

THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

Innovate Product Design offers accessible design services and route-to-market advice for inventors-cum-entrepreneurs. **Alistair Welch** heads to their offices in The West Country to find out more



The workshop at Innovate Product Design's Salisbury headquarters feels like a cross between Q's laboratory from the James Bond films and the set of the BBC business show *Dragons' Den*. Amidst the bare-brick walls, machines and gizmos, one half expects to bump into Desmond Llewellyn pitching a fountain pen that fires poison darts to an unimpressed Duncan Bannatyne. It is a fitting home for a business that specialises in using design to help individual inventors and entrepreneurs realise an idea and take it to market.

Managing director Alastair Swanwick established Innovate ten years ago and has spent the last decade offering affordable intellectual property advice and design services to developers, typically individuals or partnerships, many of whom will not have any experience in design, engineering, or even business. Whilst invention-marketing companies have existed for some time, Swanwick argues that they do not offer the rigorous analysis of market potential and design expertise that Innovate can provide.

"Our proposition is a low key, low budget means of allowing individuals to gain access to product designers," explains Swanwick. "If you go to a traditional product design company, you are talking a few thousand pounds just to get a meeting with them."

So you've got an idea that you think the world is waiting for – how can Innovate help you to develop it? Most ideas reach Innovate in no more sophisticated form than a rough sketch.

The task then is to analyse the market potential of the idea and look into protecting it. Before investing any money in design, Swanwick recommends investigating an idea's originality and looking into applying for a patent or alternative form of protection: "Fundamentally, our philosophy is to avoid spending money on an idea unless it is safe to do so. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to throw money at a project without knowing if anyone actually wants it."

Innovate has a full-time in-house patent agent working alongside an eight-strong team researching originality and possible routes to market. "It is very easy," warns Swanwick,

The consultancy sees people from a wide variety of backgrounds

"to go to a patent lawyer and spend £2,000 without discovering whether the idea is original. In response to our clients' needs we are able to offer a patent search – this is a massive bonus for a product design agency."

With idea protection sorted, attention then turns to product development. Essentially, Innovate's goal is to help their clients develop their project to a stage at which it can be presented professionally to industry or retailers. "What we are trying to do is turn an individual who has an idea from just an inventor into a product designer and businessman," explains Swanwick.

The process always starts with a project

briefing meeting between the client and an Innovate designer. The consultancy sees so many people, from a wide variety of backgrounds, with ideas often weird or wonderful, that Swanwick explains it is important to have a face-to-face meeting to not only fully understand the idea and the client's expectations, but also to gauge the client's acceptable level of risk.

All within a timeframe of just six weeks, designers will then address the core factors that will shape the product before moving to concept design. With the concept approved by the client, the focus then shifts to preparing the idea for presentation; CAD – Innovate predominantly uses Solidworks – is deployed to develop technical aspects of the product and overall aesthetics.

The goal is to generate for the client a high quality visualisation package. This typically includes professionally rendered photorealistic images, CAD exploded views, and storyboards to illustrate application. The client is now in a position to approach relevant investors or retail partners.

Swanwick advises against building a prototype at this point: "We are more focused on visualising concept ideas rather than fully engineering products – although, of course, we can, and often do, do that later in the process. At this initial stage the key is for a client to show their ideas to industry and see what the reaction is."

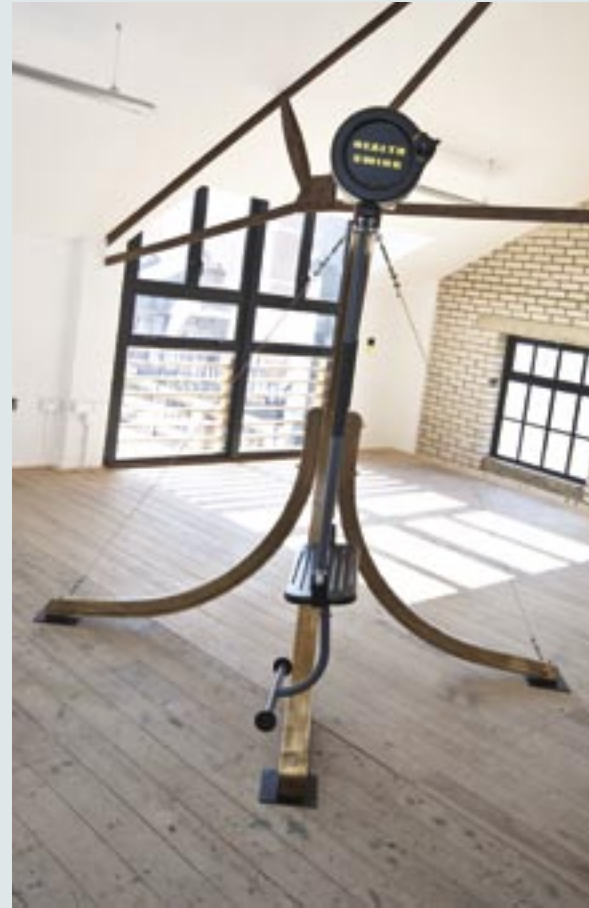
He goes on to describe the experience of a client who recently approached Innovate

with a device that shreds discarded fishing line to prevent livestock and wildlife getting tangled: “Our message was, don’t go crazy with it, firstly just visualise how it could be in the approximate. For under £2,000 the client is now in a situation where he can start presenting to companies. We have also guided him in the business etiquette of doing this. Perhaps a company will ask for a prototype; if that’s the case we can provide this. Very often though the company will ask for permission to produce a prototype at their own expense. We always advise our clients to accept as it avoids any

further financial risk.”

