

Why didn't I **think** of that?

A step-by-step guide for taking your invention to the market.

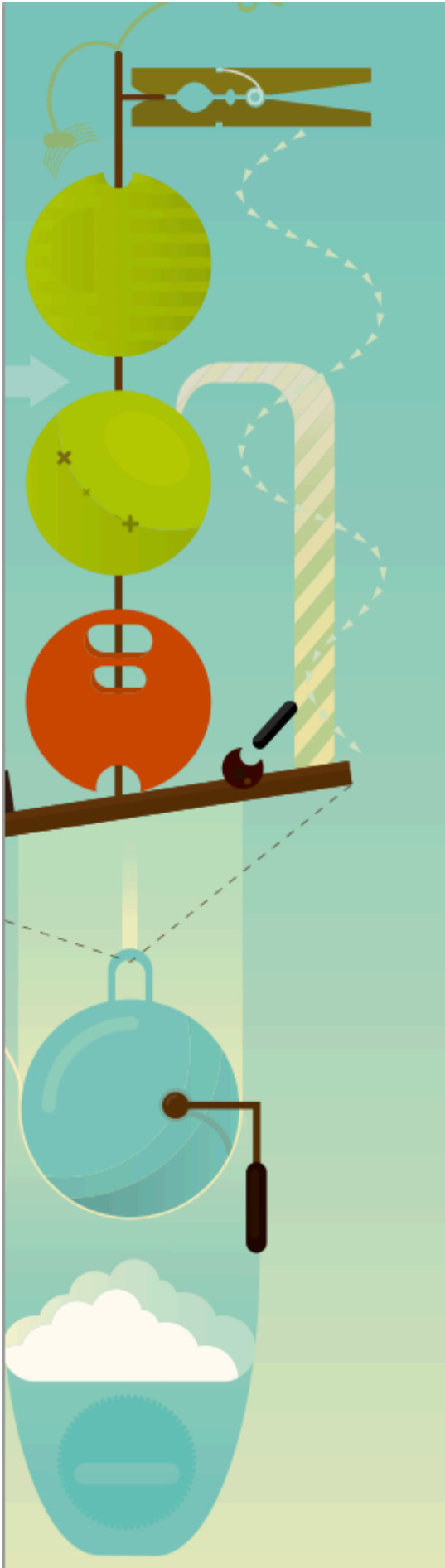
By Jenny Jedeikin

When Mary Sarao was helping her daughter make a poster for a school project, she was getting really frustrated with having to constantly measure off the blank space so that her daughter's block letters would line up evenly in the center of the poster board.

It was then she came up with an idea: Why not sell poster boards with little faint blue lines on them, which create a grid, so that there would be no need for measuring or drawing lines? Five years later, Mary Sarao and her business partner and sister Barbara Pitts were able to quit their day jobs. Their Ghostline poster boards had hit the market in a big way.

"We were just two ordinary housewives who had never invented anything before," remembers Sarao. "But we had a great idea, and a great deal of determination to follow through on it."

For many inventors who are savvy enough to bring their inventions—from inflatable paddleboards to washed-and-bagged lettuce—to the market before anyone else, one tiny idea can be a life-changer.





Realizing your dream

In the age of the Internet, where scores of competing products are hawked and sold before a worldwide audience, is it still possible for an individual to earn a profit for coming up with one good idea?

Yes, say a chorus of inventors, who have had success doing just that. "But a great idea alone isn't enough," offers Louis J. Foreman, inventor and executive producer of PBS reality show, *Everyday Edisons*, which helps first-time inventors take their ideas from conception to reality. "What is most important is how you execute and follow through on your idea."

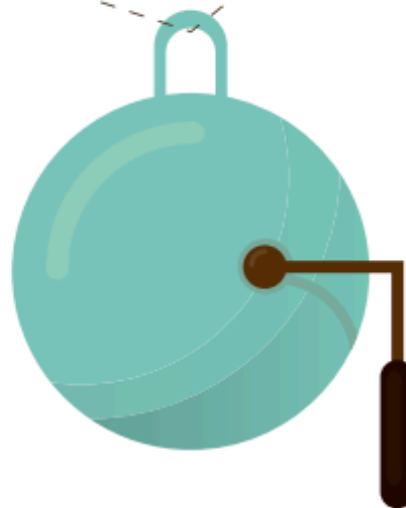
"There are a series of logical steps inventors should first take to decide if their invention is even worth investing time and money in," explains Foreman, who was the first to invent soccer shin guards created with the same medical technology used to create splints.

