

SmartCycle steps up the evolution of recycled products

By Michaela Kennedy

Michael Brown knows plastics and manufacturing. His new brainchild is SmartCycle™, and the world stands to benefit from it. SmartCycle™ is a brand of packaging made to help overcome one of the planet's biggest waste problems, plastic containers.

Americans throw away 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour, according to Brown. Yet only about 20 percent make the full circle. "The idea came to me on a bike ride, when I saw so many plastic bottles on the side of the road," he said. Brown started talking to people and companies with similar concerns.

The demand for recycled plastic exceeds supply, Brown noted. His new brand, on the market only a few months, is sold to licensees who produce the recycled packaging and use his trademark.

Brown grew up in Cumberland in the packaging business. He worked for his father, who started a plastics business in 1958. He then traveled, and worked in St. Thomas for a while. He returned to Cumberland and, together with his brother, took over the family business he had known since childhood.

The traditional business was sold. Brown and his family moved to Jamestown about seven years ago, and planned to set off cruising to the Caribbean. "We fell in love with Jamestown," he recalled. They stayed, and met like-minded professionals also interested in creating packaging with recycled materials.

Brown moved forward with his expertise in manufacturing and plastics to form his present company, Packaging 2.0. Through

networking, he became involved with a sustainable packaging coalition. He produced GeoSpring®, a patented cushion with 80 percent recycled plastic, developed and used by Hewlett-Packard to replace foam with paper inserts for packaging. "I have a partner who makes the film," he noted, referring to the rolls of plastic sheets reborn from discarded bottles.

Brown looked at what all big companies were doing, and the ideas began to flow. With a goal of using 100 percent recycled materials, Brown found the industry was not yet capable of handling all recycling possibilities. "I set out to make a product that had at least 50 percent recycled material," he said. After much research and collaboration with others in the industry, Brown introduced SmartCycle™ to the commercial world.

The SmartCycle™ brand is created from a five-step process. Discarded bottles are collected, sorted, reprocessed, extruded and thermoformed. The plastic is broken down and cleaned, becoming plastic flake which is reformed into sheets used to make containers for consumer products, and food. The brand name tells the consumer the product is food-safe and approved by the Federal Drug Administration.

"I prefer to call it same-cycle rather than recycle, because we are making containers of equal quality," Brown explained. Much of the recycling currently done in the marketplace produces a lower quality material, he noted. Producers in the packaging industry love what he is doing. "They need more," he added.

Brown works with his wife,

Kathleen, who helps to market the environmentally friendly packaging. They hope the brand raises new consciousness and motivates people to recycle more. "It comes down to changing people's behavior," she noted.

Educating the public on how to use resources already available is part of the plan. About seven percent of the oil consumed in the United States is used to produce plastic. "This is fuel," Brown said, holding up an empty bottle.

SmartCycle™ is easy to recognize. They shared their idea with local graphic artist Jane Lee, who came up with the flower design based on the pattern commonly found on the bottom of bottles. She refined the idea into the logo seen today. "It has a good feel to it, and is easy to understand," she added. Brown mentioned the numbers and arrows currently used on bottles tend to confuse consumers. By marketing SmartCycle as a brand, "We know it's FDA approved and recycled," she said. "The biggest message is to recycle more."

Retailers that package food are learning about the reprocessed packaging, and the logo will soon be spotted everywhere. On a large scale, Microsoft and Method home products are using the packaging. Locally, Grapes and Gourmet, Harvest Natural Foods and Bliss Natural Grocer are retailers already boasting the trademark. "They will give these kinds of containers a voice," she added.

The untapped market for recycling is huge. More than 25 million tons of plastic packaging are sold in the U.S. every year, enough to fill Yankee Stadium to the top over 500 times. Unfortunately, very little of that gets recycled, according to the SmartCycle™ Web site.

For more information on SmartCycle™ and other recycled source material, visit online at www.smartcycle.com and www.packaging2.com.



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