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THIS INVENTION WON'T MAKE A SPLASH -- AND THAT'S GOOD

ENTREPRENEUR SAYS PRODUCT SOLVES A RESTROOM

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Mike Cassidy, mcassidy@mercurynews.com

Correction: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 2/19/2011, page A2)

Mike Cassidy's Silicon Valley Dispatches column in the Jan. 28 Business section about the invention of a new urinal screen referred incorrectly to an association that represents companies in the building cleaning industry. The group's full name is ISSA, which once stood for International Sanitary Supply Association.

Ed Ramirez likes to solve problems, whether it was solving the back-end problems of big companies when he was a sales director at Oracle or helping enterprise software shoppers with licensing issues, once he started his own consulting company.

But now he's focused on a problem that's more on the front end. Now Ramirez is trying to solve the problem of, well, I'll let him tell you.

"I was frustrated myself, as a user of public urinals," he says.

"Anytime I'd show up with khaki-colored pants, I would go in and use the facilities and I'd come out with sprinkles all over."

Sprinkles. Some men would just stop wearing khaki-colored pants, but not Ramirez. He began to search for a solution to what the sanitary supply industry delicately refers to as "splash back."

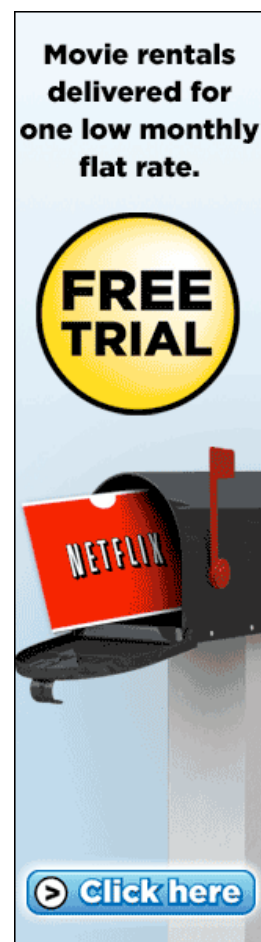
Ramirez was inspired by a special brush used by one of his daughters. She has a medical condition that has left her with a hypersensitive sense of touch. Part of her therapy includes brushing her skin with a device sprouting fine rubber bristles.

Ramirez began to think that if he could create a urinal screen of similar material and with the right "bristle" configuration it might serve to absorb rather than deflect a stream of liquid.

Now, urinal screens are nothing new. They are plastic inserts that cover urinal drains to prevent wayward paper and other trash from flushing into the plumbing. Many include some sort of fragrance device, but few tackle the indignity of splash back.


Ramirez spent six years on it. "It was six years ago that I took one of those brushes to see if it would work and it did work," he says.

Well, the concept worked. Ramirez still needed to refine the product. He built prototype after prototype. He added a scent, an antimicrobial



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for good measure and filed for patents. He was toiling to save men the embarrassment of splatter, but he had a higher purpose in mind, too: saving restroom floors, fixtures and stall dividers from an unsanitary problem.

And, um, how did he test the prototypes?

"We tested the prototypes using ourselves." (Enough said.) "And putting them in public facilities. We'd put them in a Costco and see how they worked for a month."

And how would Ramirez know whether his screens worked or not?

"We do a black-light testing," he says. "A black light makes urine glow." (Who knew?)

The results were encouraging, and so a company, Ėckos Innovations, and a product, the Ėckoscreen, were born. But there was a new problem: Now that Ramirez had his Ėckoscreen, how would he demonstrate the thing at trade shows and such?

"This is a very difficult product," he says. "You can't have someone sitting their urinating."

Or standing there even.

And so Ramirez and his crew (including his brother the plumber) came up with a solution.

"We have a urinal that is fully functional," he says, and lightweight and portable. "It has a recirculating water pump and a small hose. So the hose sits at a certain level and it sprays a stream of water, very similar to a stream of urine. That, as you would say, seals the deal."

Which is how the Ėckoscreen made its debut in November at the Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association convention.

"It was pandemonium," Ramirez says of his booth. "Everybody was so intrigued at the show."

Since the company's fall launch, he says, Ėckos Innovations has done about \$25,000 in sales. It's a small start, but Ramirez estimates that urinal screens are an \$800-million business globally.

"Here is the beauty of what I saw in this: Every single public facility is a customer, potentially," he says, citing his old employer, "whether it's Oracle that has offices all over the world with tons and tons of urinals," or some upscale hotel or restaurant. Ramirez's market research is as good as any because, believe it or not, no one actually tracks the urinal screen market.

Lisa Veeck, a cleaning industry association spokeswoman, says, no, the organization doesn't have urinal screen figures. And yes, she realizes there is a giggle factor that comes with the product. "You have to be able to laugh sometimes in this industry."

Laughing is OK, Ramirez says. He knows he's in a business that's awkward to discuss. "When I told my wife," he says of an early brainstorming session, "she thought I was crazy and disgusting."

But Ramirez says he's also on to something. He's built the beginnings of a company, while still running his software consulting business, SLC, which is based in Livermore with Ėckos Innovations. The new company has 10 U.S. employees and he hopes to move manufacturing to Livermore from Mexico within a year. In fact, he has big hopes for a business that's often met with small chuckles.

"Yes, it's funny," he says, "but if we can create a 2, 3, \$4 million business out of it, that's pretty good."

Good yes. And a sign that in Ramirez's business it's always best to aim high.

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