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## Steam washers cleaning up

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Graham Lanktree

MONTREAL – Near the bustling intersection of St-Catherine and St-Denis, friends and business partners Brent Gray, 21, and Sébastien Dupéré, 23, supervise as jets of steam from their steam cleaner vaporize the fossilized wads of chewing gum littering the ground at their feet.

Neither young entrepreneur realized steam-cleaning gum could be such good business when they were thinking about starting their own company a little more than a year ago. But after watching a profile of New York City's Gum Busters on an episode of Discovery Channel's *Dirty Jobs*, they had an inkling.

North Americans chew roughly 50 million pieces of gum a day, and as anyone who lives in a big city knows, you can find the sticky goo everywhere; on sidewalks in front of busy storefronts, on escalators in malls and, frequently, on the soles of our shoes.

"We'd been leaning toward cleaning up graffiti, but there's so much competition," says Gray. "With a little more research we realized no one in Quebec was cleaning up gum like this."

Montreal's Les Degommeurs were born.

After pooling their money and purchasing a \$5,000 steam cleaner from Italian manufacturer Tecnovap, Gray and Dupéré started scrubbing gum outside businesses like McDonald's, the Sheraton hotel and Montreal's Trudeau airport.

They found other cleaning companies were removing gum using high-powered pressure washes or CO2 and chemical sprays that freeze or corrode the petroleum-based gum so it can be chiselled away manually.

These methods aren't efficient, Gray explains. "If you use CO2 on a carpet it rips it apart, and doesn't always remove the gum. Pressure washing destroys surfaces, shoots the gum everywhere and wastes gallons of water."

Steam cleaning, on the other hand, blasts a 160C stream of steam directly on the gum glob. Since chewing gum's synthetic rubber base melts at 115C, the steam vaporizes it without leaving a mark.

"Steam is environmentally friendly, we use completely biodegradable solvents and only one to two litres of water an hour, it's easy on surfaces, and the machine's vacuum nozzle sucks up all the particles."

Demand was so great they ordered another steam cleaner, and then another. By the end of last summer Les Degommeurs had pocketed \$170,000 from various contracts with Montreal businesses ranging from \$200 to \$3,000.

Now Les Degommeurs are the ones being filmed; this time for an episode of *Les Jobs de Bras*, Quebec's version of *Dirty Jobs*, and



Degommeurs crew, from left, includes Brent Gray, Pierre-Renaud Tremblay, Sébastien Dupéré and Brandon Henderson. Gray and Dupéré started the gum-removing venture by investing \$5,000 in a steam cleaner.

IAN BARRETT FOR THE TORONTO STAR

they've taken their business nationwide in only a year. Last September they received a call from a new steam cleaning start-up in Vancouver called Gum Fighters that wanted to buy a Tecnovap machine but couldn't find one in Canada. This got Gray and Dupéré thinking and by October they had sealed an exclusive agreement with Tecnovap to distribute the company's equipment in Canada.

"There are all sorts of applications for steam cleaning beyond just removing gum," says Gray. It can be used to clean and disinfect restaurant kitchens or industrial food processing plants, hospitals, greasy machinery, the upholstery in used cars, and the bottling done at breweries and vineyards.

"I can see how good the market is," adds Tremblay, "it's almost wide open."

The partners also incorporated to become Dupray Industries, offering steam cleaning and a range of steam cleaners.

"All the money we made from Degommeurs we put back into the business," says Dupéré.

"We have no loans and no debt. We're building ourselves on a very solid foundation."

In these times of listeria outbreaks and swine flu, steam may be the answer. Research published in the *Journal of Food Protection* shows some bacteria are developing resistance to traditional cleaning chemicals such as Peracetic acid. But bacteria can't adapt to a 160C jet of steam that can reach in and kill pathogens lodged in nooks and crannies.

Earlier this year Dupray joined forces with the Gum Fighters, who have become their partners and West coast distribution branch. Dupray has also opened a Toronto office staffed by an electrician who repairs steam machines for their clients and manages Les Degommeurs' cleaning contracts in the region.

There will be plenty of business to go around. A survey in the January issue of *Food Processing* magazine found that food safety ranked as the top priority among industry respondents and 51 per cent said they planned to buy new and improved sanitation equipment.

However, the current challenge is in convincing these businesses to buy into steam cleaning. Many breweries, for example, are skeptical about the technology.

"You're looking at an investment of about \$25,000 for an industrial steam cleaner, and for us that just doesn't make sense," says Simon Rollason, plant manager at Toronto craft brewer, Great Lakes Brewery.

But Gray and Dupéré are already changing minds. In March Dupray made its first sale and has since sold 15 steam cleaners.

"We've got another 20 in the pipeline for next month," says Dupéré. "There's a client in New York City who turned to us because he's dissatisfied with companies in the U.S."

"In the coming year I think we can reach every sector where this technology can be applied," says Tremblay.

Reflecting on the past year, Gray and Dupéré agree that picking up chewing gum is not the thing you'd think of when coming up with an idea for a successful business.

"But hey, that's the beauty of business," Tremblay added.