

Pancake-in-a-can founder looks at TV to boost sales



By Jon Cook
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(Reuters) - Sean O'Connor has already tasted success from a can and is now cooking up a retro TV ad campaign to expand his reach, and profits.

O'Connor's Batter Blaster - the consumer face of his pancake-in-a-can concept - was conceived nearly a decade ago, but the process of getting the science and the taste to come together took years. O'Connor, who formerly owned gourmet restaurants in San Francisco, initially tested his idea by running batter for funnel cakes, donuts and beignets through an industrial-grade whip-cream charger. The process proved a dud, but he kept at it, and after teaming up with friend Nate Steck, a food manufacturing veteran, O'Connor found the right formula to get it to work in spray cans.

The problem then became how to reproduce it en masse. While O'Connor's pancake batter comes in the same can as those used for whipped cream, the viscosity of the mix makes it unusable in the same factory reproduction lines.

"Normally you wouldn't go into a business that you have to build up so much infrastructure before you sell, because you would have no proof of concept," said O'Connor, who ended up building his own manufacturing plant, which required him to raise \$5 million in two separate rounds from friends and family. "It feels like we're the exception to the rule for a lot of things."

To counter the negative perception of many aerosol-food based products, like whipped cream or squeeze cheese, O'Connor decided to make his batter organic and sought the U.S. Department of Agriculture's official approval. This he believed would make it more palatable for his target audience of single mothers. O'Connor admitted the organic angle was more of a business decision than an ideological position, as it acted as both a "permission slip to get people comfortable with the new technology" and "to not associate this as a product that there's no way it can be good for you."

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The move paid off. Batter Blaster is now in 13,000 stores across the country, from Costco to Whole Foods. The product has a 90-day shelf life and retails for \$4.99, which he conceded is a premium price for pancake mix.

"There's a certain price that people are going to pay for a new product no matter what I put in there," said O'Connor, who added he could mix in gold flakes and "\$4.99 is kind of the ceiling as far as what people are willing to part with to try something new."

THE PITCH

In another win O'Connor said Wal-Mart will start carrying Batter Blaster in the New Year, but he's looking to try to boost awareness and hopefully sales with a national television ad campaign.

For such an edgy product, going the traditional TV route might seem odd, but O'Connor said they have had great success in the past with short TV hits and wants to do a bigger retro-style campaign, like the Eggo waffle ones that enjoyed so much success in the 1970's.

"Our product kind of brings up that retro/futuristic Jetsons thing," said O'Connor, whose website loads with a nostalgic jingle and the lyric: "Make a better breakfast faster, Batter Blaster."

O'Connor said that in addition to single moms, he wants to better target college kids, campers and empty nesters - baby boomers, whose kids have finally left home.

O'Connor said his revenues have been around \$8 million for each of the last two years. If he can make more consumers aware of his product's core strengths of convenience and taste, then he could potentially increase demand fourfold, he said.

"I can make the cans, we've got the factory suped up to put out the capacity, but it's moving that one case per store per month to one case per store per week," said O'Connor. "It's a very doable model, because the baseline is so low."

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