

## Staying connected

### Cornelius entrepreneur turns frustrating problem into new invention

#### Business

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Necessity may be the mother of invention, but frustration helps, too. Had he not become annoyed at his power cords constantly coming unplugged from wall outlets, a Cornelius man never would have invented a new product that is winning interest among hardware retailers.

Mike Schutte, president and owner of StayConnect, says the idea for his electrical outlet cover popped into his head about three years ago, after he was using his leaf blower and – yet again – inadvertently yanked the cord from the socket. “I’m tired of this,” Schutte thought. Accidental unpluggings, he says, had been an issue “since my first house 15 years ago.”

Area hardware stores didn’t have anything that would keep a cord plugged into the wall, so Schutte diagrammed something that he thought might work, then fashioned a crude prototype by carving a makeshift hook out of an existing outlet cover. Wrapping the cord around the back of the cover and through the hook kept the cord level and the plug connected.

“It’s peace of mind,” he says. “I couldn’t believe there wasn’t anything out there.”

A marketing manager for a vending machine company, Schutte, 39, started quietly showing his prototype to friends. One pointed him to Richard Turner, who owns AxiomID, an engineering and design company based at his home. Turner, 50, says he has designed products ranging from medical devices to laptop computers, and he was intrigued by Schutte’s concept.

As Turner started working on a design, Schutte dug into his pockets. So far, he says, StayConnect is entirely privately funded, with Schutte investing close to \$40,000 of his own money. Most came from savings, but he also sold his 22-foot-long speedboat this spring. “I’m optimistic I’m going to buy another one,” he says. “A bigger one,” Turner adds.

After incorporating his company last August and applying for a trademark for



Mike Schutte of Cornelius invented StayConnect outlet covers.



Turner

StayConnect, Schutte targeted the 2009 National Hardware Show, which was early May in Las Vegas. Schutte and Turner headed west with StayConnect marketing director David Gibboney and Schutte's wife, Tracey – also the company's operations director – and 7-year-old daughter, Victoria.

The goal was to meet with hardware retailers and get early feedback on the StayConnect outlet cover, including color. "There's no point in making 100 bronzes and finding out nobody likes them," Turner says.

The team met with representatives of True Value Co., Ace Hardware, Sears Holdings and Orgill, a distribution company, Schutte says. Those talks led to a second meeting scheduled with Sears, he says, as well as plans to attend an Ace Hardware convention this fall in Atlanta. Schutte also learned about other opportunities, such as allowing other companies to package the StayConnect outlet cover under their name, providing immediate access to thousands of accounts across the U.S.

There also is interest right in his backyard. Pat Lynch, manager of Ace Hardware and Garden Center in Cornelius, said Schutte first mentioned StayConnect "when it was all just pencil and paper." Lynch thinks people will buy the outlet cover because plugs coming loose from outlets is so common.

"From the get-go, it's been something we were interested in," Lynch says. "It was an inexpensive, ingenious idea."

Lynch says he plans to buy a few dozen covers at first and display them near the cash registers as soon as this month. He also wants to connect Schutte to buyers at Ace Hardware headquarters in Chicago – dialogue that could lead to StayConnect being sent to Ace stores nationwide.

After a couple of years of planning, all of the recent activity now has Schutte thinking about quitting his day job and focusing on StayConnect full-time. The company recently started selling its first outlet cover for \$9.99 on its Web site, and Schutte and Turner don't hesitate to speculate on the sales ceiling. "There isn't one," Turner says.

"That's what we're excited about," Schutte says. "Everyone uses electricity."

#### **More Info**

[www.stayconnect.com](http://www.stayconnect.com)



StayConnect: An outlet cover that keeps electrical plugs plugged into the outlet.