

Breath of fresh air

Dr Geoffrey Speiser's simple quest to help patients with bad breath lead him on a commercial path to a whole new business. He takes **Nicole Szollos** on an entrepreneurial journey.

Teeth in the morning, breath in the afternoon;

That's the workday split Dr Geoffrey Speiser follows in his daily routine. Speiser the professional has been practising dentistry for 25 years while Speiser the small business owner founded the Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinic in 1997. Today, he operates both the dental practice and clinic from his Sydney-based premises together with his wife, also his dental nurse and office manager, and six employees who pack products.

Becoming a business owner was not an intentional plan for Speiser. His was very much the professional mentality, intent on helping his patients and not seeing the 'bigger picture' of commercialisation. "I didn't have any visualisation that this was going to be a business or that it should be a clinic – I hadn't thought through where I was going to end up. People who run businesses have a different overview of life compared to professionals who are more safe; we don't take our blinkers off and we tend to like a narrow field," he says.

With this initial focus on helping those patients who came to sit in his chair and who had bad breath, rather than any formal business plan it was his enquiring nature and interest in the area that germinated the idea and progressed it to the next level. "Over the years as a dentist, I saw many patients who had a breath problem. I went looking for what I could offer to help these patients, but also how I could offer it and approach the subject in a clinical way without embarrassing them or myself. There weren't any solutions that I could see, but the interest was there so I kept searching," he explains.

Just a hobby

Still working full-time in dentistry, Speiser viewed the project as a hobby and while he spent time improving the website he did no marketing or advertising and had no expense other than buying and selling product.

"Because I didn't have the concept that this was going to be large and because I had a full-time dental practice, the criteria was for it not to incur debt. The internet model was crucial because it was my only means of getting product out there and selling it to the public. It was quite fascinating that with absolutely no marketing, there was demand worldwide. We were getting hits every day and 90 per cent of orders were from American customers," he says. Between 1997 and 2000, Speiser sold the product through BreezeCare. Around 2002, with research backing from a private dental lab, he launched a triclosan mouthwash on the Australian market.

The product was unique on the internet at that time and also gave the business branding in Australia. The BreezeCare product range sold steadily over the next few years through online and telephone sales. Due to its strong internet presence, in 2004 New Zealand company BLIS Technologies approached the business with a product developed from research out of Otago University. The product – based on a "revolutionary approach to treating bad breath", says Speiser – was added to the Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinic's range. The connection also provided Speiser with a scientific contact, and working with the lab he was able to share his ideas and have them developed and tested. The result was the next step for the business – a unique range of products focused on creating a bacterial balance in the mouth, rather than simply killing bacteria. It was this development that led to the creation and launch of the breath clinic in 2005.

Time for business

Speiser admits that “things fell into place” as his business progressed. Although he didn’t follow an official business model, Speiser says the level of “business sense” he gained from a year studying economics, along with a general interest in his own dental practice’s business mechanics, helped prepare him for some business fundamentals. Experience has also given him business insights, two of which have been particularly significant.

“Contacts and mentors are extremely important. When you are dealing with dentistry issues, you need to have research behind it to prove that what you are doing clinically works,” he says. And with all the business knowledge he’s now gained, Speiser says he would do it all again with two criteria – interest and passion. For me it comes back to if you have a passion for it and a basic knowledge, then you will be able to make it successful. Whether you can make it into a business is a different story, but if you view it as a hobby then you can get it to a commercially viable level. It is the next jump into a self-sustaining level that is the hard part,” he says.

The future of breath

The Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinic has certainly made the transition into a self-sustaining business and its success is evident in the figures. The business has grown 50 per cent per annum since 1998 and now achieves 80 per cent of its sales in Australia. Some 5000 clients have participated in an Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinic analysis – either at the clinic or online – since it officially launched. Business growth through both education and increased product range and distribution remains the key focus for Speiser. Education is two-pronged; the business actively seeks marketing and publicity opportunities in its aim to educate the public on solutions for bad breath, and Speiser is also working on setting up a network of dentists. “The model is already evolving; we have one website for dentists and one for consumers and we are working on the distinction between the two. When dentists buy product from us they can access a password protected area with information, but we would like to see Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinics in other dental practices following our protocol.

So we are providing information to professionals showing them how they can implement a system in their own business if they want an income stream or if not, to refer the person to someone who can help,” Speiser explains. In terms of products Speiser says development continues in order to increase the range and create better flavours and packaging, with the view to make products more commercially acceptable for the supermarket shelf. Driven by the online demand for products, Speiser has attempted to engage interest from retail outlets however there’s been no take-up. “It still blows me away that this is a problem that everyone has and is interested in but the shops won’t stock product – it’s still sitting in the niche as a professional system,” he says.

On the positive side, Speiser is the most content now than he has ever been in his career and he sees continued business growth for the Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinic’s products and breath analysis. But his confidence for cracking the retail market remains low, and he’s definitely not holding his breath.