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Striking twice

Sales Stories: profiles of prosperity

Georgia inventor is poised to seal the deal — and the juice boxes — with The Last Straw.

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Michael Hunter](#) Staff Writer



The father of invention:
Robert Stribling already had
one successful invention under
his belt when he turned his
attention to messy juice boxes.

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Ideas spill forth from Robert Stribling's brain. As a child, he was captivated by family tales of Stribling's great-grandfather, an inventor who held patents on, among other things, a dental drill and a vending machine.

"He never made a lot of money," Stribling said. "He wasn't business-savvy."

The same can't be said of Stribling. In 1993, he designed, engineered and patented the Nomad, an energy-efficient portable trash compactor that can run on a household outlet.

"We built it on efficiency back in 1995, and green caught up with us," Stribling said of his invention. He initially tried to sell the units commercially, setting up distribution up and down the East Coast.

"It wasn't selling," Stribling said. "It just about broke me."

Stribling took on an investor, Jim Elliott, the co-founder of [Universal Data Consultants Inc.](#), and revised his business plan. Realizing the market was dominated by large companies a newcomer couldn't hope to compete with, he brought the technology in-house, stopped selling equipment to outsiders and set his sights on winning long-term hauling contracts from municipalities and school systems. The equipment was the differentiator, Stribling said, allowing [Stribling Systems Inc.](#) to offer energy efficiency and a better transportation model.

“It’s really a great business now. We have a tried-and-true track record,” he said. “It’s very financially successful for our customers and for us.”

In 2004, the inventing bug bit Stribling again as he was handing his daughter a juice box. Clad in pajamas after a bath, she promptly squeezed the box and squirted juice all over herself.

“I thought, ‘How can a company put out such a faulty product?’ ” Stribling said. “Surely there’s a solution. And I started researching, and there wasn’t a solution. Not [one] that you could do for pennies.”

That knowledge sent Stribling to the drawing board, sketching up a valve that would control the flow of juice through the straw. He also got on the phone to Elliott.

“I’ve got this crazy idea,” he told him, “only it’s not so crazy.”

Elliott saw the straw’s potential. “We’ve got a product that fixes a problem,” Elliott said.

Stribling applied lessons learned from his first inventing foray.

“I was younger then and I took more of a rough shot,” he said. “I wasted a lot of money going the wrong way — not really understanding the marketplace and what an influence the big guys have.”

The juice box market, Stribling quickly found out, is also dominated by big international companies. According to Stribling, the largest manufacturer, Tetra Pak, controls 80 percent of the market and produced 141 billion boxes in 2008. SIG Combibloc is the No. 2 company in the market. These companies provide the machinery to manufacture the boxes to juice packers and then profit from selling the paper they are constructed from.

Undeterred, Stribling assembled a team to help bring his idea to market.

“You have to have the best of the best if you are going to play in the billions category of volume,” he said.

His first convert was industrial designer Sam Crosby, founder of [Industrial Design Associates](#), an award-winning design firm.

“He’s done everything from the step for Step Aerobics to the B-1 Bomber windshield,” Stribling said.

Crosby refined the design, taking it through the necessary trials to assure child safety and the ability to produce the straw at high volumes. Stribling characterized the research and development phase as taking three to four years and costing more than \$1 million. Along the way, he made Crosby a partner in the company.

Stribling then lined up companies to help him manufacture the straw. A key to his philosophy is to involve companies that stand to benefit if the idea is successful.

“You always have to have help from the engineering and vending world is my belief,” Stribling said. “There’s something in it for the people who mold and make the tooling for all this. So why can’t they help me bring it to market? If you believe, invest.”

Stribling aligned his company with [Wacker Chemical](#), which makes the liquid silicon rubber the valve is made from, and starlim//sterner, the company that makes the molding machinery.

“The team I have put together for this is fantastic,” Stribling said. “As a result, this is not 100 percent my product anymore.”

The last piece of the puzzle was to interest a big manufacturer.

“You have to align yourself with people that know how to do deals with big companies,” Stribling said.

Elliott brought in [Genesis Capital Services](#), an investment firm that more typically is involved in large company acquisitions.

“Every now and again, you’ll see a great concept that fulfills such a large potential that you want to get involved,” said Jonathan Goldman, CEO of Genesis.

Goldman said Genesis got involved at an earlier stage than usual for the firm because of the product’s long-term potential. Goldman commended Stribling on building the right team around a great product.

“We have great expectations that The Last Straw will have a great future,” he said.

That future is currently in the final round of negotiations with SIG Combibloc to bring The Last Straw to market.

“The goal is we will be an option for anyone filling with SIG Combibloc,” said Stribling. “They will get us brands we are a good fit for.”

Stribling predicted the straw would be available in late fall 2009 or early 2010.

Tom Shaver, vice president of marketing in North America for SIG, said, “When Robert presented The Last Straw we became instantly excited about the opportunities it could deliver on a global scale. What set Robert apart is the detailed work and research that he invested to cover all aspects of the functionality and safety of the straw. It was very impressive.”

Like many others close to a deal with children, Shaver’s daughter served as an early test market. “Drinking from the Last Straw, she enjoys the juice from our carton, and we enjoy that the juice spraying parties are over,” Shaver said.

As to which brand will adopt the unique straw technology, Shaver stated, “It could be a major brand or a smaller organic label.” The Last Straw will give SIG a competitive edge in the market, he said.

Stribling enjoys his position as the inventor-man of Between, Georgia, and is confident more ideas will spring forth.

“I have always prided myself that I have never had a job. I always worked for myself,” Stribling said. “To develop ideas into a viable business is hard, but it’s fun.”