

Innovation

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Entrepreneur's Niche: Chlorine-Soaked Triathletes, Swimmers

SPORTS: SBR sells specialty hair, skin products, others

By ALISHA GOMEZ

Karen Allard isn't your typical beauty expert.

Allard makes products that remove chlorine from skin and hair, a big problem for triathletes and swimmers such as herself.

Allard, 45, is founder and president of Santa Ana's **SBR Sport Inc.** She started her company after trying products to remove chlorine from her hair without stripping it. None of them worked, she said.

With about \$30,000 of her own money, Allard

SBR Sport Inc.

- **Location:** Santa Ana
- **Business:** products for swimmers, triathletes
- **Started:** 2003
- **2011 sales:** \$600,000 to \$700,000
- **Notable:** started by triathlete, swimmer Karen Allard

began working on her own line, developing the formula with chemists in the Inland Empire.

The result was TriSwim, a line of shampoo, lotion and body wash that she debuted in 2004.



Allard: "triathletes don't take care of themselves on the outside"

The products use what Allard calls sequestering agents that attack the chlorine molecule, containing it and washing it out of hair and off skin.

Everyday soaps don't attach themselves to chlorine, which is why you still can smell it on your skin even after a shower, she said.

Once she finalized her products, Allard—who had an almost nonexistent marketing budget—

took several thousand samples and got them into giveaway bags at the Oceanside Ironman Triathlon.

"The product slowly started getting a name for itself," she said.

Sales are expected to be \$600,000 to \$700,000 this year.

Triathletes aren't exactly beauty junkies.

"It's a big joke in the triathlon market that triathletes don't take care of themselves on the outside," Allard said. "You'll see a person, and he or she will look 60. It turns out that person is actually 40. Chlorine is so bad for your skin and hair. It rips through bathing suits."

The company's products are sold in several hundred U.S. stores and in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Sellers include drugstore.com, dermadoc-tor.com, Roadrunner sports stores, bigdaddy-beauty.com, mom and pop bike and sports shops and some beauty stores.

Triathletes are a niche market.

What's unique about them is that they're typically wealthier, spend money on expensive bikes and wetsuits and are willing to buy the newest line of any piece of equipment, said Courtney Baird, editor in chief of Inside Triathlon magazine in San Diego.

"Doing triathlons is pretty expensive," she said. "Bikes cost a lot of money, and so does their upkeep. And of course, it costs a lot of money to travel around the world to all these different races, which triathletes willingly do."

It was a challenge to get triathletes to see the benefits of good skin and hair habits, according to Allard. She said she's making some headway.

"We'll walk by people and they'll shout 'We love your product,'" Allard said.

Competition is stiff in the world of beauty.

Aside from big name companies such as L'Oréal Inc. and Johnson & Johnson's Neutrogena Corp., closer rivals include Ultraswim, part of French drug maker Sanofi-Aventis SA, South Carolina's Poolhead Products Inc. and Malibu Wellness Inc. in Malibu.

Other Products

SBR has expanded beyond beauty products. In 2008, it came out with TriSlide, a skin lubricant spray athletes can use to prevent chafing and help get on wetsuits more easily.

A year later, the company started selling Foggle, a package of anti-fog goggle cleaning towelettes.

Products sell for \$10 to \$65.

Marketing is done internally. There are no paid athletes as spokespeople.

"I'd rather take the \$10,000 and put it elsewhere," Allard said. "I don't want to veer away from grassroots marketing."

She still puts samples in race bags for triathletes and gives away products during events. She'll hand out shampoos and other products outside showers for athletes and offer TriSlide and Foggle at pit stops.

Allard said she isn't looking to sell or bring on a backer anytime soon.

"It's just so exciting," she said. "I do it more for the competition—to see how big I can get without a lot of help."

The company has three full-time workers, including Allard.

A mom to four kids ages 11 to 20, Allard still coaches swimming when she can and competes when time allows. Everyone, including her husband, has helped with the business.

"I don't do this for the money," Allard said. "It's the level of creativity and seeing things go from being conceptualized to coming out with the product and building the brand."

Gomez is a former Business Journal editor and freelance writer based in Long Beach.