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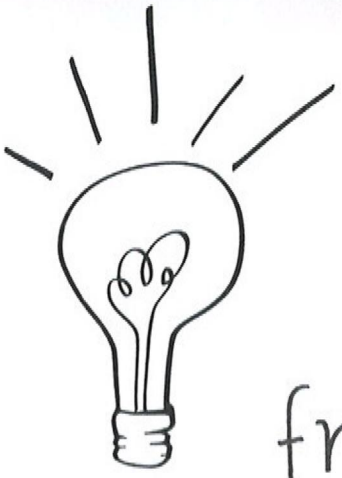
ISSUE 37
SPRING 2012



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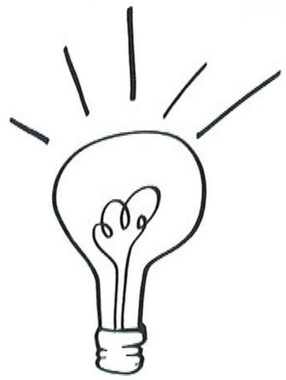
from Eureka!...



...to customer

You've had your one per cent of inspiration – now it's time for the ninety-nine per cent perspiration. Today's inventors need more than just bright ideas if their products are going to translate into profits. **Nick Green** looks at what it takes to turn a concept into a commercial reality.

Every schoolchild knows that Thomas Edison invented the lightbulb, and that Marconi invented radio. Of course, neither man invented either. But they are the names the world remembers, for one very important reason: they were the first to achieve success with these products on a commercial scale. It's a welcome reminder that, no matter what your new gizmo might be able to do, it can't really do it unless it reaches its target market.

You need to turn that lightbulb over your head into a lightbulb (or whatever it may be) in someone's shopping basket. That journey from concept to checkout can be long and arduous. Even if you've invented something as revolutionary as radio, and of course few do, then it may well be someone else who gets rich from it in the long run. It should be noted here that genuinely new products are incredibly rare; the vast majority of inventions are developments on initial concepts – which is why, more than a century after Edison, people are still inventing electric lights.

Alistair Swanwick, CEO of Innovate Design, is keen to point this out. 'The first thing to do, when you think you've come up with a new idea, is really quite obvious: do a web search and see if you can find something similar online. And the second thing to do, is don't despair if you find it! Discovering a similar product is by no means a death knell for your invention. In fact, it could be just the opposite.'

What's new?

Innovate Design is a company that helps inventors to develop their ideas into commercial products. Alistair cut his teeth with an engineering product design degree, while pitching many inventive ideas of his own, and in the course of both activities he acquired substantial knowledge about the overall process of developing and marketing new products.

An example of a virtual prototype

Through his company he now uses that knowledge and experience to support other creative entrepreneurs.

So what should you do if you find a very similar invention to your own already on sale? 'Your one doesn't have to be completely new,' Alistair emphasises. 'It just has to be different – preferably better, or cheaper, or in some way more saleable – than what is already out there. Remember, it's often the second or third variation on a new product that ends up making its inventor rich.'

A worldwide patent search will let you firmly establish whether or not you have something new to offer. You can use the Intellectual Property Office for this (espacenet.com) or engage a company such as Innovate Design (it can be better to employ professionals to do this, as they have more experience of searching on the relevant keywords, and will also search keywords in other languages so as to cover untranslated patents).

To establish the originality of your own invention, you must study all the claims made for prior art (i.e. any previous patents) in the same general field, to see how yours differs. The difference may be in terms of functionality, improved performance, or a cheaper manufacturing process, to give but a few examples. You are looking for all the ways in which you are improving on what has gone before, and what you are offering that is unique. This is more than just a way to see if you have a new idea – it is also your key to protecting it. Analyse your own claims carefully, and single out those that no-one else has yet been able to make. These will form the basis of your patent.

Necessity is the mother of invention

One of Innovate's high-profile success stories is Kate Castle, inventor of BoginaBag. Caught short one night on a campsite, Kate devised a collapsible, portable camping toilet, working with Innovate for three months to perfect the design. After completing a full budget planner and getting an investor on board, Kate then applied for a patent and registered design images, and then approached UK and Chinese manufacturers directly.

Kate offers a few tips to others thinking of embarking on a similar route. 'Research your market. Use business link to get government advice on grants, manufacturing contacts and general business information. Do a full business plan and P&L so you know your figures and the direction you are going in.' Most notably, Kate appeared on Dragons' Den last summer, convincing Theo Paphitis to invest £50,000 of his children's inheritance. She is now working with Theo to enhance her sales beyond the UK and is looking to extend her product range.

www.boginabag.co.uk

Developing your idea

An idea by itself is just an idea – and you cannot protect or market an idea alone. So the next stage is to turn your brilliant concept into a designed product. This is where the prototype comes in.

A major hurdle for many entrepreneurs and businesses is the cost of prototype development. In testing economic times, even a company may not wish to divert capital into the building of prototypes, and for an individual the costs can be prohibitive. There are however ways around this. Virtual modelling technology now enables the creation of photorealistic 3D impressions of products, which alongside the material specifications and measurements can provide a lower-cost alternative at the early stages of development.

'A virtual prototype is not a stand-in for the real thing,' says Alistair, 'but it is an important step on the road to developing a saleable product. Many inventors who come to Innovate Design choose to license their products to buyers, rather than go into business on their own. In such cases, the virtual modelling approach can be a hugely cost-effective selling tool. It is common for a buyer to get involved after seeing a virtual prototype, and agree on the strength of it to produce a working "proof of principle" prototype at their own expense. This means that the inventor may never have to produce a material prototype themselves.'

However, sometimes buyers are more cautious, and want to see concrete proof that something works before they open their wallets. Equally, the inventor may choose not to license the product, and instead develop it themselves. In such cases, there is no alternative but to produce a physical prototype. Fortunately, technology offers low-cost solutions here too. Rapid prototyping technologies include the laser-moulding of plastics to produce individual products, a technique that would be expensive on a large scale but which is more cost-effective than moulding for one-offs. 'At Innovate, we often use such techniques to make physical prototypes to demonstrate that a client's great idea really does work in practice,' says Alistair. 'This can provide the assurance they need either to license the product to a buyer, or put it into production themselves.'

The route to market

As already mentioned, how a product is developed may largely depend on whether you plan to license it or produce it through your own business. Each option has its pros and cons; essentially, the licensing route means a smaller initial outlay, but lower returns in the long run, while running your own business means high initial costs and risks, but greater potential earnings. It all depends on how much time and money you are prepared to commit to the new product, especially if you already have another business to run in the meantime.

When it is your own business producing the new product, you will need to take further crucial decisions such as who will manufacture it (and/or its component parts) and where they will be based. China is a popular manufacturing base due to the low cost of labour, but the choice should not be a foregone conclusion; Europe, for example, has a more familiar business culture and is closer, which may be a factor with regard to shipping costs. Your decision may also be influenced by other factors, such as where the majority of your market is to be found, so it is useful to take professional advice on this issue too.

Invention, as Edison famously said, is mostly about perspiration. But today's inventors are more fortunate in that a great deal more help is available. No-one is going to have your ideas for you, but it is now easier that ever to turn those ideas into something tangible to tempt investors and buyers.

To find out more about Innovate Design, visit their website at www.innovate-design.co.uk or call them on 020 7354 5640.