

# SARASOTA-MANATEE business™

## **Word of Mouth** by Mary Catherine Coolidge

A Sarasota entrepreneur markets his innovative tongue brush through Wal-Mart and YouTube.

The first time Tom Oechslin, president of Peak Enterprises, Inc., a consumer products company that is marketing the TUNG Brush, met with Wal-Mart, he heard the word every entrepreneur dreads: “No.”

It was August 2005, and Oechslin and his marketing consultant, Joel Warady of the Joel Warady Group out of Chicago, thought they had nailed their marketing presentation of the TUNG Brush to the Wal-Mart buyer.

Oechslin and Warady were stunned. They replayed the presentation about their dental hygiene product—a black-and-neon-orange plastic tongue scraper that retails for between \$3 and \$4—in their heads. Hadn’t they presented reliable data about the bacteria build-up that causes bad breath in nearly every individual at some time or another, creating a consumer base that spends, according to Oechslin, “\$700 million to \$800 million a year on bad breath” remedies? Hadn’t they presented detailed information that proved the efficacy and salability of their product?

The buyer had seemed impressed, and Oechslin and Warady had left that first meeting elated, sure that Wal-Mart would make a buy.

What, they wondered, had gone wrong?

Oechslin called the buyer back and asked the big question—why?

The response was surprisingly simple. The buyer liked the product, but felt the packaging was too wide and would take up too many valuable inches in the highly competitive scramble for “real estate”—shelf space—in Wal-Mart aisles.

Oechslin immediately offered to change the packaging. He had no problem reconfiguring the size of the packaging if that would solve the problem.

But Wal-Mart insisted there was no way the TUNG Brush packaging could be redesigned in a time-frame acceptable to their schedule; they wanted it turned around within 48 hours.

Oechslin knew that only 2 percent of the thousands of suppliers who pitch Wal-Mart actually land on the giant retailer’s shelves, but he wasn’t going to come this close and slink away because of a couple of lousy inches. Getting on Wal-Mart shelves was an absolutely essential step in building the product’s prestige—and he believed in his product.

“If you’ve got a tongue, it applies,” says Oeschlin. And Oeschlin felt his timing was right. Even though Wal-Mart historically hasn’t attracted the TUNG brush demographic—

educated women who prefer more upscale shopping—the company is trying to change its image and draw higher-income customers through better-quality products.

The pair started dialing numbers and found a Chicago design team that would make the changes and create a mock-up of the new packaging in 24 hours. The next day Oechslin and Warady went back to Wal-Mart with a sleeker, slimmer package.

And the final answer—yes!

Within 90 days, Wal-Mart had placed its first order for 20,000 TUNG Brushes. Manufacturing began in China, Chicago, New York, Tennessee and Ohio. By March 2006, the brush debuted in limited distribution in 1,280 stores across the country.

In retrospect, Warady says, the packaging drama was really “a test.” The big retailers, he explains, are practically “daring you to do business with them.” Whether it’s Walgreen’s or Wal-Mart, he says, they’re going to “throw up obstacles” to see if an entrepreneur can play in the big leagues.

Oechslin concurs. National retailers “have to believe in the people behind the product,” he says. “They don’t care how good your product is,” they care about whether it will sell, and whether you can deliver on your promises, he adds.

It’s also absolutely essential to have enough capital to ramp up production and deliver quickly when opportunity finally does come knocking.

Oechslin has been marketing TUNG Brush since 1996, when he and Sarasota dentist Steve Wieder came up with the concept. The TUNG Brush has been in Rite Aid drugstores since 2000 and other drugstore chains throughout the country such as Duane Reade, Long’s and Meijer. With Wal-Mart under his belt, Oechslin hopes to launch the TUNG Brush in Publix supermarkets and Walgreen’s as well as other large chains in 2007.

But that’s not all. Oechslin and Warady are intent on delivering the message to the prime TUNG Brush target audience—18 to 45 year olds, Oechslin says, an audience that lives online.

“Gen X and Gen Y groups,” Warady explains, “want to be entertained and they don’t want to be sold to,” especially on the Internet.

So in his quest to make the TUNG Brush as ubiquitous as dental floss and as hip as the latest MP3-playing cell phones, Oechslin turned to video viral marketing, a tactic that uses online sharing of video clips, often homemade, mostly through e-mails and blogs. In June 2006, Oechslin launched his viral initiative through YouTube, a wildly popular new Web site that contains millions of videos—everything from wacky homemade videos of pets doing backflips to clips of politicians’ speeches.

Oechslin forged an alliance with YouTube impresario Billy Presley, who has a penchant for videotaping himself as he travels around licking things like bridges and statues. Presley documents his antics on video and posts them on YouTube.com, [www.youtube.com/profile?user=billypresley](http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=billypresley), which has become one of the Web’s most popular video sites. The TUNG Brush Web site is tagged to the end of every video Presley posts.

To drive visitors to the Presley videos and subsequently to the TUNG Brush Web site, Oechslin and Warady hired college students and recent college graduates, some with master's degrees in marketing, to "get the word out about these videos through social networking sites" such as [myspace.com](http://myspace.com), [iambored.com](http://iambored.com) and [friendster.com](http://friendster.com).

Marketing via viral video is a relatively unproven arena, and videomakers such as Presley aren't easily managed, causing many marketers to shy away from such online strategies. Warady, however, says the strategy enabled them to build the brand cheaply. Presley's expenses are paid, along with a "very modest fee," Warady says, and "all the TUNG Brushes he wants."

Oechslin says that so far, promoting the TUNG Brush alongside Presley's funny, slightly subversive videos has resulted in "tens of thousands of hits" to the TUNG Brush Web site. Even though TUNG Brush is not sold via [tungbrush.com](http://tungbrush.com), there is a store locator feature and a link to [drugstore.com](http://drugstore.com), where sales "have doubled in the last six months," he says. Although Oechslin wouldn't release revenues for the last year, he says more than 100,000 TUNG Brushes have been sold and sales are in the "seven figures."

"I have no doubt that the TUNG Brush will become a staple in dental care," states Oechslin, with the true entrepreneur's boundless faith. "We're grateful that we've had the success we've had. But can we do better? Of course we can. The key is never quit."