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HELPING HAND

Augusta inventor gets a grip on success with the **BAGGLER**



Mark Eichenbaum (above) holds his ergonomic invention, the Bagglers, at his production facility in Springvale on Monday. The Bagglers (top and below) is designed to make carrying multiple bags easier.

BY KRISTEN ANDRESEN
OF THE NEWS STAFF

Marilyn Fuller goes grocery shopping once a month. She ends up with a heavy load of groceries, and because she has osteoporosis, her back can't bear the strain of lifting paper bags — so she chooses plastic instead.

But plastic isn't much better for Fuller, 71, of West Gardiner. When she carries 10 to 12 bags of food and drinks, the handles cut into her arthritic fingers.

"I would just bite the bullet, get it over with and take a Tylenol afterward," Fuller said.

That is, until she got her hands on the Bagglers.

The brainchild of Mark Eichenbaum of Augusta, the Bagglers consists of three plastic hooks attached to a soft rubber grip. The hooks are intended for

grocery bag handles, and each holds a maximum of 18 pounds.

Eichenbaum, 49, is a native New Yorker who has lived in Maine for almost two decades. A father of five who also does shopping for his elderly grandmother, he saw the Bagglers as a simple solution to a common problem.

"The bags are a nuisance because there are so many handles to manage, and I thought there's got to be a better way," Eichenbaum said Monday during the drive from Augusta to Springvale, where the Bagglers is manufactured. "So I sat down and drew a picture of this handle."

On New Year's Day 2006, he resolved to turn that drawing into a tangible product. After working with friends, neighbors, students and lawyers, he had a prototype by June. He brought his son-in-law, George Silver of Lowell, Mass., into the business as a shipping expert. In September, his Web site

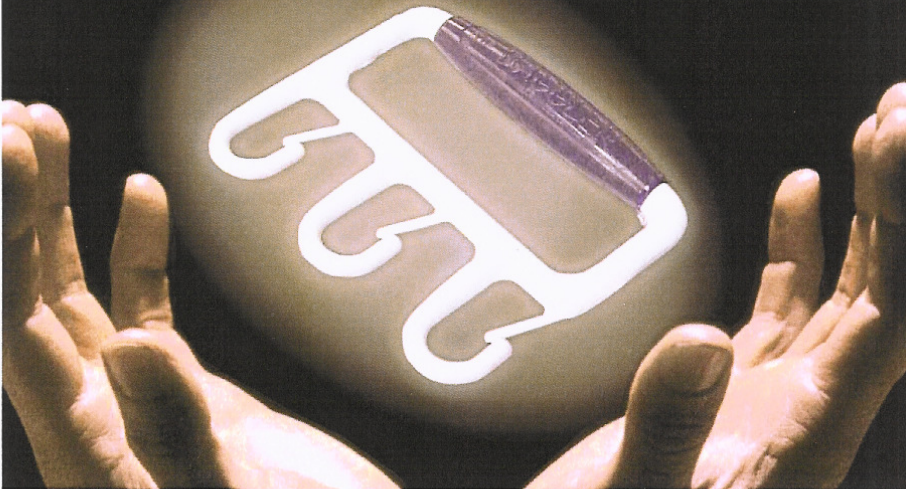
was operating, and by December, the Bagglers had taken on a life of its own. He has sold more than 6,000 Bagglers thus far, and he now has sales representatives throughout New England as well as Michigan, Florida, Iowa, New Brunswick, Texas, Arkansas and Israel.

"There's almost like a cult of people who are becoming Bagglertized," Eichenbaum said, laughing.

Eichenbaum's passion for his invention is obvious and contagious. He's a salesman by trade and by nature — he has worked at Blouin Motors for 16 years — and he believes in the Bagglers.

"I'm not a marketing genius, but I think the product speaks for itself," he said. "If the Bagglers wasn't good, I don't think anyone would buy it, but people buy it because it makes it easy to carry plastic shopping bags, and those

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Bagglers

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Gary Gagnon, who owns G&G Products in Springvale, said Eichenbaum's enthusiasm is telling. Gagnon's company manufactures the Bagglers as well as toys for Planet Dog, among other Maine-based businesses.

"Sometimes it's the people themselves — I can tell if they have the drive to make it work," Gagnon said. "[If they don't], it's not that I can't make a product for them, because I can, but if they don't do anything with it, it'll just sit there and die."

That won't happen if Robert Lawson of Camden has anything to say about it. When Lawson first saw the Bagglers, he thought it was unique, but that was about the

extent of it. His father-in-law plays golf with Eichenbaum, and he had given Lawson's wife one to try.

"I thought it was interesting, but my wife kept bugging me," Lawson said. "Now she keeps one in her purse and keeps two in her car."

Lawson is a sales and marketing consultant who has worked for companies such as Black & Decker. After feeling out the market and sending Bagglers samples to his national contacts, some of whom work for Fortune 500 companies, the response was overwhelming.

"I said, 'Guys, take this out and force yourself to use it,' — 85 percent of the feedback was, 'This is the greatest product. Where do I get it?'"

At that point, Lawson decided to come on board as the Bagglers' organizational manager, and he now is working to streamline

packaging and market the Bagglers to larger corporations. He envisions companies such as Staples imprinting their logo on a custom-colored handle and selling Bagglers at the checkout.

"Grocery is certainly a big driver, but now, why else would I use it?" Lawson asked. "When I'm hauling stuff out to my boat, from the mall, when I'm carrying stuff to a picnic, to the beach, there's a lot more than I initially thought of."

Lawson sees companies buying personalized Bagglers in bulk to hand out at trade shows, instead of pens or magnets. Eichenbaum wants to market them as a student fundraiser, customized with a school's colors on the grip, as an alternative to gift wrap and candy bars. One Bagglers customer has his own creative idea: He plans to hook his small dogs' leashes to it and walk them all at once.

As for Marilyn Fuller, she's content to use the Bagglers just for grocery shopping. She loves the fact that the hooks hold the bags in place, so when she sets them down, they stay in one place. And though it's helpful for shoppers with arthritis, she said people who have healthy hands appreciate the Bagglers' convenience.

"I bought 10 just before Christmas and gave them to friends and family," Fuller said. "They love it. Even my niece. She doesn't have a problem with arthritis or anything, but she loves it because she can carry more bags."

And isn't that what every shopper wants?

The Bagglers is available at Tozier's in Bucksport, Brewer and Searsport, along with several Central Maine locations. For information or to order a Bagglers, visit www.thebagglers.com or call 441-4953.