



Waterproof: Tracy Bialek with various designs of her shower timer. Picture: MARK SMITH

Making waves through Ripple

SOON after the worst floods that parts of Melbourne had seen in 100 years, Tracy Bialek launched a business designed to save water.

The Collingwood sculptor turned inventor last year received a large payout from an insurance company after her car was so badly damaged in the deluge, it was a write-off.

But instead of replacing her vehicle, Ms Bialek used the cash to start up Ripple Products, an enterprise she had been planning for a number of years.

"I thought 'how often in life do you end up with a lump sum that size?'," she said.

The drought had finally broken for her enterprise and Ms Bialek used the \$12,000 windfall entirely for inventory.

She had designed a waterproof four-minute shower timer shaped like an hourglass that attached to the wall with suction caps.

The day after she cold-called Bunnings with her prototype, Ms Bialek received a request from the hardware chain for a formal presentation.

After making some modifications to her packaging and price point, the retailer placed its first order.

In the past 12 months, Ripple Products has supplied Bunnings with 20,000 units.

Ms Bialek attributes the success of her pitch partly to being in the right place at the right time.

The chain's buyers had planned for some time to add a water-saving device to their range of bathroom accessories.

But the main reason Ms Bialek believes she was able to sign on with Bunnings so effortlessly was because she had designed a product she knew fitted the hardware store's offer.

Women in Business



"I did quite a bit of research and knew that their bathroom accessories were either white or chrome," she said. "I made a point of understanding their market and I knew what they wanted before I designed the shower timer."

Since then, Ripple Products has launched acrylic shower timers in decorative shapes, a pop-up bucket to catch the shower's initial cold water and colourful digital shower timers that will go on the market next month.

The programmable digital timer comes with an alarm and a real-time clock, and will be distributed through department stores and gift shops.

"My goal is to make people think about the water every time they turn on a tap," she said, adding that one day she would like to create a device for all household taps to remind people they need to use water responsibly.

"It might be a talking tap or something that beeps."

She is confident that Australian consumers will one day warm to the idea of appliances that keep track of wasteful habits.

In fact, confidence is something Ms Bialek appears to have by the bucket load.

How else could she have travelled to China on her own and convinced a non-English-speaking mass manufacturer to

make a few thousand units of an unusual product, using only her sign language and some sketches?

"Negotiating in China was difficult," she said. "Negotiating the traffic was hard enough, but finding the right factories and then identifying the right person to speak to and winning their trust was a challenge."

Ms Bialek says, for a foreigner, the key to winning the trust of a high-volume Chinese manufacturer is to not take anything for granted.

"You have to acknowledge their contribution, especially when they deliver early or on time, and to communicate with them every day, and to be thankful for the processes that do exist."

She did, however, have some insight into doing business in Asia, thanks to her previous job as a product developer for a homeware retailer and a merchandise buyer for an online gift business.

Before that, Ms Bialek was a sculptor, having graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1994.

"It is difficult to sustain yourself as an artist. There is a certain vulnerability about it and it is a very competitive field."

So Ms Bialek reinvented her "passion for making things" and switched from sculpting esoteric works of art to creating practical consumer goods.

She says she comes from a long line of creative beings who use their talent in practical ways — citing her interior designer mother, Estelle, and her uncle, Michael Bialek, who is one of the architects behind the Commonwealth Games athletes village in Parkville.

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