

THE CENTRAL NEW YORK BUSINESS JOURNAL

Siblings hope Smile Brite venture leaves them beaming

By Casey J. Dickinson

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LIVERPOOL — Sisters Cynthia Cooper and Michelle Keib always wanted to be in business together. A late-in-life set of braces for Cooper led to an entrepreneurial opportunity that could lead to changes in the way people clean dentures and dental appliances.

The sisters equally own Smile Brite Distributing, LLC, the company that distributes SonicBrite, a denture-cleaning product that cleans dentures and dental appliances in 15 minutes, killing bacteria in the process. The system also cleans prosthetic eyes.

"People tell us there's nothing else like it," says Cooper.

The bacteria-killing aspect of SonicBrite, says Keib, has attracted interest in the medical community, because buildups on dental devices can cause serious illnesses.

SonicBrite is a proprietary powder formula, developed by dentists, that removes plaque, stains, and bacteria from dental devices and false teeth. Users combine water with the powder in a bath machine that powers away stains and debris, explains Cooper. The product's effectiveness has been confirmed by the Bureau Veritas Consumer Products Services, Inc. lab in Buffalo, and through a study conducted at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital in Bedford, Mass. The Buffalo study, Keib explains, tested SonicBrite's effectiveness in removing stains as well as its bacteria-killing properties. The VA study, she adds, demonstrated SonicBrite's effectiveness on actual patients.

Smile Brite has shipped its SonicBrite products to all 50 states and several foreign countries since it began sales earlier this year. The www.sonicbrite.com Web site brings in traffic from around the globe, says Keib. A contract packaging company in Ontario County packages and ships SonicBrite. The SonicBrite cleaning system costs \$39.99 and Smile Brite has shipped more than 3,000 units this year. SonicBrite is sold primarily through the www.sonicbrite.com Web site, says Keib, but it is also available in the NextTen catalogue and through www.nextten.com. The company is negotiating with other potential distribution channels, she adds.

The founders are the company's only employees. Cooper handles Smile Brite's business from her home office in suburban Rochester while Keib staffs company headquarters from her Liverpool home. Prior to launching Smile Brite, Cooper worked in corporate hotel sales and computer training. Keib is director of business development for Designworks Advertising in Syracuse.

How the company started

In 2001, Cooper was seeking a product that would clean her retainer properly. Unsatisfied with readily available products, she ordered a promising



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SonicBrite founders Cynthia Cooper, left, and Michelle Keib display some of their company's products. The entrepreneurial sisters sell a cleaning system for dental appliances that can also clean prosthetic eyes.

product from a catalog. The product worked so well, Cooper tried to get more, but the catalog she ordered it from no longer stocked the cleaner.

Undeterred, Cooper tracked down the two Canadian dentists who developed the SonicBrite system and eventually purchased the rights to the formula. She encouraged Keib to join her in business and the two began Smile Brite Distributing with a \$50,000 investment. The sisters supplemented \$25,000 of their own funds with a \$25,000 U.S. Small Business Administration-backed loan from HSBC bank.

Securing the formula in 2003 was only the first step on an entrepreneurial journey, says Cooper. The sisters had to make a number of decisions before the first SonicBrite system could be sold. Keib and Cooper turned to intellectual-property attorney James Muldoon, of Wall, Marjama, Bilinski, LLP to help secure their intellectual property. Smile Brite decided to keep the formula as a trade secret and secure registered-trademark status for the SonicBrite name.

Finding the proper battery-powered water bath was another step to market, says Keib. The sisters searched the world's manufacturers before finding the ideal unit in China. The cleaning device has a 15-minute timer, so users don't have to worry about watching the clock.

Labels and bottles were another step. SonicBrite needed a logo and packaging. Keib and Cooper turned to Syracuse artist Holly Scherzi to create

the logo and packaging. The packaging is designed to be easy for older users to read and open.

Bottles presented a new learning experience for the entrepreneurs. A shipment of thousands of plastic bottles arrived, but without any caps. The new corporate owners soon learned that caps are sold separately.

"We had no idea that there were so many choices of caps for each bottle," says Cooper.

Web-site development, banking, and online-ordering systems presented further challenges the sisters surmounted. Solvay Bank provides the online payment system that allows credit-card ordering through SonicBrite Web site.

A product "audition" with a television-shopping channel led to the laboratory and clinical studies of SonicBrite. Though Cooper and Keib knew how well the SonicBrite system worked, they were unable to back up the claims with independent proof.

Networking with other female entrepreneurs has been very important in helping get SonicBrite launched. Personal contacts have resulted in opportunities such as the Veterans' Hospital study, says Keib.

"Women entrepreneurs have been so supportive," she explains, "If someone can't help with a particular problem, she can suggest someone else who can."

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