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# Reminders simplify dealing with diabetes

A daughter's diabetes inspired a thriving business selling products that help others to cope with the disease's many requirements.

Dick Youngblood, Star Tribune  
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When their 7-year-old daughter, Maya, was found to have Type I diabetes late in 2002, Doug and Lisa Powell were confronted with a bewildering array of cautions, advisories and instructions about how to deal with the disease.

There were directions regarding nutrition, blood testing and insulin dosages; descriptions of the symptoms and treatment of low and high blood sugar; instructions about critical care and emergency responses, and daily schedules for meals, blood-testing and insulin injections.

"The stack was 4 or 5 inches thick," Lisa Powell said. "We were terrified; we had the feeling we had to know it all to keep Maya alive, but it seemed like there was no way to absorb it all." That was just part of the challenge, she said: "We also had to teach Maya [now 11] to understand it all."

The Powells resolved the problem, as Doug Powell put it, by "drastically simplifying" the mountain of information. Using their 15-year background as owners of a graphic-design studio, they created a system of colorful flash cards, refrigerator magnets and other shortcuts to help them keep track of the most crucial details.

That done, they proceeded to transform their system into a thriving

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Minneapolis company called HealthSimple, which grossed \$100,000 in 2005, mainly through online sales through three websites. Sales last year were up 42 percent from \$70,000 in 2004.

And now, with several manufacturers of insulin and blood-testing equipment having invited them to submit sales proposals, the Powells figure revenue will approach \$1 million this year. They also are in discussions with insurance and medical-device companies.

Not bad, considering that they've invested only about \$100,000 from savings and debt and already broke even in 2005. Their graphic design business, Schwartz Powell Design, helps keep food -- nutritious food, mind you -- on the table.

The company's offerings have drawn plaudits from professionals in the field: "I believe HealthSimple products will be invaluable for the millions of adults and children living with diabetes," said John Fedor, book publishing director for the American Diabetes Association.

Inspiration for the enterprise came in 2003, when Lisa took some of the shortcut tools to a meeting of a diabetes support group to which she belonged. The enthusiastic response persuaded the Powells that they had a viable business on their hands.

They spent six months developing products and designing websites before launching the business early in 2004. The result was a line of six products, which sell for \$64 in a full starter kit. Included:

- Decks of 3-by-5-inch "FlashCarbs," which show colored pictures and detail carbohydrate content and other nutritional information for commonly eaten foods ranging from pizza and spaghetti to rice and potatoes to bagels and taco shells, not to mention lollipops, peanuts and ketchup. A deck of 50 cards alone costs \$20.
- A corresponding set of 1½-by-2-inch refrigerator magnets offers the same information, and also sells for \$20 in a stand-alone package.
- Care Plan Worksheets for teachers, babysitters and other caregivers, summarizing emergency reaction information, insulin dosage instructions and similar data. Cost: \$10 for a book of 25 sheets.
- Pocket-sized Post-it Notes for calculating carbohydrates and insulin dosages, and books of carbohydrate-count stickers for labeling leftovers. Books of 200 sell for \$12.
- Checkbook-size logbooks to track daily blood glucose levels, carbohydrate intake and insulin dosages. A year's supply costs \$40.

The result is a unique entry in the field, said Jeff Hitchcock, founder

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of Children With Diabetes, a diabetes information and support website at [www.childrenwithdiabetes.com](http://www.childrenwithdiabetes.com).

"A lot of nutritional 'edutainment' products exist that were developed by nutritionists and other health care professionals," Hitchcock said. "What separates [the Powells'] products is exceptional design that doesn't sacrifice sound science. They help make learning about nutrition ... amusing and fun."

The Powells started out selling primarily online, helped by the American Diabetes Association's decision to sell their products off its own website. The association partnership has generated about 25 percent of the company's sales.

With the online business humming, the Powells are focusing on the more remunerative corporate market, offering potential customers in the pharmaceutical, medical-device and other health care industries graphic products customized with their logos and marketing information.

"Based on the scale of the proposals we've got out there, even a moderate response would push sales toward the million-dollar mark," Doug Powell said.

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