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SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

Cal Poly Alums Pitch a Healthy Alternative to Tobacco with ‘Grinds’

By Jo Ann Lloyd

Move over Red Bull. A new energy product is making news, and it comes with a healthy bonus: the potential to get people off chewing tobacco.

Called Grinds, it’s the brainstorm of Cal Poly grads Matt Canepa (B.S., Business Administration, 2009) and Pat Pezet (B.S., Business Administration, 2009). It’s a flavored energy kick delivered through coffee grinds enclosed in a pouch that fits easily in the cheek, like “chew.”

Grinds earned Canepa and Pezet a first-place win and \$15,000 in prize money in Cal Poly’s 2009 Innovation Quest competition. But its creation came about more by happenstance than design, during summer quarter 2008, their senior year.

“We had procrastinated until the very last moment on a marketing project that was due the next day,” Canepa recalled. “It was about 11 p.m. the night before it was due. We needed caffeine, but no coffee shops were open that late on a Sunday night in summer.

“We looked in the cupboard and found a tin of Folgers coffee grinds. Without thinking, we each stuck a small handful in our mouths, sort of like chewing tobacco.”

The two got the kick they were after – but those pesky coffee grinds weren’t particularly pleasant.

“We worked on our marketing project maybe 30 minutes,” Pezet said, “then we stopped to ponder this other idea.” One nagging problem was figuring out how to contain the grinds.

Not much happened with Grinds until winter quarter, when Canepa and Pezet spotted a poster in the Business Building advertising the Ray Scherr Business Competition. “Have a cool idea?” the poster asked. “Share it with us and get free pizza.”



“Free pizza! It was lunchtime, and we were hungry,” Canepa said. So they went and answered 10 questions, which qualified them to compete.

The product they brought to the competition was a tad crude. They had emptied teabags, refilled them with coffee grinds and hot chocolate granules, and sewn the teabags back up.

But those crude little teabags netted the duo third place and \$3,000, as well as an automatic entrance to Innovation Quest (IQ), an annual competition created to identify and encourage innovative ideas by Cal Poly students and faculty.

Canepa and Pezet pitched Grinds to a panel of IQ judges, and the idea was a first-place hit.

The victory gave them more than money; it provided the impetus to start their company. Early on, they thought Grinds would appeal to professional baseball players, many of whom are known to indulge in “chew.” Both Canepa and Pezet had played baseball during their days at Cal Poly. Neither, though, had been a fan of chewing tobacco.

By 2010 they were ready to take their prototype to Arizona and Florida, the two places where Major League Baseball teams hold spring training. There, the two handed out free pouches to the players, touting Grinds’ energy kick and playing it up as a healthy alternative to smokeless tobacco.

Two pouches deliver a caffeine equivalent of about one-quarter to slightly less than half a cup of coffee. Flavors include mocha, mint chocolate and cinnamon roll, with plans to add vanilla and a robust French roast flavor.

Together, Canepa and Pezet take care of all aspects of the business. Pezet is good at marketing. “He is forward thinking,” Canepa said. “He knows how to develop the business. He’s an optimist.

“I’m more a realist,” he continued. “I deal with the financial aspects. We are polar opposites and can argue over spending \$10. When that happens, we take a break, get a beer, and by the time the beer is gone, we’ve usually compromised right down the middle. We have a good working relationship.”

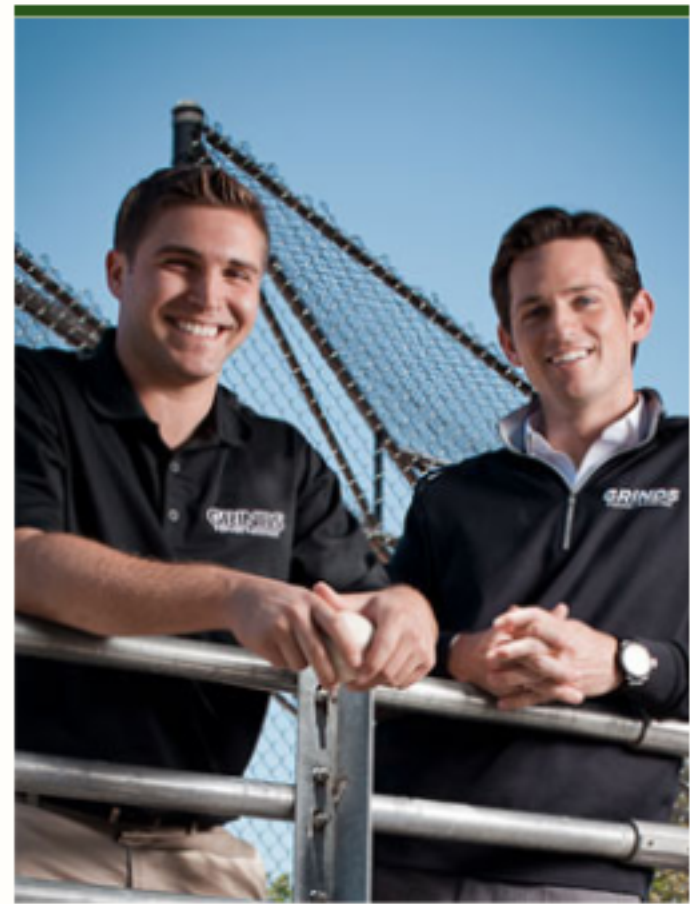
They say the best part of their jobs is helping people kick the chewing tobacco habit. “San Francisco Giants Manager Bruce Bochy told us we might have saved his life,” Canepa said. ‘I really appreciate you guys passing this out,’ he told me. ‘I’ve been chewing tobacco for years.’ ”

Canepa and Pezet credit Cal Poly for making the improbable possible. “We owe nearly all of our brief success to the professors and alumni who helped us in our final year at Cal Poly,” Pezet said. “As business finance students who played a lot of baseball, we didn’t have much background outside of some number crunching and sports. IQ changed all that in just a matter of weeks. Everyone – the students, alumni and faculty – helps create a lucrative environment for people with ideas to succeed and make them a reality.”

For Canepa and Pezet, the reality now is that Grinds is catching on. “The players are coming to us now,” Canepa said. “They call us ‘the Grinds Guys.’ We love it.”



Photos courtesy of Grinds.



Grinds

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