



Cleanliness is his business

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By Adolfo Pesquera
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A veteran in food service management all his life, Randy Mendoza was right at home at the annual May gathering in Chicago of the National Restaurant Association.

That feeling of ease, however, did not extend to his visit to the public restroom during a banquet function.

"I've always had a preoccupation about door handles in restrooms," Mendoza admitted.

There was something self-defeating, "and kind of gross," he added, about washing hands only to grab door handles before he sat down to slice his bread.

Mendoza isn't quite the germaphobe that the television character portrayed on "Monk" is, but he did ponder the subject long enough to change careers. Dwelling on that 2002 experience on the flight home, Mendoza decided to develop a solution that steered him into a new venture.

Kleenhantz, a nonalcoholic, anti-microbial towelette, was the outcome of several years' investment in laboratory trials, public beta tests and marketing research.

The product recently was adopted throughout the North East Independent School District, and it goes on H-E-B shelves today in two sizes of containers.

Mendoza, 51, readily acknowledges the ubiquity of sanitary wipes. The head of Mendoza Group LLC, a San Antonio company, went to great lengths to make his towelette better.

Most wipes and the alternative personal size soap gels have high alcohol content. The alcohol dries skin, making it unattractive to people past their 30s. Alcohol in gels has raised concerns among parents and school districts; children have gotten ill from licking it.

Mendoza visualized Kleenhantz as a routine hand hygiene practice that would be taught to young children.

If Mendoza could teach kindergartners to use it, he reasoned, there would be a long-term market. In the 2006-07 school year, it was tested at five North East elementary schools at Mendoza's expense for less than three months.

Mendoza installed a specially made, hard plastic dispenser. It was designed in collaboration with San Marcos-based Stellar Plastics Inc.

At the least, the school district suspected the towelettes helped cut absenteeism. It didn't hurt that North East was nervous about the gel soaps and considering their removal.

At the start of the 2007-08 school year, North East put the towelettes in 30 elementary schools.

“Teachers commented that to the students, it was fun to use them,” said Lance FitzSimon, Mendoza's partner and chief operations officer.

During the next seven months, the district was convinced that use of the towelettes lowered absenteeism.

On April 23, district Superintendent Richard Middleton announced plans to switch all schools away from alcohol-based gels to Kleenhanz.

“One of the strengths of Kleenhanz is its convenience,” Middleton said. “Our students can easily fight germs by grabbing a wipe on their way to lunch or grabbing one when they return from P.E.”

While North East conducted its pilot program, Mendoza was in talks with H-E-B. But getting the product into stores required a different dispenser system. For that, he went to Mexico.

Indelpa S.A. de C.V., a manufacturer of baby wipes and diapers in Mexico City, was contracted to make Kleenhanz in their Toluca factory.

“Indelpa has a 55 percent market share on all baby wipes in Mexico and Central America,” FitzSimon said. “They sell their brand to Wal-Mart in Mexico.”

The dispenser systems for both the wall unit and the retail packaging are protected by a patent application, Mendoza said.

During talks with H-E-B, Mendoza also was confronted with the inevitable question: why does the public need yet another moist towelette?

“During our trials with the school district, teachers were coming up to us asking, ‘Where can we buy it for ourselves?’” Mendoza said. “That helped.”

Online at: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/business/stories/MYSA050508.1E.kleenhanz.29f1a5f.html>