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With Be Food Smart, Santa Barbara brother and sister team moves beyond labels to encourage healthier choices

By JEREMY NISEN -- JAN. 14, 2011

January is typically when legions of people devote themselves (often temporarily) to eating healthier in the new year.

However, being smart about eating healthy goes beyond portion control.

One local entrepreneur, Dina Clapinski, believes that reading ingredient labels, as to know what you are putting in your body, is critical.

She and her brother, Jonas Dalidd, founded Be Food Smart (befoodsmart.com), to encourage this and other healthier habits.

"Just look at the label," is Clapinski's impassioned refrain.

"Just read it. It's shocking how many people never look at ingredient labels."

Be Food Smart, which the siblings launched in March 2010, provides a searchable, ever-growing database of strange-sounding ingredients. Befoodsmart.com displays not only an explanation of what the ingredient is, but offers a letter grade on the relative merits of consuming it.

Clapinski, 33, and Dalidd, 31, hope to help steer consumers away from dubious additives, chemicals, and preservatives, and make smarter choices. In addition to the database, the site is frequently updated with original content: healthy recipes, analysis of food safety and regulation issues, and more in-depth spotlights on select listing from the ingredient database.

Sibling Corroboratory

Clapinski and Dalidd grew up in Ojai in what Clapinski calls a very health-conscious household. She recalls, for example, being allowed to pick out a breakfast cereal at the grocery store with the caveat that it couldn't have sugar. Accordingly, they found themselves selecting cereals such as puffed rice and puffed corn . . . and got into the habit of label reading.

In February of last year, Clapinski and Dalidd began brainstorming.

Both were in periods of career transition. Clapinski, HR director at BargainNetwork, was about to be laid off in March 2010, when that company's Santa Barbara operations would be shuttered. Dalidd, with a background in aerospace engineering, had been working for the same company for nearly a decade and was ready for a change.



Dina Clapinski and her brother Jonas Dalidd started Be Food Smart to help people make healthier food choices.
Daily Sound/Victor Maccharoli

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However, Clapinski finds some advantage to being located in Santa Barbara. That the city's populace is generally health-conscious means that her ideal audience is right here, which is excellent for bouncing ideas off of friends, and taking the pulse of what a Be Food Smart reader would like to see.

Dalidd, who lives in Alisa Viejo, takes care of the behind-the-scenes Web implementation, a challenge he tackled despite only having dabbled in Web design previously.

"The learning curve was steep, but getting good books on Web design—HTML, CSS, PHP—and reading them cover to cover really helped me start with a good foundation," he said. "Having the luxury of making our own deadlines really helped to ensure things were done right and gave me the time to learn," he added. "I did get some help from various friends on some of the more complicated database aspects of the Web site, but besides that I was able to tackle the rest on my own."

Both Clapinski and Jonas Dalidd believe that their skill sets have proven complementary and have helped to forge a stronger partnership.

"Looking back at what we've done to this point, I find it very interesting to realize my sister and I make very good business partners, which I think is critical for a business to succeed," Dalidd said.

Building a Business

It's easy to see how this is a useful tool and hub of health-related information. What's less obvious is how a Web-based venture supplying content for free can be a viable entrepreneurial venture. After all, the Web is rife with content providers, many of whom make no secret of the daunting challenge of turning eyeballs into dollars (and, indeed, attracting those page views in the first place). But the team behind Be Food Smart, which recently came out of Beta, is both focused on a realistic goal and fairly pragmatic about how far they've come and where they are going.

"I think in the short term we really want to ramp up our content," said Dalidd. "The means expanding our database and doing more frequent blog posts. We want to create a place where people can go to learn about not only the countless additives in food, but also the latest news and trends regarding food."

The strategy has been working. Clapinski's efforts in providing content have proven successful enough that the blog portion of the site--where she posts her articles--are the largest draw.

"We're definitely seeing a big climb," said Clapinski, referring to traffic levels in December 2010 and month-to-date January 2011. "We'd been getting about 2,000 visitors per month, and now we're closer to 3,000."

"We still have a long way to go," Dalidd admitted, "but just getting the technical aspects of the website up and running along with the searchable database of additives is a great accomplishment at this point—12–18 months down the line, success will be primarily determined by the number of people visiting us."

Ultimately, Clapinski says that about 20,000-to-30,000 monthly visitors is the key for the site to achieving viability.

Those numbers will generate more ad revenue and increase the probably of readers clicking on Amazon affiliate links (links to products related to Be Food Smart articles, where the site will get a percentage of the sale if a user clicks through and purchases).

Those are also the levels at which Clapinski believes the business can approach companies for direct advertisement opportunities, rather than making due with ad servers.

Clapinski, however, is clear that her goals for the site go beyond generating revenue.

"We're both just super passionate about spreading the word," she said. "Quite frankly, if this doesn't amount to anything, it'll be okay, because all that content will be up on the Web and it will be a wonderful resource for people."

For more information, check out befoodsmart.com on the Web and through its [Facebook](#) page.

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