

Cool makes hot launch

By Vicki Vaughan - Express-News

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It's 2Cool Ltd. CEO Deb Bolner Prost (from left); friend Linda Caldwell, who is executive vice president of the company; and Prost's sister Beverly Bolner, in charge of quality control, are launching the new product. EDWARD A. ORNELAS/eaornelas@express-news.net

Cool Off

Deb Bolner Prost's aha! moment came as she searched for something to help beat the heat during one of her daughter's field hockey games.

Drinking Gatorade and soaking towels in ice weren't doing the trick, so Prost asked a drugstore clerk what else could help. Nothing, she was told.

"When you ask a question about a product and nobody can answer, it's ding, ding, ding!" Prost said.

Four and a half years after that moment, Prost and her partners are launching Cool Off, a new product that hit the shelves at H-E-B this week.

Touted as "The Quick Chill," Cool Off is a premoistened towelette that's infused with natural ingredients, including aloe vera, chamomile flower, lemon peel, fennel, wild yam and tea tree oil. It's designed to provide relief from hot weather, intense physical activity or the hot flashes of menopause.

The product works by pressing the towelettes onto the back of the neck or onto pulse points, and the effect can be refreshed by dampening the area later.

Cool Off's rollout continues May 1, when it will be on shelves at TETCO's convenience stores in Texas and Utah, and at selected Stripes convenience stores in Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma on June 1. The stores are owned by Corpus Christi-based Susser Holdings Corp.

The product also will be sold online starting May 15 at CVS.com.

Prost, as CEO, heads Cool Off's parent company, It's 2Cool Ltd., while her sister Beverly Bolner is in charge of quality control.

Friend Linda Caldwell is executive vice president and works with retailers. Other partners include friend Dawn Gwin, who is in charge of the look of the product and its advertising, while Caldwell's husband, Jim Caldwell, is in charge of manufacturing and product specifications.

Prost and Bolner say they have entrepreneurship in their blood. Their father, Clifton Bolner, founded Bolner's Fiesta Products Inc., a San Antonio-based company that sells spices and flavorings nationwide, in 1955.

Prost and both Caldwells hold MBA degrees, while Bolner got a bachelor's degree in food science and technology from Texas A&M University. Gwin worked for years with Prost on marketing campaigns for clients that included national companies.

Although Cool Off seems to be a natural extension of the group's expertise, the product wouldn't have made it onto store shelves without plenty of effort and hefty infusions of cash.

It took hundreds of thousands of dollars to bring it to market, along with big doses of sweat equity during testing and marketing, Prost said.

The partners started by experimenting with natural products in Prost's kitchen, putting together concoctions in small bowls and vials.

The partners figured they had no real competition, as most towelettes are given to restaurant patrons for wiping their hands. But it took a lot of experimenting to get the right formula that would have cooling effects.

They tried more than 200 fragrances and herbs with therapeutic or rejuvenating qualities, Linda Caldwell said. They tested 20 wipes before settling on the one they believe has the best feel.

"We didn't want anything chemical-y, stinky or gluey," Bolner said.

Their research expanded to home-use tests so they could get feedback from users.

People who tried Cool Off liked it. "We got scores in the 90 to 95 range," Prost said. "I've seen companies act on a product that got scores in the 30s."

When the team introduced Cool Off at a retail marketing trade show in Tampa, Fla., last August, it was named Best New Product. Then came the score with H-E-B. Cool Off is available at all of the grocer's stores.

Next on the agenda: giving away thousands of samples, including during Fiesta's Battle of Flowers Parade, the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure on May 1 in San Antonio, and the Texas Folklife Festival in June.

The group is now planning to take the product to national retailers. "We are at various stages within the sales cycle with 23 other retailers, Web retailers, catalogs and specialty stores," Prost said.

Prost said the team "is in the final stages" of closing private placement, a nonpublic offering to a group of investors. "It is imperative," she said, "to have sufficient funding to work with national retailers."

"We have a long list," Bolner said.