

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2006 - VOL. CCXLVIII NO. 97 - ★★★ \$1.00

B6 TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2006

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## SMALL BUSINESS

**Enterprise** / By Gwendolyn Bounds

### Working to Hit a Product Out of the Ballpark

*Cleaning-Goods Company, With Major League Sales, Wants to Bat Retail Now*

**M**ANY ENTREPRENEURS hope their product makes it from little-league status to the majors. Brad Singer's quandary, literally, is just the reverse.

Mr. Singer's family business, Eisco Inc. of Toms River, N.J., sells uniform-cleaning products to every Major League Baseball team and about 20% of the minors. After tonight's third World Series game in St. Louis, for instance, Mr. Singer's protein-release formula will help coax stubborn grass and blood stains out of the Cardinals' uniforms. Clubhouse managers there also favor Mr. Singer's shoe polish and his clay remover for the gritty head-first slides that are so hard on pants.

"The clay is the worst," says Cardinals assistant equipment manager Ernie Moore. "But with this, you presoak for a half hour and add it to the wash. It works great."

Their series rivals, the Detroit Tigers, meantime, use Mr. Singer's rosin to coat players' slippery hands. And the just-eliminated New York Mets swear by Mr. Singer's pine-tar remover, calling it an antidote for players such as third baseman David Wright, whose habit of tucking a tar-caked bat under his left arm is murder on his jersey.

#### Buyer Recognition

Such high-profile endorsements would seem a perfect platform for expansion into the collegiate, high school and youth-league market. Yet navigating traditional retail channels is turning out to be a whole different ball game for Mr. Singer—as it



Clubhouse Kit products for sale and two, Glove Oil and Hat Cleaner, in the pipeline

often is for entrepreneurs trying to break their wares out of a niche.

For starters, while selling to the major leagues means persuading 30 clubhouse managers to give his wares a try, hitting thousands of individual school and league teams requires getting recognition and distribution with a fragmented network of institutional sports-gear dealers who provide uniforms and equipment to nonprofessional teams—but don't often sell cleaning supplies.

And then there is mainstream retail, where many parents are likely to look for detergent. Mr. Singer's Clubhouse Kit products, as he dubs them for the consumer market, are sold in small quantities online via sports specialists such as Dick's Sporting Goods Inc., Modell's Sporting Goods and Sports Authority Inc., and on the company's own Web site, [www.clubhousekit.com](http://www.clubhousekit.com). But getting into the bricks-and-mortar side of these retailers has been more difficult. Consumers aren't necessarily thinking about laundry while shopping in such stores, and Mr. Singer says he believes his products need to be stocked alongside the uniforms and helmets to build awareness, not with random accessories—no small request when shelf space is limited.

#### Big-Store Hurdles

Meantime, the aisles of grocery and other cleaner retailers are dominated by long-established giants such as Procter & Gamble Co., the maker of Tide and Cheer. Breaking into this market means landing deals with distributors as well as navigating potential pricey barriers such as "slotting fees" levied by many retailers on new suppliers to get products placed on shelves.

Such obstacles have put Eisco in a retail no-man's land. "Although we have had successful products in professional sports, it

doesn't necessarily translate into retail-store business," says 40-year-old Mr. Singer, president of Clubhouse Kit. "I'm a small company. We are very lean."

With sales of \$1.5 million and a staff of seven—a count that includes Mr. Singer's mom and dad—Eisco's core business is far from consumer products. Founded by his parents, Howard and Anise Singer in 1962, Hobrean Inc., doing business as Eisco, has mostly sold industrial-strength cleaning supplies that it sources from various manufacturers to institutions such as casinos, schools and religious orders. But a 1992 cold call from the Philadelphia Phillies, desperate for a powerful cleaning agent to cull stains from their players' uniforms, shifted the company's direction.

"The whole system we were using where we'd buy 30-gallon drums of stuff and preprogram the wash wasn't that effective," says Phil Sheridan, the Phillies' assistant clubhouse manager. "Basically now, we use all Brad's stuff, and buy Bounce sometimes."

Mr. Singer began courting clubhouse managers, flying to spring-training sites and industry trade shows. The minor-league business picked up through osmosis off the majors. "Getting into the major-league business was a fluke," Mr. Singer says. "We thought it would be neat, and it snowballed." Today, 10% of sales are directly for sporting goods-related products such as the uniform cleaners and helmet-disinfectant spray, and Mr. Singer estimates company revenue will double in five years, mostly because of this category.

Despite the hurdles, Eisco is making inroads. One came via a large Tampa, Fla., uniform maker, Speedline Athletic Wear, which sells to teams in all 50 states. An executive there tested Mr. Singer's products on some of its uniforms and was impressed. "Clubhouse Kit is

one of the only products that will maintain the uniforms as close to the original form as they were delivered," says Roland Strul, Speedline's general manager. He gave Mr. Singer a list of sports-apparel dealers who were "solid financially" and says he'll occasionally write letters directly to clubhouses or team managers introducing Clubhouse Kit products.

Mr. Strul says he receives no financial incentive for the introductions of Clubhouse Kit, saying that school-budget crises have increased the need for better long-term maintenance of uniforms and that offering such cleaning solutions helps him service clients better.

#### Trial Run

Mr. Singer got his first taste of in-store challenges in a trial run at several dozen Modell's Sporting Goods stores. He sold a combination grass-and-blood eliminator and clay remover for \$19.99, but sales were slow, mostly, he says he believes, because consumers didn't know to look for cleaners at Modell's. Individual items are still sold at [modell.com](http://modell.com), he says, but he has not received a second store order. "We tried the products, and they're awesome, but not items you typically find in a sporting-goods environment," agrees Tommy DeSimone, Modell's baseball buyer. He says he might try a different Clubhouse Kit item down the road.

Mr. Singer's next shot will be at Dick's Sporting Goods, which ordered 8,000 spray bottles of his protective head-gear disinfectant for a January shipment to stores. Mr. Singer says he will push managers there to place his spray alongside helmets or at the register, instead of grouping it with accessories.

He also is doing what he can to maximize the major-league connection. He has changed the logo on products he ships to professional baseball outfits to have his consumer Clubhouse Kit name on the product.

And he also is beginning to sell to Major League Soccer and to court lacrosse and football teams. The most limiting factor: manpower—he's one of three company salesmen. "There are so many avenues we can take," Mr. Singer says, "and over time, we believe we will expand into every sports market that may need our products." But, he says, for now, "as a small company, you can only go in so many directions."

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