



**THE PITCH: Liquid Mints Freshen A Stale Product Category**

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NEW YORK (Dow Jones)--There's nothing faddish about wanting to have fresh breath. When it comes to deciding how to achieve it, however, consumers are rather finicky.

"Mints are a fad business," says Derek Schmitt, the confectionery category manager for Dallas convenience store operator 7-Eleven Inc. (SE). "You are always looking for the next thing to put it over the edge," he says. Witness the Altoids craze of the 1990s yielding to the popularity of breath strips such as Listerine PocketPaks. Right now, things have gotten a little stale in the category, with sales of breath fresheners and breath strips on the decline. Schmitt says he thinks he's found the next big thing to breathe fresh air into the category.

By volume, tiny tubes of Momints liquid mints are outselling the competition at 7-Eleven stores, Schmitt says. Created by Yosha Enterprises, Westfield, N.J., Momints are small gel beads that are filled with a potent minty liquid. In addition to the eye-catching sample-size vials of eight sugar-free mints that are moving fast at 7-Eleven, Yosha also sells Momints in a flip-top pack of 36. With its tapered edge, the pack can be tucked easily into the pocket of even the tightest jeans.

The package design originally had smokers in mind, and its packaging still touts how easy it is to dispense Momints from a cigarette pack. All three flavors - the original peppermint, winter burst, and cinnamon - are powerful enough to banish a tobacco taste.

**Starting Small**

Momints founder Anthony Shurman started Yosha with the severance money he collected when he left the gum-and-mint division of Warner-Lambert after Pfizer Inc. (PFE) bought the company. He began distributing Momints in New York by wheeling the product from convenience store to convenience store in a wagon. But the product has taken off from this humble start. After packs of the mints were placed in goodie bags at high-profile events such as the Sundance Film Festival, Momints gained a cult following. Shurman claims Momints fans include Brazilian supermodel Giselle Bundchen, actress Cameron Diaz and R&B diva Mary J. Blige.

The product's rising popularity hasn't been missed by larger rivals. Hershey Foods Inc. (HSY) is rolling out its own liquid mint under its Ice Breakers brand and Playtex Products Inc.'s (PYX) Binaca has introduced its own version. With competition coming from these deep-pocketed rivals, consumer awareness is sure to follow.

"We take it as flattery and know it will help us build awareness," Shurman says.

### **Building A Buzz**

Hershey Foods says its peppermint-flavored Liquid Ice uses a technology developed for its Ice Breakers gum. The Hershey, Pa., candymaker puts 30 capsules in a small plastic container emblazoned with the Ice Breakers logo.

Hershey plans to support the product's launch this spring with a national television advertising campaign, but it declined to further discuss its details or the product.

Binaca uses the same manufacturer as Momints to make its Gel Bursts liquid mints. However, it is set apart by the shiny finish it uses for its brightturquoise-colored orbs.

Binaca Gel Bursts may end up in the oral care section of the store rather than near the mints because it is positioned as a health and beauty aid, Schmitt says.

This isn't that usual. Pfizer's Listerine PocketPaks, which tout their germ-fighting ability, are often shelved in this section. Binaca's packaging also sets it apart. Sold in a blister pack similar to that used by some tablet gums, some say Gel Bursts' packs aren't as hip as the competition, which could be a drawback in the trendy category.

The design was intentional, says Peter Standhart, product manager for Binaca Gel Bursts. "If the beads all live together in the pack," he says, "there's a chance they can stick together" in hot or humid environments. As a result, the blister pack was needed in order to meet Playtex's tough quality standards and may make for happier consumers this summer, he says.

Binaca expects its brand recognition will go a long way toward capturing consumer interest. "Household awareness of the Binaca brand is north of 90%," Standhart says. In addition, Binaca is planning a print advertising campaign with the tagline "a kick in the kisser," which will debut in the June or July issues of magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Fitness, and Men's Health, according to Standhart.

With the strength of their corporate parents, Ice Breakers Liquid Mints and Gel Bursts are likely to gain wide distribution easier than Momints. As a result, Shurman says he's continuing to focus on alternative channels such as hotels, restaurants and night clubs as well as on other non-traditional retail channels to grow his sales amid this new competition. Momints is considering introducing a new package size that will allow it to be sold as a gift, Shurman adds.

All this is good news for the category, Schmitt says. "Mints are a social experience," he says. The new products and packaging

give consumers a way to discover new things and share them with their friends. "It's cool to have the latest thing to share," Schmitt says. Still, others are more skeptical. The liquid mints are "a logical evolution," says Don Stuart, a partner at consultancy Cannondale Associates in Wilton, Conn. "It is a faster-acting form, which combined with innovative packaging, is a good combination."

Although innovative packaging has traditionally driven sales of intense mints, it remains to be seen whether this will reinvigorate the category, hesays.

(The Pitch is an occasional column analyzing trends in media and marketing.)