



Back to the future

A great idea for back pain relief has been patented. Now for fame and fortune.

With an estimated nine in 10 Australians suffering from back pain at some stage in their lives, physiotherapist-cum-entrepreneur Mark Alexander knows he could make a great living out of manipulating people's spines with his own hands. Instead, he is shifting focus to a health product that promises to help sufferers around the world – and in the process is confident of making his fortune.

Alexander, a former physio for the London Broncos rugby league team and the Australian Olympic team, is the creator of BakBalls, a spinal mobilisation device that fits the anatomical shape of the spine and allows self-treatment of back ailments at home.

Since patenting the idea in 2002 and selling the first BakBalls in October 2004, Alexander has been on a roll. A six-minute appearance on the Nine Network's *A Current Affair* generated 1.5 million hits on the BakBalls website and created marketing momentum that continues today.

"I always had the belief that it was going to be successful," Alexander says. "Because I'm pretty self-motivated and self-driven, I had the idea and I just knew it would take time to get there, but I knew it would eventually sell and be successful."

A sufferer of back pain himself, Alexander and his partner Tara Garson trialled golf balls, squash balls and rolling pins before settling on the rubber prototype for BakBalls.

Selling strongly in Australia, it is one of only nine products that has been endorsed by the Australian Physiotherapy Association in its long history. Alexander is rapt to have such industry backing.

"Historically they can potentially look down upon somebody making money or turning physiotherapy into a business," he says. "I guess physios are carers – they're not by habit business people."

Sales over the internet are also steady, and Alexander is pursuing growth into Hong Kong, Singapore and Britain.

The TV exposure aside, another big break came in late 2004 when BakBalls won \$100,000 in the University of Queensland Business School's "Enterprize" business plan competition. The cash allowed Alexander to fund the business without risking his mortgage – a rarity for SMEs. While he concedes public exposure and the prize have helped his cause, Alexander says small businesses have to make their own luck.

"It's great to have an idea, but you don't only have to be a thinker, you have to be a doer. Other people have told me some fantastic ideas but I know they'll never get off the ground because the people I'm talking to, I know, just aren't doers."

Research, marketing, financing – nothing can be left to chance. Alexander is also not afraid to embrace new ideas or opinions, and holds business strategy sessions with friends and fellow professionals every few months. "I put beers and pizza on. Sometimes you get so deep working in your business you can't see what's going on. And with your mentors you can open yourself up and not get stuck in a rut egotistically."

While acknowledging he is an entrepreneurial novice, Alexander has completed an MBA degree and reckons his business model is sound. "I'm confident because it's a low-risk product. It doesn't cost that much to make, but there's a high margin and low bottom line. We can implement this business model in every country in the world."

Rigorous attention to detail has also been crucial. A 50-page business plan has enabled the BakBalls boss to answer every question and address all contingencies.

"I haven't left any stone unturned," he says. "I guess that's the secret to my success."

Alexander is getting more comfortable



with the transition from physiotherapist to businessman. "Early on, that was a major thing, not knowing the answers. Going from an Olympic-level physiotherapist ... I knew what I was doing and had no qualms. Then I go from that to business person with zero experience and zero expertise."

Grounding his faith is the product. He knows BakBalls work. A robust business model also helps. "Our distributors pay for the product up front so we never have to have useless inventory sitting there and we sell directly to the public online, so they hand over their money and we send them the product. You've never really got a lot of inventory sitting there to give us cash-flow issues."

Despite the dream run, Alexander is determined to proceed cautiously. For that reason, he is not bending over backwards to enter the giant US market – yet. "My mentors have said don't grow too fast or you'll implode with your cash-flow issues." ●

SPINAL TAP

Mark Alexander is on a winner with BakBalls



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