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RD Fresh aims for supermarket shelves

By making refrigerated food lasts longer, RD Fresh has gained popularity among commercial clients. Now entrepreneur Steve Gerson aims to take the product into grocery chains.

By JENNY CHALSTEKICH
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If the creator of Pureit can do it, Steve Gerson figures he can, too.

As a chef in the Virgin Islands, Gerson discovered one of the great challenges for cooks: rotten food. Working first in resorts and then as the proprietor of Conrads in Boca Raton, Gerson constantly waged war with food spoilage, smelly coolers and cross contamination.

He thought long and hard — a dozen years in fact — before he finally created RD Fresh, a product that uses minerals as a natural deodorizer to keep refrigerated food fresher 50 percent longer.

After testing the product for a year at Houston's in Boca Raton, Gerson launched his Pompano-based company in January 2008 and in less than two years built a long list of loyal customers that includes more than 60 restaurants, nearly three dozen hospitals and retirement homes and six hotels. There's only one thing wrong with the list.

Not a single supermarket chain will sign on to sell his product directly to consumers.

"We have hundreds of customers, so it's not like we're unsuccessful. But I cannot break down a big enough door to really get this off the ground because nobody's willing to tie the large enough door," Gerson said.

And here's where Pureit comes in. As the company history goes, its Canadian inventor started out creating a hand cleaner for his wife and her co-workers who were struggling to remove carbon and grease after long shifts at a rubber factory during World War II. Eventually he created Pureit in the 1980s, which hospitals and restaurants quickly made a staple.

But when it was released to the retail market in 1997, consumers reacted tepidly, unsure of what it was or what it did. So the company, GOJO, initiated a series of studies to prove its effectiveness and win over the public. By the time Filter acquired rights to distribute Pureit in 2004 (which has since been bought by Johnson & Johnson), it was well on its way to dominating what is now a \$90 million a year hand-sanitizer market.

And that's where Gerson wants to be.

"Have you ever heard of zeolites?" he asks, referring to the main crystal that does the heavy-lifting in RD Fresh. "It's in cat litter and laundry detergent. Ever open the washing machine and the water is filthy grey? Ever wonder why the dirt doesn't stick to the clothes instead of being washed in the water?"

Some refrigerators already come outfitted with a changeable filter that tries to do the job of RD Fresh on a much lower level, Gerson said. But most people have never heard about this, much less the idea that deodorization can save food.

"Everyone uses them everyday, but they don't know it because it's never been brought to the public consciousness."

But after investing more than \$200,000 to develop RD Fresh, Gerson can hardly afford to bankroll the kind of studies conducted by GOJO.

So how does he make the leap from wholesale to retail when the retailing public might not be as enlightened as his hospital and restaurant customers?

At The Miami Herald's request, Rafael Cruz, regional director of the Florida Small Business Development Center, a nonprofit that helps advise entrepreneurs, stepped in to evaluate RD Fresh and make recommendations to bring it out of the walk-in refrigerator of hospitals and restaurants and into the supermarket.

Cruz suggested Gerson rely on existing studies and focus on his proven success. He has to convince retail consumers, even if that means starting with the local PTA and pulling in one customer at a time before a supermarket will sign on.

THE RIGHT STUFF

"You have a successful company in spite of the economic times," Cruz told Gerson, who has also authored a cookbook and coached the award-winning 1997 British Virgin Islands Culinary Team. "In other words, he has the chops."

Sometimes entrepreneurs get so caught up in the brilliance of an idea, Cruz said, they forget they still need to sell it.

"They assume everyone else will get it because they spent so much time working on developing the idea," he said.

Gerson may have to revise the way he describes RD Fresh so that he answers the needs of individual consumers versus commercial clients. A simple change, Cruz said, would be to revise his business card, which looks more like that of a wholesaler than a retailer.

Gerson needs to first find his customers and then engage them. Cruz suggested going to PTAs where he can find the moms who do most of the food shopping and then offering his product for free with the caveat that if they like it, they provide testimonials. Because RD Fresh is so wrapped up in science, Cruz suggested Gerson offer it to local middle schools to conduct science contests.

LOCAL FIRST

"Do things to engage the community," Cruz said. "If you can't dominate the local market, you can't dominate any market."

Gerson also has another tool: the internet. The internet would enable him to go directly to consumers, particularly the women who have countless websites devoted to them. If Gerson can get some bloggers to give his product a try and then write about it, he can increase his reach exponentially.

"It's old school. It may be online, but it's still old-fashioned word of mouth," Cruz said. "The groups themselves become virile. Once the mavens become believers, then it naturally spreads."

Cruz also said Gerson needs to make it easy to purchase RD Fresh because every sale is potentially an endorsement.

"The lesson here is the economic times are hard, which is all the more reason to focus on your product and how it's going to help people have more time, more time with their family, and more money," Cruz said. "Every entrepreneur now, if they're not in love with their customers, they're not going to last."

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unreadable wrote on 01/10/2010 10:41:17 PM:
I've been using the consumer product in my vegetable crisper. I'm amazed that I don't throw out veggies anymore! Fresh mushrooms I bought last week still look like and firm. Everything stays fresher so much longer.

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lptner wrote on 01/10/2010 01:33:35 PM:
I actually do have the consumer unit in my refrigerator. Took out the one that came with it - it didn't work. I have orders in my crisper with carrots and celery and you can't "smell" the onion or taste it on the other food.

I no longer throw out shawberries. I can actually eat them all before they go bad.

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