

# DrinkWell

While the majority of Americans get their drinking water from large-scale municipal water systems, according to the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) approximately 42 million of us get water from private wells. And while the EPA closely regulates the quality of public water systems by enforcing safe drinking water standards, it does not have the authority to regulate private drinking water wells. Because the quality and safety of private well water is not tested by the government, it is up to well owners themselves to test their water supplies.

Seeing the need for a safe, easy, at home private well testing kit, Underwriters Laboratories Inc, (UL) which had acquired Environmental Health Labs (EHL), in 2001, partnered with Memorial Hospital to provide DrinkWell testing kits. How this partnership came about is a lesson in how three businesses came together, each with their own unique niche, to come up with a product to fill an important health and safety need.

Since its founding in 1894, UL, an independent, not-for-profit product safety testing and certification organization, has been a leader in its field. Before being acquired by UL, Environmental Health Labs was in the business of testing public water supplies across the country for almost 20 years. Because St. Joseph County, Indiana is the home to over ¼ of all well owners in the state, UL came to their new company, based in South Bend, with the idea of creating a consumer testing program.

While enthusiastic about the idea, it was important to EHL that they not offend their core business, the testing of city water supplies. They set out to make a product that would be marketed to those who live in rural areas, own their own wells, are worried about problems in their water and don't know who to call.

## RESEARCH

UL's South Bend market manager Dan Carter set out to do competitive research on private well owners. "At first we did some informal research with friends and family who were well owners, asking them if they test their wells, when they tested and how they tested." They researched mail order laboratories and put together focus groups. Web sites were studied to see if that would be the best way to sell the product. (Doing it exclusively online would eliminate the need for phone sales but wouldn't be as user friendly). Calls were made to county health departments who are often contacted by well owners. They were surveyed on how many calls they get a week and what they recommend to callers. The researchers soon realized the importance of maintaining a healthy relationship with county health departments.

They also studied and called competitors to find out what products they were offering. What they found was that most companies offer the test results in a four- to five-page document filled with long, hard-to-pronounce, unrecognizable chemical names. It was like reading the back of a food package and saying 'What are these ingredients and are they bad for me?' UL set out to build a better, user friendly product for consumers.

Help for research and development was provided by people in the South Bend UL office who volunteered their time. “I asked for volunteers,” says Dan Carter. “And the cream of the crop of our laboratories stepped up to help. It was exceptionally exciting to know that these people really wanted to be a part of this—that they were so eager to help.”

### MEMORIAL'S ROLE

Shortly after UL approached EHL with the water testing project, Jerry Toma, then the CEO of EHL ran into Memorial's Phil Newbold in a meeting and approached him about the idea of partnering with Memorial to use their nurse call center to provide medical information to well owners after they receive their test results. Memorial quickly saw the potential for an exciting new venture in this project and jumped in, helping out in many different ways.

All agree that the help Memorial's Diane Stover provided has been invaluable. “She brought in so much more than just the hospital perspective,” says Dan Carter. Diane and Phil came up with the name DrinkWell, helped with marketing and were always eager and excited about the product. “We're much farther along than we would have been if we'd just called a nurse call fulfillment center that didn't have the hospital connection.” The initial meeting of two aggressive, out-of-the-box, forward-thinking people like Jerry Toma and Phil Newbold resulted in a highly successful partnership

### MARKETING

Among the marketing techniques used for DrinkWell were direct mailings to a list of 20,000 private well owners in Indiana and Michigan , print ads in magazines and radio interviews. An ad in Mother Earth magazine, which attracts rural area readers, resulted in a spike of calls. Marketing well owners has been a challenge, not the least of which is reaching out to well owners who live in homes worth anywhere from \$50,000 to a million dollars. Other marketing ideas pitched included working with those who drill the wells, new construction home builders, trade groups who target well owners and the establishment of a Well Awareness Week.

### NURSE CALL CENTER

Memorial already had an established nurse call center and was looking for new innovative partners to work with, not to be vendors themselves, but lend support and become part of the creative development process. Nurses at the call center answer calls from DrinkWell customers who have received a report back from the laboratory with test results and have health questions. But the role of the nurses is limited. “Legally, we can't give medical advice,” says Taina Herr, who heads up the Nurse Call Center. Customers are given facts, not medical opinions. “We can't make a connection between a medical condition and the contaminant. We can only give information. We can say ‘If this has gone on for a long time you need to see your doctor.’”

However, the DrinkWell project did not happen without a level of push back from the nurses. “We had to convey to them how vital this program was and in the beginning. Apparently I did not do that because there were nurses who didn't want to do this,” says Diane Stover. She felt the majority of them, maybe 60 percent, were on board with the project but there were those who said ‘I'm a nurse. You're belittling my degree and keeping me from patients who really need me.’ I guess I assumed that clean water and its impact on health was a no-brainer for a nurse in terms of her mission. That was something I should not have assumed.” But she was clear that even if

philosophically the nurses didn't believe in the project, that that feeling was not conveyed to the customer.

