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Neat Idea Turned into Local Global Business

By Sophie Braccini



Marylee Guinon holding a GlitzSee light. Photo Sophie Braccini

You would never guess that Marylee Guinon needs help finding her lipstick or her keys at the bottom of her purse. The sporty Lafayette resident is an engineer, organized and in charge. But like many women, she carries a feminine purse that's almost a portable office.

"Our professional, personal and family lives are all in there, so, of course, it is quite full," she says. Being an engineer, and a practical one at that, Guinon wanted a better solution than having to dump the entire purse on a parking lot to find the keys that were hidden at the bottom. "There are flashlights for purses," she says, "but then you can't find it. I wanted to do a little something for women, to make our lives easier." That's how GlitzSee was designed: a small motion-activated light that would be bright enough to illuminate the inside of a purse, and look cute, too.

GlitzSee is the first product ever created and sold by Guinon. An environmental engineer by profession, she worked for years in Europe on the introduction of great sequoias in Nordic forests, became a creek restoration specialist back in the Bay Area, and is now an environmental officer for the BART extension from Fremont to San Jose. She is also a practical woman who put herself through college buying non-working cars, repairing and reselling them. "In my family we learn to make things," she says,

adding that her children, now college students, are the same. So she didn't shy away from taking an idea from start to finish.

"I probably wouldn't have done it without the help of my friend Larry Waide who knows how to manage production internationally," she adds.

Her first step was to create the device to specs, and finding those with electronic engineering skills to help. "My first enquiry was with the UC Berkeley Department of Engineering, but in spite of advertising my project and talking to professors I couldn't find anyone interested," she says with a tinge of regret in her voice. She also contacted a local engineering firm but their approach was not what she was looking for. "I like an iterative process, you try something, test it, modify and start again," she says. To find a team that would work with her rather than giving a finished product on the first run, she had to go overseas, to China. The result is a small unit that's motion-activated, but does not react when it is swung.

"There were a lot of different aspects to decide, the size had to fit in the palm, the weight had to be light but with some substance, and the shape had to be attractive," she says. Guinon also worked with local focus groups of different ages. "What surprised me is that no one had an interest in adding the possibility of changing the battery," she says. But she wanted an object that would be very hard to open, since, in fact, the usage is quite diverse.

"I gave one to a Lafayette friend of mine and his granddaughter took it to play," she says. "She wanted it as a night light, and at some point he saw her trying to bite on it!" So Guinon forgot the reusability and has the little units sealed.

Once the design was finalized, production had to be organized. "We chose to produce in China for cost," she says. The first attempt looked too much like junk, so Guinon chose another company that also manufactures medical equipment. "The quality is much better," she says.

The last, but not least, aspect of the business Guinon had to learn was distribution. "The best way for us to distribute is through gift shops," says Guinon. The big trade shows are in Dallas and Atlanta. "When I went there it was a completely different experience," she adds. "In my other profession, I'm often the only woman in the room. At the trade shows, it's mostly women." In California, Guinon works with very successful groups of sales people.

GlitzSee took seven months to be conceived and has been on the market for a year. For now Guinon continues to operate the company from her garage and has hired one person to help with logistics. "We also sell on the Internet, but we have to be careful to price it at a level that does not compete with our shops' distribution network." In Lamorinda, GlitzSee can be purchased at Orchard Nursery.

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