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This cooler can really hold its water

By Frank Campailla

Hanging around the water cooler is a popular office pastime. That is, until it gets near empty and someone has to replace the bottle. The Flanders brothers have developed a new concept that could save the office klutz from a dousing — a water cooler that never gets empty.

The two brothers, Dave and John Flanders, formed Cooler Waters in Farmington, and devised a system to offer filtered bottled water from the tap. The water comes out of a standard water cooler and not a faucet.

They initiated their idea in 1997 with a 30-day, no obligation trial to business clients of NVS Vending in Bloomfield. Dave, 35, was a co-owner of NVS and John, 32, was the company service manager.

It [the idea] started on whim, Dave Flanders said.

He saw how many businesses were using bottled water and wanted to capitalize on it.

"I spent about six or seven months researching bottled water," Dave Flanders said, who has a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering from Northeastern University in Boston.

His idea to filter tap water eliminates many of the drawbacks that come with bottled water — no more wasted space for water bottle storage and no bottle changing is necessary.

"Our bottle refills itself. Does yours? That is our slogan," Dave Flanders said.

Cooler Waters' bottles are always full, because as soon as someone takes a drink, water is replenished from the municipal water supply. Businesses liked the product so much that in 1999 Dave Flanders sold his stake in NVS and formed Cooler Waters with his brother.

Here's how the technology works. The Cooler Waters unit connects directly to a building's standard water supply through a quarter inch tube attached to the back of the water bottle on the cooler unit. The cooler can be put just about anywhere in an office.

"When I'm running that line I'm like a cable man," John Flanders said. "The line can go under a sink, above the ceiling or where there's was an old water fountain."

The 1/4 - inch tube is connected to a filter in the back of the unit where water passes through. This filter dissolves solids and impurities accumulated through municipal water supply pipes, which is the reason people turn to bottled water in the first place.

The second filtration stage involves an internal air vent that is connected to an external air filter. This particle filter removes dust from the air that enters the bottle.

The last filter is a granular activated carbon filter at the base of the bottle connected to the unit's internal reservoir. This removes chlorine from the bottle to protect against algae or bacteria.

"The water is filtered at point of use," John Flanders said. "The unit is like a self-contained water manufacturing plant."

The Flanders brothers point out that the water jug in their system is sealed into the unit. The advantage here is the jug on a standard cooler comes off a truck, then sits in a closet collecting dust before making its way to the top of a cooler.

Cooler Waters uses the standard cooler familiar to bottled water drinkers, except the bottle on top is patented because of its special internal filter.

The bottle is leak proof and has an ultraviolet blue coating to protect against light, which can cause algae growth. Residual chlorine is stored in the bottle for disinfection. The bottle is a disinfecting holding tank, Dave Flanders said. However, Cooler Waters doesn't own the patent on the bottle.

At first the company tried to promote flat-top coolers without a bottle, which would work just as well. But people didn't go for it.

It's the comfort factor of the bottle — being able to view your water, Dave Flanders said.

Cooler Waters has about 200 clients mostly in Greater Hartford with a few in other New England states. Local clients include JDS Uniphase in Hartford, Trinity College and Abacus Payroll Systems in Farmington.

"We've been extremely happy," said Sharod Saksena, owner of Abacus. "I



John, left, and Dave Flanders, brothers, owners of Cooler Waters in Farmington, have devised a system to connect a water cooler directly to a building's municipal water supply through a quarter inch water line tube attached to the back of the cooler. The cooler has three water filtering phases and the jug always stays full. The company has more than 200 business clients.

think it's better [than bottled water], because when we stored the bottles the water became stale. This is always fresh."

Saksena has a 600-square foot office and had little room to store water jugs.

Dave Flanders said businesses will save money with his product, particularly if a company has a lot of employees and goes through a lot of water bottles. He said standard water bottling companies will charge about \$10-\$15 per month to rent a cooler unit and between \$5 and \$8 per water bottle.

Cooler Waters' charges between \$30 and \$50 per unit, per month depending on what agreement a business chooses. In addition there's a \$65 installation fee. The company provides service and changes the filters at no extra cost.

Cooler Waters has experienced a few situations with bad municipal water, thus making the product unattractive. But the company can add a chlorine module to the unit to improve the water quality.

Cooler Waters is looking forward to company growth.

"We want to have about a thousand units out there, Dave Flanders said. We're about half way there. We are looking to go nationwide. We want to set up territories in New England and franchisees throughout the country. ■