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## Here's to your Health - and your Wealth

### Online sales model allows users to profit from rain forest elixir

**P**LANO - You can't buy Craig Keeland's elixir unless you know an existing user.

No, we're not talking illicit drugs here. But, the 51-year-old founder and chief executive of ViaVienté Ltd. has set up an unusual sales machine for his antioxidant health drink.

It combines viral marketing with a virtual sales force.

You have to order ViaVienté online and use the name of an existing customer, who makes a commission when you buy.

If you like the product and want to make some money, too, sign up as a sales agent for free. For every three-bottle, \$130 order you bring in, you get \$25. You don't buy or hold inventory - it's shipped from the company's headquarters in Plano.

The target market is baby boomers who hate sagging skin and chronic aches and pains.

ViaVienté has nearly 40,000 registered customers. Of those, about 12,000 have become Internet "pushers." Its top three salespeople make \$41,800 a month, according to statistics published on its website. And 300 make between \$3,500 and \$18,000 a month.

Take-home for the multitudes selling as a sideline runs between \$115 and

\$495 a month, Mr. Keeland says. "We're looking for the masses who want to make a little bit of money."

So far, Mr. Keeland says, the system works just dandy.

Sales of ViaVienté, a name Mr. Keeland made up to project "Alive With Youth," have gone from zero in July 2003 to an anticipated \$36 million this year, says ViaVienté's majority shareholder, adding that profit should be about \$3 million.

Mr. Keeland pays himself an annual salary of \$200,000. And since he owns 70 percent of the private company, he made an additional \$560,000 in profits last year - which was mostly reinvested in the company.

But this was no overnight miracle. It took Mr. Keeland more than 12 years and \$5 million in R&D to come up with an antioxidant fruit purée that doesn't make people gag.

A key financial backer throughout this quest has been Tom Marquez, Ross Perot's first employee and salesman extraordinaire at Electronic Data Systems Corp.

"I wouldn't touch it if I didn't believe in it," says Mr. Marquez, who's also the largest shareholder and a Director of Carrington Laboratories.

***"There are a lot of hucksters in the field. I really checked Craig out before I did this. I love what he's done with sales in a very short period."***

Tom Marquez, EDS

By Cheryl Hall, DMN Business Writer



Craig Keeland got the idea for ViaVienté from a *National Geographic* article on villagers in the Andes Mountains.



ViaVienté is a tonic made from mineral-rich water and rain forest fruits.

Above Photo By Juan Garcia, DMN Staff Photographer

# Drink developed with passion

## A slow start

Mr. Keeland graduated from Highland Park High School in 1973 - fourth from the bottom in a class of 357 students. "The only A's I had were in golf, business arithmetic, business law and typing."

At the urging of Willis Tate, then President of Southern Methodist University and an ardent golfer, Mr. Keeland went to the University of North Texas for a year, earned a B-plus average and transferred to SMU for his business degree.

After receiving his MBA from the Wharton School in 1979, Mr. Keeland returned to Dallas and became a fair-haired boy in personal banking, real estate and oil - until all of that fell into the tank. "I went from a \$4.5 million positive net worth to a negative \$6 [million] in a blink of an eye."

He spent the next five years working his way out of his financial jam.

In 1991, when he started to get a few lines around his eyes, Mr. Keeland launched his search for the proverbial fountain of youth, starting at the public library.

"I was convinced that genetics was the dominant force in aging, but that there were a lot of things that you could do to forestall it," he recalls.

He ran across a January 1973 cover story in National Geographic about villagers in the Andes Mountains deep in Ecuador who more often than not lived to be 100, weren't fat and didn't suffer from heart disease or cancer.

Turns out that water from this cool, mountainous region has abundant minerals and antioxidants, and produces plants rich in nutrients.

His idea was to use the rain forest's fruit as the base of an all-in-one health product.

He enlisted a "dream team" that included Richard Cutler, who was the principal gerontology research scientist for National Institute on Aging; Mark Pedersen, former

"But if you're a type-A personality, you're going to want more," says Mr. Keeland.

Dr. Cutler and Dr. Pedersen are paid consultants and minority shareholders in VíaVienté.

Dr. Cutler, an expert in antioxidants, aligned his reputation with Mr. Keeland because he was convinced that the Dallas businessman wouldn't cut corners.

"Craig wanted to do it right and capitalize on the fact that the product really worked, rather than faking it," says the fit 70-year-old Arizonan, who takes a swig each morning as insurance.

"Frankly, most people in the U.S. with good diets don't need extra antioxidants, but about 10 to 15 percent of the people do," Dr. Cutler says. "But it's difficult to know whether you do unless you do complex assays. So why not? This is the best product currently out there."

There are at least seven knock-offs that Mr. Keeland knows about.

"They don't have the access to the rain forest fruits and won't pay the money to get the quality," he says dismissively. "It's identical to Coca-Cola. Wal-Mart, Safeway and Kroger have their own colas but there's only one Coke."



Eric Rocha (left) and Alvin Stribling pack bottles of VíaVienté at the company's Plano warehouse.

director of product development for Nature's Sunshine Products Inc., and Linus Pauling, winner of Nobel Prizes in chemistry and peace, who died in 1994.

## Refining the taste

The first batches tasted "god-awful" and had to be put in capsules. It took 11 years to come up with a way to mask the pungent kick of the minerals.

Now it tastes like a full-bodied grape juice. The recommended daily dose is about a cocktail jigger's worth, so a bottle lasts about a month.

By Cheryl Hall, DMN Business Writer  
Juan Garcia, DMN Staff Photographer