

Startup seeks fortune in iPhone bottle opener

March 28 2011, By Peter Delevett

A lot of Silicon Valley mythology centers on the idea of two guys in a garage. Well, this is a story about two guys who actually started their company in a garage.

It's also the story of how mobile and social technology can enable a nutty idea to grow into a business.

It all started in summer 2009, when Clay Baker, a tech company veteran who'd transitioned into industrial design and contracting, took his Range Rover in for its regular servicing at Tom Ramies' Portola Valley Garage.

Knowing Baker had worked at Netscape and other valley stalwarts, Ramies unveiled his nutty idea: a bottle opener that would fit onto an [iPhone](#). "We could call it the iOpener," Ramies said.

Baker's first reaction: "Dude, just fix my car." Then he started thinking: What if it wasn't just a gadget college kids might buy, but also married to an iPhone app that could let beer drinkers keep track of when they were running low on suds? And told them where to buy more? And let them recommend favorite brews to friends, and maybe even get online coupons from beverage makers?

Next thing he knew, Baker was saying, "Let's get this company started before my wife finds out what I'm up to."

The iOpener's hardly a household name - the duo says they've sold several hundred units, which consist of a hard shell that encases the

phone and features a slide-out opener, but they're in talks with a major big-box retailer. Many of the more highfalutin functions of the BevConX app they've designed have yet to roll out. But to talk to these two middle-age guys is to be reminded of the valley's enduring well of optimism.

They're serious enough that they've both gone full time on the company, and they've recruited a respected techie to help them make inroads among the venture capital crowd.

"What impressed me the most are both Clay and Tom's instincts, their attention to detail, their industry connections and, mostly, what they've accomplished with such a short amount of time and money," said Jim Cook, a co-founder of Netflix and the current chief financial officer at Mozilla, who's advising Baker and Ramies.

The co-founders make an unlikely pair - Ramies practically defines blue-collar, confessing, "I'm only on Facebook 'cause my friends made me" - but they've developed an odd symbiosis. I'm an industrial designer, you've got a manufacturing shop; let's put on a play! One of Ramies' auto welders, in fact, assembled the first prototype.

Baker takes great pride in the fact that all the components are sourced and assembled domestically - for less than what it would have cost in China, he says. The graduate of Montana State University hit up some old engineering contacts on campus, who introduced him to some other folks; as a result, the iOpener is produced in Manhattan.

Manhattan, Mont., that is.

"We have 10,000 units on the factory shelves, and I don't expect them to be there very long," says Baker, who doesn't seem like a guy prone to swagger.

As they show off the iOpener to a reporter over lunch, a waiter notices the device and excitedly asks if he can show it to a co-worker. Soon they're oohing and aahing together.

Baker and Ramies aren't just trying to market a \$39 gag gift: Baker says the iOpener's blade is forged of high-grade steel and that the shell's polycarbonate alloy stacks up with higher-end [iPhone](#) cases. "I guarantee you there's nobody that makes tougher cases," he says - and to demonstrate that claim, he recently took a mallet to an iOpener in front of a surprised Apple merchandising executive.

But it's the app that Baker believes will prove to be the secret sauce for success. Currently, the iOpener - thanks to a sophisticated accelerometer that can sense when the unit is inverted, then quickly lifted with the force required to open a bottle cap - activates BevConX, which asks the user which of 1,200 pre-loaded beverage names he or she has just popped open. A "share" button gives the user the option of sending a notification to Facebook or Twitter, and together with a geolocation feature, your friends or followers can see a message reading, for instance, "Dave just enjoyed a Corona on Ridder Park Drive in San Jose."

Baker and Ramies say they're in discussions with major brewers about using that feature to send e-coupons when the iOpener is used. "You can connect with a customer the moment they begin enjoying your product," enthuses Baker - who, incidentally, doesn't drink.

They've poured \$100,000 into the idea so far, from prototyping to developing the app to getting the hardware and software in front of customers. "We went from a conversation to a shrink-wrapped package in, what, 14 months?" Baker asks Ramies.

"You said there'd be no math," his sidekick replies.

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