

AT VELCRO MILL, THE IDEAS KEEP COMING

Special to the New York Times

July 12, 1987



See the article in its original context from
July 12, 1987, Section 1, Page 27 Buy Reprints

[VIEW ON TIMESMACHINE](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home
delivery and digital subscribers.

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

Every week Ted Krantz, president of Velcro U.S.A., and Richard Kuhl, the vice president, get calls and letters from people around the country who say they have the "ultimate Velcro idea."

But, Mr. Kuhl said, like the Velcro slippers that were to keep people from sliding across floors but would not work on carpets, or the "anti-pickpocket" wallet attachment, very few of them work out.

Nonetheless, the ideas keep coming to Velcro's American headquarters here and, despite the material's seeming universality, the company, facing increasing competition and declining profits, keeps listening.

Just as foreign competition did in the shoe and textile factories that were once the lifeblood of this city, foreign companies are now taking on Velcro, itself a subsidiary of a Netherlands company. Since its patent ran out in 1978, there has been an onslaught of 30 companies selling their own brands of hook-and-loop fasteners. Velcro has had to lower its price and find new markets.

So, while Velcro has become an integral part of items as diverse as hair rollers and heart valves, the company depends on exploiting an ever-widening number of uses for the material. Standard Equipment for Tank

As a result, Velcro is becoming widely used in a number of unexpected places, such as the military, which uses it in the M-1 tank, and the automotive industry, where American manufacturers are using it for a variety of interior functions. One manufacturer has even experimented with assembling an entire lightweight car using only Velcro to hold it together.

Velcro has also considered and rejected such suggestions as a Velcro-sealed cookie packages and a Velcro baseball bat grip.

But once in a while a little guy does get lucky.

Take the "Kippon" kit. Conceived by Lev Neymotin, a nuclear physicist from Long Island, it is intended to hold yarmulkes firmly in place with four strips of Velcro that grab hair but release gently.

Mr. Neymotin, who is usually occupied with the safety of nuclear reactors at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, said in a telephone interview that the product's name was a play on "keep on" and "kippah," the Hebrew word for yarmulke.

In an effort to make the product more ecumenical, Mr. Neymotin offered kits to Pope John Paul II and to John Cardinal O'Connor of New York, for help with any Catholic headgear problems. Both declined the samples. Athletic Application

Mr. Neymotin had better luck when he got in touch with the Hebrew Academy of Miami Beach.

At the school, which requires students to wear yarmulkes all the time, the problem of how to keep them on the basketball players had school officials baffled. "They were even going to have them put straps under their chins," said Mr. Neymotin. The Kippon solved the problem.

It should not be surprising that Velcro found unexpected everyday uses. The product itself was suggested by a certain fascination with the everyday.

Velcro was invented in 1948 by a Swiss engineer, George deMestral, who came home from a walk in the woods one day and was fascinated by how stubbornly some cockleburs stuck to his wool socks and his dog's coat.

Under a microscope he saw that the burrs' ends were actually tiny hooks that grabbed onto anything fuzzy. The hook-and-loop fastener was born. Its name was a combination of velvet and crochet, the French word for hook. Modern Age Looms

Now, 24 hours a day, five days a week, with a work force of 600, the Velcro looms, dyeing vats and other machines spin and loop, cut and coat, taking raw nylon yarn through 50 steps to become the finished product.

But the company's competitors continue to cut into Velcro's once-protected 100 percent market share.

While the company's sales rose from \$64 million in 1985 to \$72 million in 1986, it actually lost \$2.9 million in manufacturing in 1986, a drop in earnings of \$6.4 million.

Among its new products, Leon Kuiawa, market manager in Velcro's government services division, says the company has been working on a silent Velcro, spurred by complaints from the Army about the loud, scratchy rip it makes when soldiers unfasten jackets. This could be dangerous on secret missions when silence is essential, the Army says.

In the wake of the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, the company is also working on a nonflammable tape resistant to high temperatures for astronauts' clothing.

Mr. Kuiawa said he knows some uses are "controversial, and unpopular with some people." Velcro straps are used in Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Its nonflammable tape is used to enclose pipes with insulation blankets in nuclear power plants.

The company also supplies Velcro to the maker of a risque product called "Cathy's Cuffs," which Mr. Kuiawa termed "casual restraints."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 1, Page 27 of the National edition with the headline: AT VELCRO MILL, THE IDEAS KEEP COMING