Is it unique?

"The first thing you want to determine is whether the idea is unique," says Foreman. By conducting a search online to look for your product, you can figure out pretty quickly whether someone else has already beaten you to the punch.

If you find nothing online for sale, next do a search to find out whether your idea has been patented, says Foreman. Google has a dedicated "Patent Search," which can quickly determine whether your idea is already in the works.

The Internet has made the process easier and cheaper. "Before the Internet, you would have to spend \$1,000 just to find out if a patent already existed," says Dr. Robert Yonover, a Ph.D. in geochemistry who has made more than a million dollars in royalties from his See Rescue Streamer, a water-rescue device that's widely used by the U.S. military. "But the good news is that type of research is now free."



Who wants to buy this, anyway?

If your idea doesn't already exist and hasn't been patented, the next thing you want to figure out, says Yonover, is whether the product is something that people would buy. "You may have a great idea, but if it only appeals to a small fraction of the population, it's isn't going to be worth the time and trouble," he says.

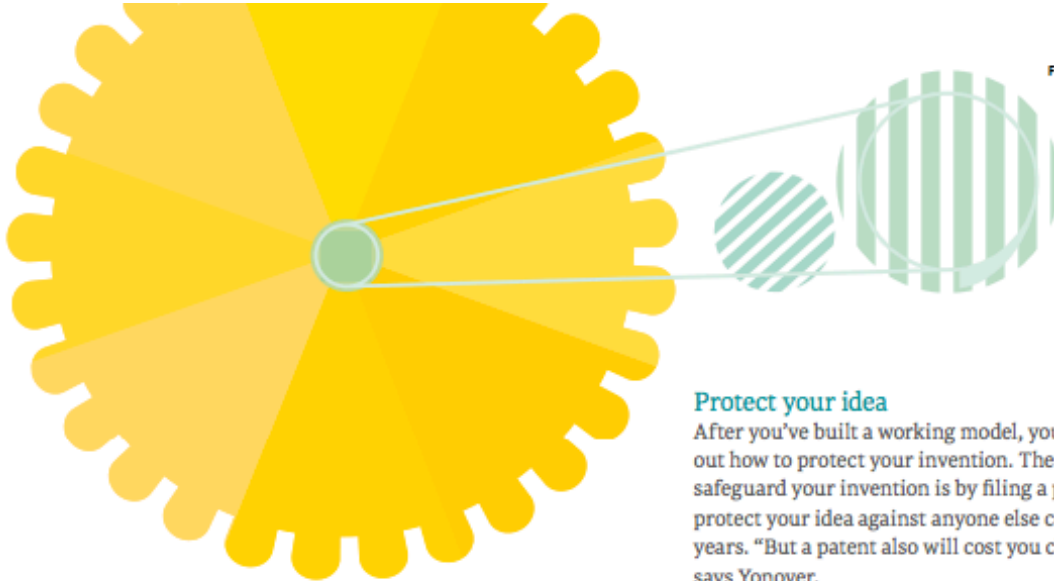
You can conduct your own market survey by informally asking people in your target market whether they think it's a good idea, and whether they would want to spend money on it, says Yonover, who likes to poll people in supermarket check out lines.

"If your idea generates a lot of enthusiasm, you can feel confident about taking the next step," says Yonover. But if your invention only receives a tepid response from people, you should probably scrap the idea and go back to the drawing board.

Build a working model

"It's important to create a prototype of your invention, so that you can determine whether or not your invention can even be done," Yonover says.

Yonover's See Rescue Streamer is a large, bright-orange plastic streamer that could help people who are lost at sea. He



experimented with plastic materials that would unfurl in the ocean and not get twisted up. It wasn't until he had the idea of segmenting the plastic fabric, like a caterpillar, that he was able to create something that held up in nature.

