

Management & Leadership

# Frugality and frustration behind a good idea

Penny Haw talks to designer Desere Strydom, whose award-winning Clip It jug for milk sachets was born of her desire to continue saving money without the mess and spilt milk

**F**ORGET necessity: frustration is the mother of invention. But it is also a mother of a job to go from good idea to great product. This is one woman's story, which began with frustration, moved on to fortitude and fabrication, and ended in product design, development and dispatch to retail outlets far and wide.

Early one morning in 2001, Durban clothing designer Desere Strydom finally resolved to stop crying over spilt milk. For the umpteenth time that week, she had watched milk splash on to the kitchen counter as she decanted the liquid from a litre sachet into a small jug for breakfast.

Setting irritation aside, she decided there had to be a way of benefiting from the more cost-effective packaging option — milk sold in sachets is up to R2 cheaper per litre than milk sold in plastic bottles or cartons — without the mess and wastage. "I was determined to save money by buying milk in sachets," she recalls. "But, being analytical, I calculated the waste incurred each year due to spilling (because of the flimsy, collapsible nature of the plastic bags) and was horrified. Something had to be done."

Strydom, who says she has "always been a bit of a tool chick", dug out the toolbox and began modifying the basic plastic jug, which she and her family used at the time more or less effectively to store sachets in the refrigerator. A handful of nuts, bolts and plastic bits later, she had assembled what would eventually become the prototype of the award-winning Clip It milk sachet jug.

But it did not, at that point, occur to Strydom that she had constructed something with commercial promise or value beyond her own home. "It was simply for convenient use by my family," she says. "But every

time I took the contraption out of the fridge in company, it drew comments and admiration."

Increasingly, she acknowledged that if she and her family found the device so handy, others would too. Eventually, at the insistence of friends and family, Strydom consulted patent attorneys Adams & Adams, who patented the concept on her behalf.

"I realised at that early stage that, if I was going to do it, it would be best to do it right, deal with professionals and not cut corners," she says.

"Adams & Adams specialise in patents and took care of everything in that regard."

Determined to get every step of the process right first time, she then approached Durban company Sumo Design to help rationalise and streamline the product. A key consideration at this stage was to ensure that the product could be produced at a cost that would be easily covered by the sensible potential market price of the finished product. Manufacturing techniques and materials were also examined and tested.

The outcome was the injection-moulded Clip It sachet jug, which is specifically designed to hold a litre sachet securely and at the exact angle needed for mess-free pouring. Made from food-grade approved polypropylene, the dishwasher-safe jug fits neatly into the door of the refrigerator and features a suspension device that grips the top of the sachet to prevent the bag collapsing into the jug as it is tipped. The clip is moulded to create torsion by manipulation, thus eliminating the need for other parts, which could come loose or break.

Shortly after she had completed the design of the Clip It jug, Strydom won a Liberty Life/Fairlady Business Start-Up Award. Just two days later, the product received a South African Bureau of Standards

Design Institute Prototype Award. In less than 12 months, the young Durbanite had gone from frustrated consumer to entrepreneurial designer.

"Despite being a qualified clothing designer, my exposure to product design with the Clip It jug in 2001 made me realise that industrial design was an exciting and potentially satisfying field. And so, as Clip It was born, so was my new career as an industrial designer."

Enthusiastic about her new vocation and product, she established MSB Design, which "very precociously, is the acronym for My Stunning Brain", she chuckles.

**She estimates South African households save R200 a month by buying milk in sachets. And because a sachet uses 75% less plastic than a 2l bottle, it is the most environmentally friendly option available**

As she discovered during the years that followed, the Clip It jug's early successes, award-winning design and product development are only the beginning of the journey to commercial triumph.

Once testing was over and production engineering processes finalised, she and her business partner, Alan Martin — whose Pietermaritzburg-based company, KB Engineering, is responsible for production, assembly and logistics — began marketing the product. Despite having established that a significant market existed for the Clip It jug, it was not easy to convince retailers to stock the somewhat unusual new product. "Getting the jug out there

was challenging and has required patience," she says.

"Dealing with retail chains means closing the deal can take as long as a year. It was slow but finally seeing the Clip It jug on the shelves of major stores throughout the country and in Mauritius and Botswana has been worth the effort."

While Strydom invented the Clip It jug to prevent milk spillage and save money, a significant spin-off is that it also contributes to achieving environmental objectives by reducing packaging.

She estimates South African households save about R200 a month by buying milk in sachets instead of bottles. At the same time, because a milk sachet contains 75% less plastic than a conventional 2l plastic bottle, it is, she claims, the most environmentally friendly option available on the market. "In fact, a milk sachet contains as much plastic as you will find in the screw-top of a 2l bottle."

Last year, the Clip It jug was selected as a featured item on the Future of Design Expo at the Johannesburg Homemakers Expo. The Future of Design Expo "recognises design with a conscience".

While, according to Strydom, about 74% of fresh milk sold in SA is packaged in sachets, the notion of buying milk in bags is more novel in other countries.

In the UK, supermarket



A NEW PATH: Desere Strydom's success with the Clip It jug prompted a career change, from clothing design to industrial design.

chain Sainsbury's claims to be leading the drive to reduce the quantity of packaging passed on to its customers.

In a long line of initiatives from that country's supermarkets to deflect criticism that they are responsible for the majority of packaging that ends up in landfill, Sainsbury's began encouraging customers to purchase milk in sachets two

years ago. Basic plastic jugs were given away to promote the practice. Today, the chain estimates that 3% of its 24-million weekly customers — that is 720 000 shoppers — have switched to regularly using bags.

