On Making A Hard Sell

June 1, 2000 By Kevin O'Leary

Steve Mare keeps The File in his desk. It's a folder of "new ideas" sent in to the sales team of Global Protection Corp., makers of Pleasure Plus and Atlas condoms. Steve's been keeping it since he joined the Boston-based firm in 1997, the same year he married his sweetheart, Cynthia. "You wouldn't believe what people think of," the 34-year-old says. Ideas range from putting celebrities' faces "on the tip, so people can fantasize about making love to Brad Pitt," to emblazoning rubbers with NFL logos, "'an idea that would be particularly popular,'" Steve reads, "'around Super Bowl time.' Except I bet the Giants and Packers would be the only ones selling."

He rifles through the papers. "Oh, here's a hall-of-famer," he says. "This guy suggested a 'minicondom, attached with Krazy Glue, that covers the head of the penis but not the shaft.' That was rejected just for putting Krazy Glue and penis in the same sentence—definitely something I'm opposed to."

The company just put up www.globalprotection.com, and some visitors give waaaay too much info. "Last week someone e-mailed me and the subject was 'Slippage.' Apparently, he has that problem and wanted us to design one for him. And then he gave his dimensions—length and diameter! I always try to respond professionally."

Though the consumer interaction differs from that of his previous job—shilling carbon and graphite products for Union Carbide—Steve says his family's gotten used to the idea of their son, the condom seller. "I was in Catholic school through high school," the Yonkers, New York, native says. "But even though my mom was an inch and a half from becoming a nun, she was a nurse. So she knows this is important."

And the blushing bride's side? "Cynthia's family is fine with it," he says. "They're Unitarian."

Soon Steve will set out on a vacation with Cynthia, then return to gear up for the summer release of The Knight-Light, the first glow-in-the-dark condom approved by the FDA. But before all that, he's got to do a demonstration for an Osco Pharmacy buyer in Phoenix. Steve flies a lot for his job and always remembers his first solo flight for the company. "There I am in the airport on my way to an expo," he recalls. "I've got a plastic penis—what we call a demonstrator—in my briefcase, along with about 60 condoms. And I also have a box cutter so I can set up my dog-and-pony show when I get there." He waits a beat. "When my briefcase went through the X-ray machine, they saw the razor and said, 'Sir, would you mind opening your briefcase?'"

But trade shows can be even more treacherous. “We do customized products,” he says, “you know, wrapped with the logo or slogan of the company giving them out. So we’re there with all these coffee-mug and apron people. Some people get embarrassed when they come to our booth, but a lot make jokes. I’m still mad at Clinton for all the Monica Lewinsky jokes I had to sit through.”

But after four years of talking about anal and vaginal intercourse with small-town buyers in Sears suits, is it all just a day’s work?

“It’s true that the unusualness wears off,” Steve says. “But then sometimes I catch myself and wonder what my grandmother would think.”

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