In the beginning the nurses had reasons to be concerned. Research conducted for them was done by a college intern and didn't translate into the kind of medical information the nurses needed to answer customer calls effectively. So the project was given to a nurse in the call center who researched the EPA and other government Web sites for more in-depth health information. Each of the 11 nurses in the center was given a list of questions on contaminants and possible questions that may be asked by callers. They went to orientation sessions and were given manuals to review. Because the calls are randomly sent to every nurse each one had to be prepared. Calls are tracked by the nurses and fed into the database.

### HOW THE TEST WORKS

DrinkWell's testing package, which costs about \$165, is designed to provide data on a number of contaminants. The kit has all of the necessary bottles and containers to collect samples. The contaminants tested for include: bacteria, regulated metals like lead and mercury, pesticides and radioactive elements. The report is sent back to the customer about six weeks after receipt in an easy-to-read color-coded format: green means no tested contaminants detected, yellow means tested contaminants were found, but below the federal limit and red means tested contaminants were found at or above the federal limit. Along with information on the nurse call center they also offer a list of options for filtering and treatment devices tested by UL that meet national performance standards.

### BUMPS ALONG THE WAY

Although two years isn't a long time to get a product such as this launched, some wonder if it wouldn't have been an even shorter process if "so many fingers weren't in the pot." With headquarters in Chicago and scientists and marketers in South Bend, a lot of people had to be brought up to speed along the way which resulted in stalls towards the end.

While DrinkWell and Memorial were hard at work developing the program and working on business arrangements and agreements with Jerry Toma (no longer CEO but still involved in an advisory basis), the corporate office of UL stepped in at the end of the project and wanted to see and approve finished products. "What we had worked so hard to develop could have been pulled apart," says someone involved in the project. "What we had built with a handshake almost melted down." But all agree that because UL was bearing the brunt of the investment, they had the right to approving its outcome. "They eventually trusted us and our judgment." Most agree that bringing in the corporate office sooner in the process would have made it easier in the end to launch the product.

Both sides also agree that another challenge was combining marketing and PR professionals with scientists. Dan Carter admits that working together presented problems. "EHL was a 'business-to-business' business for 18 years and reports were science driven. Our biggest customer base was other labs so developing products for consumers was a big jump for us." They had to learn to 'dumb down' test results so that they were readable but not so much so that they no longer looked scientific.

The non science side felt that the two sides were, in effect, speaking different languages. “They live in the lab and stay immersed in policies and procedures,” says one marketing executive. “We don't speak their language and they don't speak ours.”

Another concern involved the nurses in the call center who emphasize now that bringing them in earlier in the process and respecting their expertise would have gone a long way toward helping build successful relationships. “Nurses have valuable input,” says nurse Taina Herr. Leaving them out may result in a perceived disrespect for their opinions and a further distrust of the program.

And finally, as with any project, it's important to anticipate any snags or problems before they occur. Bring up anything that may go wrong, even if it's a last minute, one-in-a-million obstacles says Dan Carter. Gather questions and concerns and have all involved in the product development come up with five potential problems and solve them before they happen.

## THE FUTURE

Memorial is pleased with their involvement in this project. With a relatively small investment they see possibilities to enhance their own future in business. “The major contribution we made was the call center and the development of a database,” says Phil Newbold. “It's an area we probably wouldn't have examined the possibilities of, or had the confidence to go into otherwise. The database we have created could be very valuable to us in the future.” The future may hold certifying water in hospitals to give them the edge in a very competitive health care market. “Who knows where this will lead. Some day South Bend could be known as the water testing capital of the world,” says Phil Newbold.

## Summary Learning Points

1. Develop partnerships early – bring everyone to the table at the start to avoid leaving out important perspectives.
2. Learn to speak the same language – if you have scientists or other “technical” voices in the mix, find common ground and ways to communicate.
3. Let your relationship and expertise be your guide. Don't try to do things that you don't understand or don't know how to do just because there is opportunity. Bring in other experts if you need to.
4. Do the market research. Find out what's already out there and make sure your product is unique in some way or offers some value-added approach.
5. You don't need to invest funds – investing time and expertise is enough to build strong partnerships and the benefits will follow – sometimes in the form of other relationships or other innovative ideas.
6. Keep an open mind – the process may lead to other learning that might include new ways of doing things, ideas for other projects or partnerships and/or products that result from the research.
7. Work diligently to develop a “passion partnership” not just a legal partnership—meaning, prove to one another that each organization is as dedicated and passionate to the venture as the other.

8. Spend time getting to know the real workers, building trusting relationships with key contacts, and have fun! As bumps come up, the trusting relationship and a familiarity with the situation will help win-win resolutions develop quickly.