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Apollo E-Cigs has its Home in Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



Robert Freeman, with the latest version of the Apollo e-cig Photo Sophie Braccini

If you've seen the recently released film, "The Tourist," you probably noticed Johnny Depp vaping an electronic cigarette. His character explains that he is not actually smoking a tobacco cigarette, but an e-cigarette, and that all he is releasing is water vapor. We will not be discussing product placement in movies in this article (nor do we endorse the smoking or vaping of anything), but our readers might be interested to learn that one of these companies, Apollo e-cigarettes, runs its American operation from Lafayette. We paid them a visit.

Electronic cigarettes have also been called e-cigs and vapor cigarettes. It is a small hand-held device that looks and performs like a tobacco cigarette. Its primary functions are to deliver nicotine while providing the physical experience of sucking up and releasing water vapor smoke. The e-cig does not contain tobacco, does not burn anything and is powered by a rechargeable lithium battery. When the user inhales, the heating element, the atomizer, automatically vaporizes some of the flavored liquid solution that's contained in the mouthpiece. The four levels of nicotine vary from very strong to non-existent (in the nicotine-free flavored options).

The product is controversial. In July 2009, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tested two brands of e-cigs and issued a press release discouraging the use of electronic cigarettes; while a review of the FDA study by scientific consulting firm Exponent, Inc., concluded that the FDA's study did not support the claims of potential adverse health effects from the use of electronic cigarettes.

Rick Lee is one of the founders of Apollo; he lives in Lafayette where he is raising his family. "I live in Lafayette and love Lafayette," he says, "so naturally we (the partners) chose Lafayette to rent our office. Lafayette is also a community that leads and stands out in living a healthier lifestyle. We believe personal vaporizers (e-cigs) are a better alternative than tobacco cigarettes. So our company should have a good fit in this community. We will also create job opportunities in the community."

Another of the founders was manufacturing personal vaporizers for about four years in China, where the Apollo e-cigs are presently made. He teamed up with Lee and decided to start up a new company in the US to build their own brand and directly service their own customers. "We are not only doing R&D, manufacturing, quality control, but also doing direct sales and marketing for the US market," says Lee, who believes that this business model allows them to better service the American market.

Apollo's manager, Robert Freeman, is the person you will speak to when you call the Lafayette office. A heavy smoker himself, the young man in his early thirties lives with his e-cig in his pocket. "This is not a device to quit smoking," he explains, "It delivers nicotine. But I have noticed many positive changes since I replaced my 1 1/2 packages a day with my e-cig." Freeman first noticed the return of his sense of smell. "I was in the check-out line at the grocery store when I suddenly picked up the smell of a customer a few people ahead of me, I couldn't believe I used to stink that way!" As a matter of fact, his office where he puffs on his e-cig does not smell of anything at all. Freeman says that his sense of taste is back and that he does not have that heavy feel when he takes his first breath when he wakes up. "E-cigs is my alternative to quitting and to smoking cigarettes," he says.

As the first contact with new customers Freeman says he makes sure not to sell to minors. If he has any doubts about an order he personally calls the customer and has a prepared series of questions to assess their real age. "It would break my heart to see kids picking up smoking with e-cigs," he says.

According to Lee and Freeman, most of Apollo's customers are over age 45 and have been smoking for years, they switch to e-cigs for economic and perceived health reason. For Freeman, the major benefit of the e-cigarette is that it does not contain the thousands of harmful chemicals that have been found in tobacco cigarettes. Recent studies seem to agree with that claim.

A study appeared on December 9, 2010, in the advance online publication of the Journal of Public Health Policy (www.palgrave-journals.com), by Zachary Cahn (Department of Political Science, University of California at Berkeley) and Michael Siegel (Department of Community Health Sciences, Boston University School of Public Health). "Few, if any, chemicals at levels detected in electronic cigarettes raise serious health concerns," the authors said. "Although the existing research does not warrant a conclusion that electronic cigarettes are safe in absolute terms and further clinical studies are needed to comprehensively assess the safety of electronic cigarettes, a preponderance of the available evidence shows them to be much safer than tobacco cigarettes and comparable in toxicity to conventional nicotine replacement products." They conclude that, "electronic cigarettes show tremendous

promise in the fight against tobacco-related morbidity and mortality."

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