



Mom would be proud

With his mother's admonition in mind, an entrepreneur has designed an automated, hygienic public toilet.

By Susan Feyder
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Alan Brill vividly remembers his mother's stern warnings.

"My mom would say, 'Don't ever sit on a public toilet, you'll go blind!'" he said.

Thanks to his partnership with a Minnesota company, the Florida entrepreneur is gaining acceptance for a

high-tech, electronic toilet seat that won't make anyone blind but could make him rich.

His product, which he invented and patented about four years ago, uses an electronic motor and computer chip to cover toilet seats in public bathrooms with flexible plastic.

SEAT continues on D5:
— About 700 customers.

Star Tribune photos by Kelly Guenther
Alan Brill, top left, of Florida-based Brill Hygienic Products, teamed with Bill Hassel, top right, of Imperial Custom Molding in Rogers to make Brill's toilet seats, which use an electronic motor and computer chip to cover the seats with flexible plastic. Mystic Lake Casino has more than 100 of the seats in women's restrooms.

SEAT from D1*Inventor working to create a sensor-activated version*

A user pushes a button on the back of the toilet and new plastic moves from one roll to cover the seat while the used plastic rolls off onto another cartridge where it is slit by a tiny razor so it can't be used again. Brill is about to introduce a new version that works when the user waves a hand in front of a sensor mounted on the wall behind the toilet.

"You don't want to touch anything in a public bathroom," said Brill, who attributes his interest in developing the seat to a previous job with a European competitor, along with his mom's long-ago lectures.

Brill, by the way, conceded that there may be no documented cases of disease being spread by contact with a toilet seat. But he added that increased concern over illnesses such as hepatitis has made people more conscious of the sanitary conditions in public bathrooms.

He expects his company's annual sales, about \$4 million now, to rise to about \$20 million within the next couple of years.

Imperial assistance

A key to the growth has been the help Brill received from his Minnesota partner, Imperial Custom Molding in Rogers, Minn.

Privately held Imperial, which has about 350 employees and annual sales of about \$40 million, counts sizable companies such as 3M Co. of Maplewood, Hoffman Engineering Co. of Anoka and Wagner Spray Tech Inc. of Plymouth among its clients.

When Bill Hassel joined the firm as president in 1997, one of the first things he did was lay out a strategy to transform the company from a simple supplier of plastic parts to one that could provide design, engineering and assembly services for customers.

By happenstance, the Hassel family ran out of gas in December of that year while on a trip to cut down a Christmas tree. While Bill Hassel dealt with getting gas, his wife and children hitched a ride to nearby Grand Casino in Hinckley.

There, they struck up a conversation with Brill, who was paying a visit because the casino had bought some of his toilets. Brill had been looking to replace the company that made the plastic parts for his toilet seats and he happened to ask Hassel's wife what her husband did for a living.

An Imperial engineer soon was meeting with Brill in Delray Beach to help solve some design problems with the seats that were causing them to break. Imperial also came up with a more moisture-proof housing for the motor that runs the plastic rollers.

Brill now has about 700 customers, among them 36 casinos — including Mystic Lake Casino in Prior Lake. The airports in New Orleans and Fort Lauderdale have the toilets, as do some Saks Fifth Avenues and other department stores. Brill also has persuaded numerous country clubs, including Interlachen in Edina, to install a couple of seats on a trial basis. A country club in Hong Kong in his first overseas customer.

Have a seat, no charge

Brill uses Gillette's give-them-the-razor-and-they'll-buy-the-blades marketing approach to sell his toilet seats. His company supplies the seats and installs them at no charge, then sells customers the plastic at about \$3.60 a roll.

That cost — it works out to about 4 cents per use — is still a significant expense for customers, who can wind up paying as much as \$200,000 a year for the plastic covers. Mystic Lake, which has more than 100 of Brill's seats, spends about \$120,000 a year on the plastic, he said.

"We're looking for high-end users," said Brill, not meaning it tongue-in-cheek. "This product isn't cheap, but some people are willing to spend a little more to provide an extra service for their customers."

Part of Brill's sales pitch is that customers need to install the seats only in women's bathrooms.

"Men don't care," he said. "They don't put up the seat,

so they're not touching the toilet anyway."

In fact, one of the biggest obstacles Brill faces is dealing with male executives, who often are the ones deciding whether to put in an order.

"I tell them to go home and talk to their wives," he said.

Sold on the idea

Rich Langelius, Mystic Lake vice president of operations, said he was skeptical of the Brill seat.

"I told my secretary to interrupt me after five minutes and tell me I had another appointment," he joked.

But he changed his mind after listening to Brill's sales pitch — which stretched into a two-hour conversation — and later talking about the product with his wife.

Mystic Lake surveyed women customers not long after installing its first Brill seats in 1996. "The response was overwhelming, about 99.9 percent positive," Langelius said.

Final assembly is done in Delray Beach, but Brill and Hassel said that work most likely will shift to Imperial's 130,000-square-foot plant as production volume rises. Imperial currently molds and embeds metal in 11 different parts of the seats.

Imperial has doubled its revenue in the past three years and might expand through acquisition, since there are 300 plastics molders within 100 miles of the Twin Cities. But Hassel believes most of Imperial's growth can come from adding customers and providing them with more services.

That means continuing to work with customers such as Brill — and maybe even installing Brill's toilets seats in Imperial's own bathrooms.

"That's not their fault, it's my fault," said Brill of the oversight. "Believe me, we're talking about it."

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