

Here Comes the Sun

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By Sara C. Shoemaker

Sunlight Direct hopes its technology, inspired by ancient times, becomes light fixture

Just as the Egyptians would light the interior of gigantic edifices by refracting the sun's rays down elaborate mirrored passageways, so, too, is an Oak Ridge-based technology company bringing sunlight directly to the corporate world's most dimly lit places. Oak Ridge National Laboratory researcher and founder of 2004 startup Sunlight Direct, Duncan Earl and his team may have borrowed the notion from ancient times, yet the hybrid solar lighting system teeters on the cusp of being adopted by the masses.

Many studies have suggested that human productivity increases when indoor workers are exposed to natural sunlight, in contrast to common florescent lighting. Big-box retailers hope that piping sunlight into its stores will provoke a rise in consumer spending. Plus, the use of natural lighting can dramatically cut energy costs—at least in regions like the southwestern United States where the word “energy” often comes coupled with “crisis.” The hybrid system collects the sun's rays with a mirrored disc on a building's rooftop, filtering out the harmful rays and absorbing heat. The pure sunlight travels through plastic optical fibers that distribute the light—ranging in intensity as the sun rises and sets. On a cloudy day, the existing florescent bulbs take over.

The technology seems sound. Beta-testing sites have cropped up across the United States, including a Wal-Mart in Texas, a Staples store in New York, Braden's Lifestyles furniture store in Knoxville and the Siskin Children's Institute in Chattanooga. But the company is currently operating on debt, says president and CEO, John Morris. The system is still pricey, running about \$16,000 per 1,000 square feet. “We're hoping to cut that in half in two years,” Morris says. He needs more funding for research and development—something he says has been hard to come by regionally. “We have had a better response in California and Hawaii than we have in Tennessee,” he says, having presented at the Tennessee Valley Venture Forum last September. “The solar industry is not that big [here].”

Yet the Braden's store test site entertains plenty of interested prospects. “They have clients come in to see [the test site] about once every couple of weeks,” says store manager Nick Braden. “[The system is] expensive right now. I guess we could see a cost savings if we had it over the whole store.” Sunlight Direct will formally launch its system later this year. Maybe that will shed some light on the venture crowds. Feedback:

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In the News

Knoxville

Baptist Health System of East Tennessee hired Chicago-based Wellspring Partners to manage day-to-day operations of Baptist's four hospitals as the struggling health system continues to search for a new financial partner. The hospital's board of trustees hopes this move will bring stability and a renewed focus back to Baptist. Neither party provided additional details, but the Wellspring agreement is considered temporary. In related news, Premier Surgical Associates severed its ties with Baptist at the end of March, and Volunteer Radiation Oncology Group will also no longer have a presence at Baptist.

Protein Discovery announced a new service, Tissue Imaging By-the-Slice that reads and delivers tissue imaging MALDI mass spectrometry data from a customer-supplied tissue sample for just \$1,200. The announcement means a cost savings to those in scientific communities making it more accessible to researchers.

Provectus Pharmaceuticals received a U.S. patent pending notice that will allow the company to soon move forward with novel acne medications, including Pure-Stick, an invisible, solid acne treatment. Pure-Stick is the first in Provectus' over-the-counter products to receive this allowance to broaden its existing intellectual property portfolio, which includes a host of skin care medicines including cancer treatment.

In a licensing deal between Scripps Networks and V-me Media, a network for the Spanish-speaking public television audience, Food Network will provide two 30-minute original shows produced in Spanish to be aired on the 24-hour digital broadcast channel, V-me (pronounced veh-meh). Scripps new shows, plus Spanish language adaptation of some of its top-rated shows will also be shown to more than 28 million homes in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami and Houston.

Maryville

Casual dining restaurant company Ruby Tuesday opened a new franchise in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, which debuted in late November 2006. The store was developed as part of a franchise agreement with Marssana International Trading Co., who plans to add three more Ruby Tuesdays in the central and western provinces of Saudi Arabia.