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Shouldn't Have Had That Second Piece

By Brendan I Koerner

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A good advertising slogan sticks in the mind like the multiplication tables. Maxwell House, as virtually everyone knows, is "good to the last drop"; Nike implores you to "just do it"; and Jolt Cola has "all the sugar, twice the caffeine."

The last aphorism doesn't ring a bell? Then you probably weren't a preteen when Jolt was introduced in 1986. The jitters-inducing soft drink was briefly a junior-high-school fad before maturing into a niche brand, popular among computer nerds. Yet nostalgia for Jolt runs deep in the under-35 set, as Kevin Gass and Laurence Molloy discovered. When the entrepreneurs surveyed 1,000 young consumers in 2000, they found that 80 percent still knew the Jolt slogan by heart. "That was, like, the light-bulb flash over our heads," said Mr. Gass. "At that point, we came up with putting Jolt in a gum."

Jolt Gum, like its cola counterpart, provides a speedy kick -- two tablets contain the caffeine equivalent of a cup of coffee. At 12 pieces per \$1.49 pack, there are few cheaper ways to catch a caffeine buzz, said Mr. Gass, who founded GumRunners L.L.C. with Mr. Molloy to develop and market Jolt Gum.

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The concept is simple enough, but the product's voyage from concept to shelf took far longer than expected. GumRunners first had to obtain a license from the maker of Jolt Cola, Wet Planet Beverages in Rochester. Mr. Gass and Mr. Molloy, both former marketing executives at Colgate-Palmolive, pitched the gum as yet another way to exploit Jolt's cachet among consumers who hit puberty in the Reagan era. The idea dovetailed with Wet Planet's recent brand-building tactic of placing the Jolt logo on everything from key chains to thong underwear.

License in hand, GumRunners had to formulate a gum that energized chewers but didn't taste like potting soil. Pure caffeine has an intolerably bitter flavor, one that the company had a tricky time masking. "We went through iteration after iteration," said Mr. Gass, who estimated that GumRunners produced four tons worth of test pieces. "It took us two years to get the product ready to go."

Jolt Gum might have still been on the drawing board without the aid of Mauricio Bobadilla, the food scientist who finally perfected the six-sweetener blend, featuring everything from dextrose to aspartame. Mr. Gass compares Mr. Bobadilla's work to that done by acoustic engineers, who use inverse sound waves to block out noise. At GumRunners headquarters in Hackensack, N.J., Mr. Bobadilla is referred to simply as MM -- "Magic Man."

The gum spent most of 2003 in test markets in New England and Oklahoma before going nationwide last January. It is now available in about 10,000 stores. GumRunners hopes the gum will be popular among cyclists and joggers looking for a boost mid-workout, but who probably don't want to pause for a hot latte.

Jolt Gum has attracted plenty of attention with a catchy slogan of its own -- "Two More, Do More." It has also drawn unwanted notice from lawyers for the Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company in Chicago. They have filed suit against GumRunners, alleging that Jolt Gum infringes on a 2002 Wrigley patent, involving a caffeinated gum that was never brought to market. (Wrigley once sold another caffeinated gum called Stay Alert, but it's no longer on the market.) The suit specifically targets Jolt Gum's coating, which contains a sweetener called sucralose.

Mr. Gass declined to comment on the suit, preferring to trumpet the Department of Defense's decision to include Jolt Gum in an experimental line of ready-to-eat meals. Soldiers may need a caffeine boost, but they can also do without one of coffee's main side effects. Combat is no time for a bathroom break.