

Monkey Hook has firm grasp on success

By BRITTANY LEVINE

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David Kurrasch sent a friend a piece of bent wire in the mail. The response: "What the hell is this?"

A few months later, the two were in a borrowed conference room figuring out how to brand the wire - a picture hanger that installs without tools - and sell it to millions of Americans.

The first idea: Call it Le Hook - think Paris, the Champs Elysees, high-class art. That didn't sit well with Kurrasch, who has a German heritage. But another name, Smart Hook, appealed to the efficiency that ran in his blood.

Then came the winner: Monkey Hook. That was it. That was "disruptive," Kurrasch said. The wire was so easy to use, even a monkey - scratch that, human - could do it.

But the name is only part of the story that brought Kurrasch into an office in San Juan Capistrano filled with Monkey Hook artwork and awards hanging on Monkey Hooks.

The story begins in Santa Ana, sprouts arms and legs throughout Orange County and leads to steady revenue growth year after year.. The Orange County Business Journal recently listed Monkey Hook as one of the fastest growing companies in the county.

"It's a super-local strategy," said Kurrasch, 51, noting that because the Monkey Hook is made, packaged and shipped using local vendors, he has been able to make a product that sells in 29,000 retail stores nationwide. He and one other full-time employee run most of the day-to-day business.

Keeping things local is bucking the trend in the hardware business, where many products are made overseas, said Steve Faessel, merchandise manager at Crown Ace Hardware, the Huntington Beach company that gave Kurrasch his big break. Last year, \$5.3 billion worth of hardware was imported into the United States, mostly from China and Mexico, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Also, \$1.9 billion in fabricated wire products came from overseas.

MONKEY KINGDOM

If product is king, as Kurrasch says, referencing Lee Iacocca, a businessman best known for his revival of Chrysler in the 1980s, then Orange County is Monkey Hook's kingdom. A Garden Grove factory makes the wire. A Buena Park printer creates the card stock that features the Retailer's Choice award the company won at a 2005 hardware show. People with disabilities assemble the product at a work center run by Elwyn California, a Fountain Valley



David Kurrasch, Founder and Managing Member, The Monkey Hook, LLC

Monkey Hook has firm grasp on success cont'



Original Monkey Hook 4pk

nonprofit group. Kurrasch chose the work center partly because he wanted to help an organization that employs people like his autistic son.

The hook is not a new invention. The design has been around since the 19th century. Kurrasch, who has worked for food titans Del Monte and Hunt-Wesson, used a similar gadget when he moved into a new house. He liked it so much, he set out to brand a patent-pending product of his own.

“It was an uphill battle” in the beginning because Monkey Hook was a one-product company and hardware buyers typically shy away from those, Kurrasch said. He partnered with a close friend, Kelly Davis, a Santa Ana insurance agent, to get the company started in 2004. The two had played Little League baseball together in Santa Ana and later were roommates at USC.

In 2005, Kurrasch set up a booth at the National Hardware Show in Las Vegas. That’s where he met Faessel, who offered to sell the Monkey Hook in 11 Crown Ace Hardware stores. At the time, the hooks could be found at De-Nault’s True Value Hardware Stores in San Clemente and San Juan Capistrano. Faessel requested 132 units, the biggest order Kurrasch had ever had. This Month, about 300,000 hooks will be shipped to national retailers such as WalMart and Target.

GARAGE ASSEMBLING PARTIES

At first, Kurrasch assembled the product in his garage in Dana Point. His four children would race to see who could assemble the most. The incentive: a bigger allowance. Davis’ daughter Rachael, who worked with Kurrasch at a recruiting firm, shuttled paperwork back and forth.

At the same time, Kurrasch, who still had his day job, was running ads featuring a monkey installing the hook. Bluesy music played as a chimpanzee hung a picture of a man hugging a monkey. The video hooked Faessel.

“We’re always looking for something new and out of the ordinary,” Faessel said. “If a monkey can do it, I’m sure our customers shouldn’t be too perplexed by it.”

A package of four hooks costs about \$3 and comes in three styles. The Original holds about 35 pounds on residential drywall of about a half inch. The “Gorilla Grade” hook holds 40% more weight. For items that must hug the wall, there’s a flush-mount version.

GOING FULL TIME

In 2007, Kurrasch went to work at Monkey Hook full time. Orders grew and he could no longer run the operation out of his garage.

“My kids were so happy they didn;t have to package Monkey Hooks anymore,” he said.

His eldest son, Joe, 18, a freshman at UC Berkeley, often calls between classes and baseball practice to tell his father interesting stories about his day. Kurrasch’s other son, John Paul, 17, who is autistic, was one reason he decided to work with Elwyn California.

“He wants to help people who need a hand up,” said Joan McKinney, executive director of the nonprofit. “You can see he genuinely cares about people with disabilities.”

Monkey Hook has firm grasp on success cont'

Unemployment for people with disabilities runs about 70 percent, McKinney said. Elwyn California tries to reduce that number by helping people with autism, cerebral palsy and other health conditions find jobs, she said.

LOCAL BENEFITS

Working with local vendors speeds up the production and distribution process, Kurrasch said.

Things that would take people months if they were getting their products from places like China, I'm doing in days because it's all right here," he said. For a small guy like me to compete in this business, I've had to figure out how to do something better than my competition."

Though the economic slump hasn't really affected his sales, foot traffic is down at stores that sell the product, and that could make a difference, he said.

The next step, Kurrasch said, is run ads that make the consumer say, "I want to buy a Monkey Hook, so I'll go to Ace," rather than say, "I need a picture hanger, so I'll go to Ace."

"We need to add new customers," he said. "And now is the time for us to do that."



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