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"ZOWIE"

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Chicago inventor Laura Engel (left) shows off her BraBaby while Kieu Phan holds her BraBall. The competing products allow padded bras to hold their shape in washing machines.

Housewares show an all-out bra-w

2 firms compete for women's wash

BY CHERYL V. JACKSON
Business Reporter

Call it a bra fight. At least they're keeping it clean in the battle playing out at the International Home and Housewares Show at McCormick Place, with millions on the line for two small businesses banking on competing bra washing products.

Plastic ball-shaped devices — designed to help pricey padded bras hold their shapes when laundered in the washing machine — are hot. So is Austin, Texas, inventor Kieu Phan: She's steamed that a Chicago company has taken some of the thunder from her four-year-old BraBall invention.

Phan's Phantastic Innovations Inc. has a small booth at the show, which wraps up its three-day run today. Not far away is a larger booth of Chicago-based Angel Sales Inc., which launched a similar product, the BraBaby, at last year's show, and has since sold about 500,000 of the devices.

Both have patents

It's a testament to how such a show can make a product.

Phan, 36, a college student when she developed the BraBall, was working to sell her product — mostly online — when she learned of the com-



TOP: BraBall (\$25-\$30 each). LEFT: BraBaby (2 for \$20). BraBall accused its foe of "bullying" on prices.

petition. She's had it on the market for two years.

Chicago inventor Laura Engel, co-owner of Angel, said she was unaware of a similar product being marketed when she developed her BraBaby. Phan got a patent in June 2004. Engel got one in July 2006.

Engel said a friend encouraged her to pursue the idea in January 2005, she presented it in a catalog in August 2005, and "by March 2006, we knew it was an item and took it to the housewares show."

As a result, Linens-N-Things and some Bed Bath & Beyond stores began carrying the de-

vice; and OneCare Co., which licenses household product brands, is starting to sell the BraBaby under the Tide name.

The BraBall, \$25 to \$30 online (braball.com), is more than twice the price of the BraBaby (brababy.com), which retails for about \$20 for a two-pack.

That has buyers pressuring Phan for better deals, she said, alleging Engel uses cheaper materials and labor to produce the BraBaby.

"They've been bullying us to go down on prices," she said. "At that price I'll be out of money."

But at least the sales are up. By Monday afternoon, Phan was up to 50,000 orders for the BraBall. Meanwhile, Target and Bed Bath & Beyond had committed to full rollouts of the Angel's BraBaby.

cjackson@suntimes.com