

FAIRFIELD COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

March 16, 2009

The shape of things to come Company battles for shelf success

BY RYAN DORAN

Peter Clarke's business has been finding solutions for brand packaging on a quiet street in Fairfield for 15 years. In that time, his Product Ventures Ltd. has risen to the top of the world of industrial design, even putting its stamp on the iconic Heinz ketchup bottle.

"The core of what we do is design for industry," said Clarke. Clarke founded Product Ventures in 1994 after working for famed design firm Walter Dorwin Teague Associates.

"They were the founders of this discipline of industrial design, which is designing things that get mass produced," said Clarke. "But the call of the entrepreneur took over me. We have since built this organization with the goal of a better connect with consumers, a better connect with our clients and what their manufacturing capabilities are. Really, it's all about enhancing lives."

Early Product Ventures created relationships with Fischer Price, Schick and eventually Procter & Gamble.

"That – " the P&G contract " – was absolutely the catalyst that gave us enough work load to build a staff," said Clarke.

"It's been a 15-year journey and now we're 33 people and proudly we have multiple disciplines beyond industrial design, which complement what we do, such as researchers and insight professionals."

Clarke is a native of Fairfield County, growing up in Westport as the son of a fine artist, the grandson of a master cabinet maker from Darien and eventually becoming a University of Bridgeport alumnus.

Clarke said in today's competitive economic retail climate it has become increasingly important to capture the attention of the consumer with a distinguishable, unique and compelling first impression.

"We're able to iterate and reshape right on the fly," said Clarke. "It's kind of like a veritable Santa's workshop."

The Product Ventures headquarters in Fairfield has technology that enables Clarke's team to build test model products to scale.

"Henry Ford was really the genius behind bringing the work to the workers and that's what we're applying," said Clarke. "We're just bringing the people who want to make these things and the people that want to buy these things right to

the people that envision and create them. It just gets rid of the hurdles, gaps and time-to-market really compresses. We have a very enabled, can-do environment."



Orlando Nunes, industrial designer and model maker for Product Ventures.

Clarke said that the work Product Ventures has been able to do with another Fairfield-based company, Acme United, is proof of how packaging can differentiate a brand on the shelf and achieve that space to begin with. Acme brands include Claus, Westcott and PhysiciansCare.

"What we're doing for them is inventing all these great little widgets and value-added things, like erasers with little brushes, measuring instruments and pencil sharpeners for kids," said Clarke. "What we're seeing for this company that's 140 years-old is that sales were flat or typical." Once the Acme products were rethought, sales spiked. "So it's exciting what designs are doing for them. Retailers are saying to them, 'Give me stuff and I'll give you space.' How often do you hear that?"

Clarke said that packaging in America is only recently coming into its own, whereas in Asia and Europe design, style and ergonomics have been parallel to cost and function for years.

"You don't have a captive audience for advertising as there used to be," said Clarke. "Now with DVR's people are skipping past commercials." Clarke said companies have over the past few years been re-realizing the physical product as the ambassador of each brand, rather than a line-item expense.

"The package evolved into this great marketing tool," said Clarke. "We like to target the sweet spot between what the consumer desires and can afford and what the manufacturer actually can make for a profit and that's where all our research comes in."

Some of the most profound products that Product Ventures has helped produce recently are the new Folgers Coffee containers, Similac baby formula package, the newest squat Heinz ketchup bottle, and Duracell's "easy tab" hearing aid battery package.

"After the Folgers package launch, they got a 43 percent market share gain over Maxwell House," said Clarke. "It can make a competitive point of difference for them."

According to Clarke, Product Ventures has benefited from being located in Fairfield County. "Location has served us very well for research," said Clarke. "From folks in Bridgeport to Fairfield, it's the whole menagerie of all the various types of consumers. We're lucky in that the suburbs to New York are a prototypical slice of life. It's a wonderful place to live and if you can afford to work here, too, it's incredible."

Clarke said there is a very positive recognition in emerging trends for the demand for creative thinking and creative solutions and he hopes that Product Ventures can continue to be able to affect greater change in more facets of life and move further from the window dressing of the past.