



HOME BUSINESS: Carol Barge works out of her home office in San Clemente marketing a product, My Lacys, panties that come with built-in liners for women.

CHAS METIVIER, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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The 'panty lady'

Carol Barge was looking for a special undergarment. She couldn't find one. So she designed it herself.

By GREG HARDESTY
The Orange County Register

SAN CLEMENTE – Carol Barge stands outside the open door of her office in her elegant, ocean-view home.

"You're a brave soul," she says with a warm smile. "Welcome to my underwear lair!"

She laughs.

Barge, a 52-year-old mother of two grown children, has spent the past three years (and several hundred thousand dollars) painstakingly researching and perfecting a female undergarment she thinks has the potential to be huge seller.

She cracks a few jokes, then gets down to the serious business of talking about her online retail store, www.mylacys.com – definitely not a hangout for men, but an increasingly popular destination for women.

Barge – a former PTA mom and college graduate who has a resume that includes careers in sales training and real estate – was looking for a special panty but couldn't find one anywhere.

So, being the sensible, hyper-organized and opportunity-minded person she is, she did what countless entrepreneurs before her have done:

She designed the product herself.

"Now, I'm always asking women about their panties," Barge says with a laugh. "I'm the panty lady."

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There are about 85 million women in the United States over the age of 30, and many of them use disposable panty liners for extra protection and comfort – especially women who have had children.

The type of panty Barge wanted but couldn't find was one with a built-in liner that didn't make her feel like she was wearing a diaper.

"You know," she says, "the ones that you can hear yourself walk around in."

She was looking for an alternative to disposable panty liners, which tend to move around, add up to a lot of money, are a hassle to remember to wear and aren't exactly environmentally friendly.

There's underwear on the market for incontinent women, but Barge wanted to target healthy, active women like herself who experience minor problems with "unexpected panty moisture."

It's a delicate subject – not one that smoothly comes up at cocktail parties, for sure, and one with a high snicker factor among men. But it's a serious subject deserving of more attention, Barge feels.

"If we can talk openly about erectile dysfunction," she says, "then we can talk about female moisture concerns."

Unexpected panty moisture can happen when a woman coughs, sneezes or laughs. Active women also can feel uncomfortably wet when they perspire.

So Barge's fertile mind got to work: How could she create a comfortable, fashionable panty with the added benefit of a moisture liner that a woman could slip on and forget she was wearing?

The farm girl from Colorado got to work.

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"Progress, not perfection."

The slogan is on a plaque in Barge's home office.

She's always been a perfectionist.

"It's a blessing and a curse," she says, shutting a desk drawer that contains meticulously color-coded files in her office of moss-green walls, granite desktop and maple floor.

The middle child of seven, Barge grew up in Florence, Colo., a town of about 3,000 in the southern part of the state. Her grandparents are from Italy.

"How do you end up with Italians on a vegetable farm in Colorado?" Barge jokes.

She attended the University of Southern Colorado, where she majored in psychology and mental health.

Husband Bruce's job took the couple to Minnesota, where they spent 15 years and had Rachel, now 21, and Matthew, 20.

Between household and child-rearing duties, Barge enjoyed semi-full-time careers as a trainee for a consulting firm and as a sales trainer for a real estate company.

Her family relocated to San Clemente 10 years ago "for the weather," she says. Bruce Barge is a consultant

in human resources management.

Once her children were out of the house, Barge had more time to focus full-time on a career.

Little did she know that her new life as an entrepreneur would spring from her inability to find a decent pair of panties with liners sewn into the gusset.

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"Who would have thought you could have smart underwear?"

Barge asks the question, and as usual, she laughs.

Rather than crank out something quickly, she took a slow, research-driven approach to designing the perfect pair of panties to combat unexpected leakage.

She thought of a product name that would give a woman a sense of ownership and also sound feminine – hence myLacys, whose logo is the silhouette of a curvy woman, to represent women of all sizes and shapes.

Barge scoured the Internet and did a lot of research on fabrics that utilize nanotechnology in the treatments that are applied to them.

Living near Los Angeles, a hub of the garment industry, she found a pattern maker and had her sew up prototypes.

Barge found a cut-and-sew operation in Mexico to make the panties, which come in three styles: brief, thong and French (high on the thigh) cut.

Barge next did a lot of field research, turning to friends, family and colleagues to test and give their thoughts on her underwear. She tweaked the design based on their comments and criticism.

She then hired a garment consultant in Los Angeles who she worked with for a year to perfect the high-tech fabric.

Finally, she had the garments tested in a lab on the East Coast for their ability to absorb moisture on one side and not leak to the other. In some tests, synthetic urine was used.

In November, Barge filed for a patent that covers the configuration of the pad material and how it interacts with the fabric.

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The key to her panties, Barge says, is a fabric protector infused in the material that acts as a moisture barrier that can't be worn or washed off.

"I'm not making T-shirts," Barge says. "This is not a simple piece of apparel."

Sales of myLacys panties started on the Internet in March. The panties cost \$15 to \$20 each.

Barge launched a direct-marketing campaign and has hired a public-relations agency, but her business still is in its infancy.

She hopes to soon start selling myLacys through specialty catalogues such as Time for Me and As We

Change, and eventually through select retailers.

For now, fans such as Linda Jenkins, 60, of Cypress, buy myLacys panties on the Internet.

"I love the way they fit, the way they move with you, and the fact that you don't have any obvious panty lines," Jenkins said. "The fabric breathes better than anything else out there."

Wearing her myLacys, Barge is, well, just breathing easier.

"I have one less thing to worry about," she says.

Contact the writer: 949-553-2915 or ghardesty@ocregister.com For more information about the company, visit www.mylacys.com

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