If a client does commission Innovate to produce a prototype, the bulk of the work can be done in the onsite workshop. There is a paint shop at the top of the building to deliver colour and finishing. Any 3D printing or rapid prototyping work is contracted out as, in an effort to keep costs low, Innovate does not keep these expensive machines in-house.

A key difference between Innovate and other product design consultancies lies in pricing structure. Innovate offers a fixed price per project rather than a day-by-day rate so that a client can



have certainty about cost. Furthermore, the client is able to retain 100 percent of their intellectual property should they wish.

Swanwick explains that the projects his agency works on tend to be relatively low-tech, problem-solving devices, or, as he describes them, “plastic widgets”. He cites the ‘Tea Tool’ as an archetypal Innovate project: the product is a handheld plastic gadget for picking up and squeezing teabags. Swanwick admits that at first glance the product appeared “silly” and he was not sure if there would be a market for it. However, they gave it a go, developed the

concept and delivered visualisation materials – the product is now sold through Lakeland kitchenware stores and is proving extremely popular.

With this emphasis on problem-solving and entrepreneurial spirit it is perhaps no surprise that, as hinted at in the introduction, *Dragons’ Den* is a natural outlet for many of Innovate’s clients. Indeed, in the latest series alone, no fewer than five Innovate products have appeared on the show. Maybe you remember the ‘Health Swing’ – a new exercise machine concept devised by Wendy Thomson. Although

it failed to secure funding, it did capture the interest of Dragon Hilary Devey and Innovate is currently refining the prototype with a view to commercialisation.

Swanwick is proud of his company’s ability to offer clients the credibility, confidence and protection to pitch their ideas. “We help people who otherwise wouldn’t have access to product design,” he concludes. “We come across not only a lovely range of ideas, but also people. Along the way we have encountered some very interesting human stories. It is a pleasure to champion British innovation.”

INNOVATE DESIGNER **ABY THOMAS** TALKS THROUGH THREE OF INNOVATE’S RECENT SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS. SHE HAS WORKED AT INNOVATE FOR 18 MONTHS AFTER GRADUATING FROM BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY WITH A BSC IN PRODUCT DESIGN.

CASE STUDIES

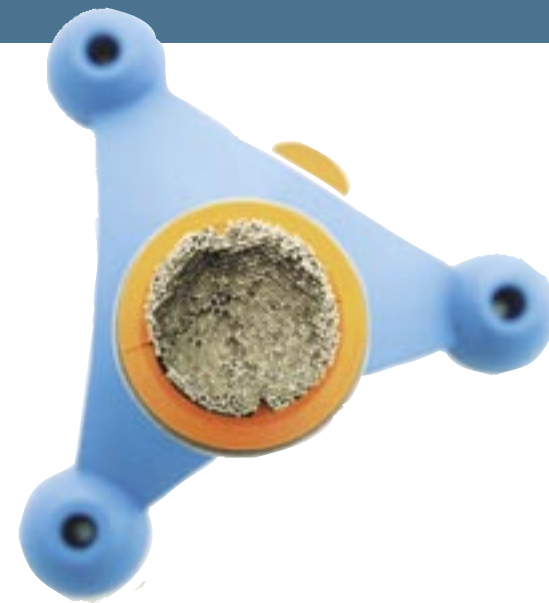
BoginaBag

The BoginaBag was a *Dragons’ Den* success, winning £50,000 investment from retail guru Theo Paphitis. Devised by Kate Castle, it is a portable toilet that is lightweight and robust.

The idea for the product came to Castle when she was desperate for the toilet in the middle of the night whilst camping and the prospect of the long walk to the toilet block wasn’t appealing. She wanted to come up with an alternative to bulky chemical based options.

We provided professional presentation boards that helped gain interest and investment. After completing a budget planner, Castle then applied for a patent and registered design images.

Perfect for camping holidays and festivals, the BoginaBag offers a simple solution to a frustrating problem.



Niloc

A number of inventors approach Innovate with ideas for problem solving devices that are inspired by their own experience - Niloc is another good example.

The device is designed to hold small parts and components with the requirements of model makers and electronics engineers particularly in mind.

During development, Innovate sketched initial concepts and then, through consultation with the client, Colin Richardson, the design evolved. We used CAD to refine the design and determine the technical aspects of the locking mechanism.

The 3D virtual prototype was rendered using the latest software to produce photorealistic images of what the product would look like. The inventor used this visualisation to pitch the product to potential market partners.

Quadcrate

William Allingham first came to Innovate with his idea after his trailer often impaired the performance of his quad bike whilst working on his farm in Northern Ireland. He devised a system by which a crate could be fitted directly on to the quad bike.

We helped Allingham navigate the patent research process. Then our designers and engineers worked with him to come up with the best design solution for the Quadcrate. The final product allows a heavy load to be carried on any make of quad bike and also accommodates multiple different attachments and uses.

Quadcrate won the Best Labour Saving Device award at the Tullamore Agricultural Show and in 2009 Allingham was named Eircom Young Entrepreneur of the Year.

