



A dentist's hobby treating halitosis has become a thriving business, writes Janine Perrett.

CREATING a small business around halitosis seemed a natural progression for veteran dentist Geoffrey Speiser, but even he admits marketing The Australian Bad Breath Clinic is a big challenge. That is why when you ask the simple question of what his business is actually called, there is a bit of confusion. The products he sells to alleviate halitosis are under the company name of Breezecare, as is the main website, but he wants to market the business under the name "The Australian Bad Breath Clinic".

Yet when you visit his office on a main road in Sydney's eastern suburbs, where he still operates a part-time dental surgery, there is no evidence of the name of the "clinic". And that's for one very good reason. "How many people would be willing to walk into something identified as a bad breath clinic?" he asked. "I have many people like CEO's come here and they don't want to be seen coming into such a place." Therein lies just one of his problems; while the name might be a turn-off for clients entering a physical premises, he believes it is a strong selling point for marketing and advertising purposes, particularly on the internet, which attracts those with chronic bad breath who have become anti-social. In fact, Dr Speiser is at something of a crossroads with his whole operation, facing the eternal entrepreneurial dilemma of growing what started out as a hobby to the next phase as a stand-alone enterprise. "I'd been doing dentistry for 25 years and I would say it's an extremely stressful profession," he explains.

"It is also extremely predictable and you don't have to have any business skills in order to be a good professional. You do have a steady income though and that means you can afford to take a challenge, because you have a buffer zone behind you." The idea for Breezecare came when he noted over the years the number of patients who came through the practice suffering serious breath problems. As a computer buff he went on the net to search for treatments and found only one suitable prospect in the US.

In 1997 he began importing the American range and selling online but eventually decided he could do a better job himself and by 2002 was manufacturing his own range under the Breezecare label. In July 2004 it became a separate business although it still shares offices and staff with the dental practice. His wife Sharon is the full-time receptionist and office manager and there are four part-time staff who pack and send all the orders. Dr Speiser spends mornings treating patients and afternoons tending to the business, doing everything from answering email queries, devising online educational quizzes, cold-calling potential distributors and updating his website, breezecare.com.au. It seems obvious that he is spreading himself quite thinly but denies the suggestion that he might be a "control freak".



However, he is reluctant to totally abandon dentistry, even though his bad breath business is now four times bigger than the practice and with strong growth potential. "I still enjoy dentistry and want to be a dentist. It also definitely gives credibility by

being a practising dentist as we do breath consultations and research products," he says in answer to the question of why he doesn't give up the patients and focus full-time on building the company. However, he admits that the current structure is holding back growth. "I haven't been able to nut out a concrete direction.

Until I can say that this is the path I must be on and start running down that path, I'm worried to employ someone for \$100,000 a year and find down the road I need to start changing direction." Among some of the key issues he must address, apart from the name and marketing, is distribution. At the moment Breezecare products are sold only online but he is keen to broaden that and has had unsuccessful discussions with small pharmacies and the large Priceline chain. "I don't want it to be flooded on the retail market, but geographically placed." Some 30 per cent of the online sales are offshore, predominantly in the UK, and Dr Speiser is already looking at hiring someone in Britain. He also sees big growth potential in Asia and points out that it is cheaper to send an item to Singapore than to Western Australia.

Breezecare products are marketed as a professional system rather than a supermarket brand and are certainly priced in a different category to the mass market multinational mouthwashes which have 97 per cent of the market. The tongue scraper and gel kit retail for \$29.95 while his special KForce probiotic system for treating bad breath is \$49.95 or both for \$79.95. He also has specialist breath strips and chewing gum. "Our mouthwash is usually a bonus or giveaway because it alone does not fix bad breath despite the common perception," Dr Speiser said. "It is seen as a cosmetic or hygiene problem but it is really about an imbalance of bacteria in the mouth. Chronic bad breath is an embarrassing problem and our products treat the ailment and that involves an educational process."

That is why he is keen to keep the bulk of the business online or, as he puts it, "I want the net to be the centre of the model". He points out that the website is crucial for advice and consultation which, in turn, are vital for the marketing efforts. It is this educational imperative that drives his marketing campaign which focuses almost totally on PR rather than traditional advertising. "We did an ad in the Sunday newspaper insert, Body and Soul, in July for \$11,000 and only got 20 calls. We did a quiz on bad breath in Woman's Day and got flooded with calls. You just have to find the right PR approach." Other PR initiatives include writing a booklet on bad breath which he hopes will lead to more television interviews. Meanwhile, the bulk of his marketing budget is concentrated on the internet but it is proving ever more costly. "It's got much harder. We spend \$1500 a week for web advertising and that cost has soared in the past two years." One of the other issues here is the large number of websites he has ended up including justcleanteeth.com.au. He is reluctant to consolidate because he claims they have free advertising advantages and allow him to monitor the effectiveness of his advertising and marketing.