

Clarke said one of the most innovative elements of Product Ventures, besides the people, is its combination of consumer research with design. He has two rooms in which to conduct focus groups, where people can handle new products and tell the design team what they think about it. That's good, he said, standing in the bigger of the two rooms, because if a

person makes a suggestion or complaint, he can actually make an adjustment and hand it back in an instant. For example, if a bottle is too tall, he can offer a shorter one immediately.

He calls the quick prototyping lab his "Santa's Workshop."

Product Ventures has earned many patents during its history, but Clarke says the firm doesn't own them because it gives all the work it has to its clients. He said he can't hold things back from them.

After 15 years in business for himself, Clarke points to fundamentals for the company's success. He said it is disciplined, innovative and

humble -- all lessons he's gathered throughout his life. Clarke's father was an artist and his grandfather was an artisan cabinet maker who worked for Frank Lloyd Wright. The founder of Product Ventures was a U.S. Marine. He said his

family and his experience have helped him form this company, and he's determined to continue to grow it into the future.

The firm plans to expand to 50 employees within two years, he said.



PHIL NOEL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Peter Clarke, CEO of Product Ventures in Fairfield, says package design can influence customer loyalty.**