

The family behind the lint roller sheds part of its past to help its products stick with consumers.

BY JOANNE GORDON

Brushing Off Mom

NICHOLAS MCKAY JR. GREW UP HEARING THE LEGEND OF HELMAC'S FOUNDING: One evening in 1955 his parents were preparing to chaperone a high school dance. In an impromptu effort to get lint off his black suit, Nicholas McKay Sr. wrapped masking tape around a cardboard toilet paper roll and stuck that on a mangled wire hanger. In so doing, the electrical engineer fashioned what is believed to be the world's first lint roller. Soon after, he patented the "Lint Pic-Up" and started Helmac Products, named for his wife, Helen McKay.

Helen McKay helped guide the company to steady growth until her death 28 years later. For most of that time Helmac was a one-product show. McKay Jr., a brash Harvard Business School grad, joined Helmac in 1993 with ambitions for more. In his first few years he introduced 50 new products, including cedar clothing balls, stain remover and potpourri, the better to capitalize on the company's ties to retailers Kmart and Wal-Mart. From \$15 million when he joined, sales at the Alpharetta, Ga. outfit will climb to an estimated \$75 million this year.

The McKays' expansion push took on new urgency in January 1998, when giant 3M started selling a lint roller that competed with Helmac's \$3.50 (retail) version. Father and son turned to Landor Associates, the San Francisco-based brand consultant, to get ideas about how to further diversify Helmac's product mix. Landor's experts mentioned a more pressing problem: Helmac's clunky moniker. Not conducive to a good image, they said.

As proof, Landor—the same company that suggested Philip Morris become Altria—trotted out a survey in which consumers were asked to say what Helmac meant to them. Upon hearing the name, 11% associated it with mayonnaise, 12% with helmets and, worst of all for the conservative McKay family, 9% with fire and brimstone. "I was hurt," says McKay Jr., who became chief executive in 1997. "The connection with hell had never occurred to me."

Wasn't it time for a slicker name? It was, but the family agonized over the decision. Jettison "Helmac"? "The mere mention of changing it used to create such a stern expression on Helen's face that it would set even me on my heels," confides Larry McKay, Helen's nephew and a company vice president.

In time even the company's founder couldn't dismiss the findings. As part of earning its \$500,000 fee, Landor came up with the name Evercare and established that consumers associate this appellation with hygiene and cleaning supplies. (Only 7% think of the rock band or the cheap liquor Everclear.) McKay Sr. consented to the name switch, first on the product line in 1999, only last month for the corporation.

"Even when we struggled, we were always a family first," sighs McKay Sr. "It saddens me to see the name Helmac disappear."

