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From the Feb 15, 2010 edition



MAIN STREET

Building a brand packet by packet

By **Richard Asinof**
PBN Contributing Writer

Paul Fleming, the 60-year-old managing partner at ZBlok LLC in Newport, and CEO of Fleming & Co., has built a number of \$100 million-plus consumer brands for companies such as Procter & Gamble and Nestle, working on accounts including Cool Whip and Bounce fabric softener.

Now, Fleming said, "it is incredibly gratifying to actually be trying to build one for myself."

His new consumer product is a sunscreen, ZBlok, 30 SPF, a clear, zinc oxide product without any fragrance that is water and sweat resistant and does not sting or burn the eyes. Fleming's demographic targets athletes – sailors, bicyclists, golfers, tennis players, fishermen, baseball and softball players – who cannot afford to lose focus in the heat of competition – but who need strong protection from the sun.



PBN PHOTO/BRIAN MCDONALD

SCREEN PASS: Paul Fleming is taking the marketing experience he has gained at his firm, Fleming & Co., and applying it to ZBlok LLC, a sunscreen marketing and sales company for which he is the managing partner.

"I want ZBlok to become the sunscreen version of Gatorade, and Under Armour," Fleming said.

With his partner, Fred Cook of Schaefer Marine in New Bedford, who manages production and distribution, Fleming believes that he can create a strong niche market in a billion-dollar category. "I don't need a big market share to be a happy person," he said, as sunlight streamed into his office on Long Wharf overlooking Narragansett Bay.

The firm, formed in December 2008, is introducing three more products to complement its 4 fl. oz. sunscreen – a 2 fl. oz. sunscreen, convenient for skiers, a lip balm and a stick applicator.

In its first year, ZBlok sold a modest 1,600 units at \$14.95; this year, Fleming projects sales of 22,500 units, with a goal of \$100,000 in revenue. Within three years, Fleming hopes to reach a target of \$1 million in sales.

The product was field-tested by Ken Read, world-class sailor from Newport with the Puma Ocean Racing Team, during his preparatory race for the Volvo around-the-world sailing challenge. Read loved the product; now the official sunscreen of the Puma Ocean Racing Team.

ZBlok is currently available online at zbloksun.com, and at a number of retail locations here in Rhode Island, listed on the Web site. Fleming is currently negotiating with West Marine for product placement in its 300 stores nationwide.

Much of the product marketing to date, according to Fleming, has been a "guerilla" approach: Small packets filled with ZBlok were sent to yacht-club directors around the country, with a focus on young sailors, age 15 and younger. At the Ida Lewis Yacht Club in Newport, for instance, Fleming provided packets to be distributed to all youth sailors as part of safety day.

Fleming is not shy about pressing the flesh to promote his product. In the summer, a large plastic model of ZBlok is mounted atop his car (actually, his wife's) with which he frequents area beaches and hands out samples.

"I wish that I had been slathering ZBlok when I was younger," said Fleming, an avid sailor. He pushed up the sleeve of his left arm to show a recent bandage covering a cancerous growth that has been removed.

Zblok will be a sponsor of the eighth annual Fish Stock tournament over Memorial Day weekend in Smyrna Beach, Fla., sponsored by Sport Fishing Magazine. More than 250 boats are slated to compete.

An online survey of customers who have purchased ZBlok reveals that the sunscreen has created an effective solution to the problem that consumers experienced with burning or stinging eyes. Before buying ZBlok, most of the customers said they had such problems with other sunscreens. And, four out of five customers indicated that they were very satisfied. More than 96 percent also liked the fact that ZBlok is fragrance-free.

The firm employs the equivalent of four full-time workers, including a webmaster and a receptionist/bookkeeper. To date, Fleming & Co. and Schaefer Marine have helped cover staffing costs. Paul Fleming expects ZBlok to turn a profit by next year.

In the latest redesign of the product's labeling, created by RISD graduate Robert Troutman, the firm's artistic director, emphasis is being placed on ZBlok's clear, transparent properties, the fact that it contains zinc oxide, and its eye-safe, no-sting qualities. The letter "Z" in ZBlok is designed to resemble the block lettering in an eye chart.

With the introduction of the smaller, 2 oz. package of sunscreen, Fleming said that customers are responding by buying both sizes – the 4 oz. as well as the 2 oz. packages. "That's a 66 percent increase in the average sales income," Fleming said. •

COMPANY PROFILE

ZBlok LLC

OWNERS: Paul Fleming and Fred Cook

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Marketing and sales of sunscreen

LOCATION: 31 America's Cup Avenue, Newport

EMPLOYEES: 4 FTE

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 2008

ANNUAL SALES: \$24,000 in 2009