The company reckons that switching from bottles to bags could save up to 1 400 tons of packaging. Although many other

countries are also increasingly selling milk in sachets, bagged milk has been around in countries like China, India, Poland and Canada for decades.

Indeed, there is nothing new about buying milk in sachets in this country and many others.

What is new, though, is the fact that the sachet is truly convenient when you combine it with a jug designed — by a

frustrated woman on a messy Durban kitchen counter nine years ago — specifically for that purpose.

"Yes," concedes Strydom. "That's true. But for me, the Clip It jug is a symbol of what anyone can achieve by being resourceful, creative, determined to do things right and prepared to be patient."

pnhaw@mweb.co.za

## Network Rail invests in training to stay on track

**W**HY should a classroom full of middle managers from Network Rail, the organisation that runs the UK's railway infrastructure, need to learn about the work of Karl Weick, a psychology professor from the University of Michigan? How does sitting in a seminar room on a campus near Coventry, in the English midlands, help to get the trains to run on time?

These are not unreasonable questions. A recent trip to Westwood, Network Rail's leadership development centre, in the company of Iain Coucher, CE, helped to provide some answers.

Britain may have been a pioneer of the modern railway but it did quite a good job of wrecking its own system in the 1990s. A dubious privatisation led to the creation of a new company, Railtrack, to run and manage the network, serving new train operating companies, which carried the passengers.

A series of fatal accidents in the 1990s provoked intense concern about the integrity of the system. After the last of these in October 2000, at Hatfield, north of London, severe speed restrictions were imposed. The rail network almost seized up. A year later the government put Railtrack into administration and its successor, the state-owned Network Rail, was born in October 2002.

"The two best decisions we ever took at Network Rail were, first, to take back direct control of maintenance of the track," Coucher told me (Railtrack had been a notorious outsourcer of maintenance to engineering companies, losing both in-house expertise and control over costs). And the second key decision? "The investment in Westwood."

The site was bought from

### THE OPEN COLUMN



Stefan Stern

Cable & Wireless in 2005 and Coucher says his company has spent about £25m acquiring and refurbishing it. Why did Network Rail make this investment?

"In 2002 (when the current CEO was MD under John Armit, Network Rail's first leader) we found that there was a generation of managers that had no formal development in leadership skills at all," Coucher explained.

"One of the things that seemed to have slipped away when British Rail (the former state-owned railway) was privatised was the training schools. Railtrack did some training, but it was an early victim of cost-cutting. We looked at this and said we can either train people externally, we can recruit people with the right skills, or we can set about creating our own leadership centre, and that's what we did."

It is a handsome set-up. There is comfortable accommodation — "three star", according to Coucher — sports facilities, restaurants and a bar. There are 38 modern classrooms and a 200-seat auditorium.

Courses are taught by faculty members from the nearby Warwick Business School. About

55 000 training "slots" are offered each year, with an occupancy rate at Westwood of 92%. Graduate recruits get to spend six weeks onsite when they join the company.

Is it all paying off? Coucher thinks so. Today's UK railway network is operating with a much higher volume of traffic, with greatly improved safety and punctuality. Better leadership is driving through change. There have been efficiency savings and new ways of working. There is still a lot to do, particularly in terms of modernising signalling, an issue that has caused tension with the unionised workforce. Threatened strike action has been averted, though, and now looks less likely.

Network Rail's inheritance was grim — a near broken system. But Coucher thinks the hardest task is ahead. "Fixing a broken company and restoring it is relatively easy," he told me. "It's what you do when the company's performing really well, when you need to move to the next level, that's tougher. Then you've got to get people to think in a different way...."

"Many businesses start to change when it's too late. It's got to change when you're still on the up, otherwise you go over the top of the curve and.... We're saying we need to change now."

The Westwood centre, as I saw for myself, is proof that investing in leadership development makes sense. And the Karl Weick class? It was based on his 2001 publication (with Kathleen Sutcliffe), *Managing the Unexpected*, which looked at how to manage risk in "high reliability" situations. As the delegates learned how to develop a more sophisticated understanding of risk, and how to build resilience in a system, the CE (an engineer himself) stood at the side of the classroom, nodding silently.

*Financial Times*



# Local Content Summit: Unlocking the potential of the local content industry

**The Minister of Communications, General (Ret.) Sipiwe Nyanda, invites members of the public, industry, labour, civil society and other interested sectors to attend the Local Content Summit.**

The purpose of the summit is to refine and finalise the draft local content development strategy released by the Department in 2009. Key amongst strategic issues to be discussed includes the following:

1. Integration and harmonisation of local content policies to foster transformation and attract investment in the sector;
2. Unlocking the potential and constraints of content commissioning business practices;
3. Comprehensive support for emerging content creators;
4. The (in)adequacy of existing content regulatory instruments;
5. Digital Rights management regime;
6. De-centralising content production to boost economic activities in predominantly rural provinces;
7. Fostering and creating borderless content market in the SADC region.

**The summit will be held as follows:**

**VENUE: Indaba Hotel, Fourways-**

**Johannesburg**

**DATE: 06-07 May 2010**

**TIME: 08H00**

### Who should attend?

The summit is intended for

- policy makers,
- regulators,
- content creators, aggregators and distributors,
- broadcasters,
- funders,
- IP specialists,
- academics, both locally and in the SADC region.

Interested persons wishing to participate at the

Summit should confirm their attendance with:

Ms. Miyelani Khosa at miyelani@doc.gov.za,

Tel: 012 427 8174 and/or

Humbulani Rambau Humbulani@doc.gov.za,

Tel: 012 421 7049.

Closing date for confirmation of attendance:

05 May 2010