"Your prototype does not have to be elaborate or expensive," says Pitts, who worked with her sister on making a prototype for their poster board invention. "Just make it out of any material you can find. It only needs to demonstrate what your invention is, how it works and that it does work."

The best thing to do is to create a prototype yourself, but if you can't accomplish that on your own, there are companies that specialize in making prototypes. "Be aware that there will be fees involved," explains Pitts. Thanks to the recent advent of 3-D printing, you can also contact a business (or even some universities) that will give you access to one of the rapid prototype printers, which can create a model using drawings. (See "Q&A with Randy Ganacias," page 18, for more on building a prototype.)

Be wary of scams

Along with the availability of free information on the Internet to help first-time inventors, there is also a wealth of bogus companies who advertise that they will take your idea and turn it into a gold mine.

"Be cautious of any company that makes big promises and charges you a lot of money," says Sarao. "Thanks to the rise of the Internet, the invention scam is a multi-billion dollar business, in which thousands of inventors have lost money after being promised success."

Protect your idea

After you've built a working model, you've got to figure out how to protect your invention. The best way to safeguard your invention is by filing a patent, which will protect your idea against anyone else copying it for 20 years. "But a patent also will cost you close to \$10,000," says Yonover.

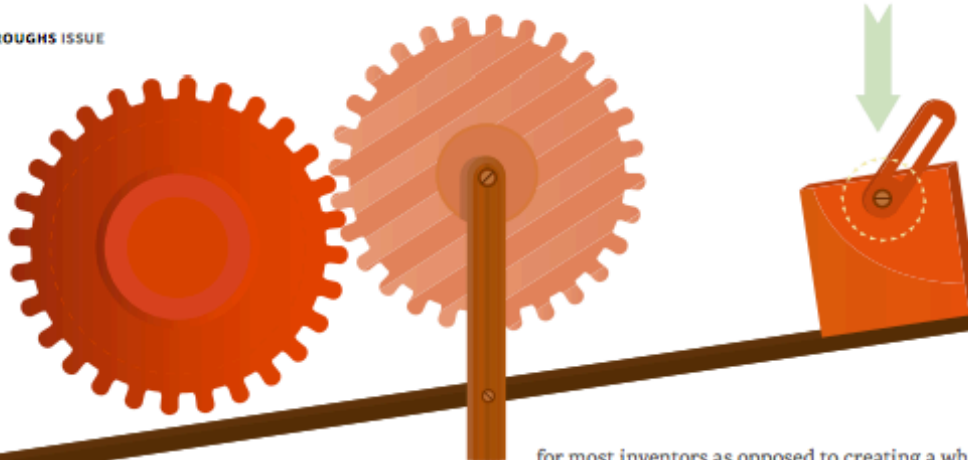
Another choice is to file a "provisional patent," which is only \$1,000 and lasts for about a year. "A provisional patent temporarily protects your invention and can also be helpful if you are looking to license your product to a larger company," says Yonover.

In some cases you may want to skip getting a patent altogether. Some inventions can't be patented because they aren't broad enough, says Yonover. You may have come up with a unique idea, but for one reason or another, the patent won't really protect the idea. In that case, your goal is to get your product as quickly as possible to the market.

In order to find out whether your idea is one that can be patented, Sarao recommends having a consultation with a patent attorney or agent. "Most patent attorneys and agents do not charge for the first visit," says Sarao.

Whether or not you're getting a patent, Yonover advises people to trademark their product name, which is inexpensive. Inventors can visit the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO.gov) for information. He also recommends obtaining a domain name online, which can be purchased for as little as \$12 a year.





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The business of funding

It’s essential to figure out up front how much it’s going to cost you to develop your product. Foreman recommends that inventors do a thorough assessment of costs involved, including patent fees, attorney fees, as well as prototype creation, before moving forward.

“I’ve met people who’ve spent thousands on their invention, and their product was never even brought to market,” says Foreman, who serves on the U.S. Patent Office’s public advisory committee, which advises Congress and the president on matters related to intellectual property.

When you have an idea about how much capital you may need, you can try utilizing crowd sourcing websites, such as Kickstarter (see page 18) or Indiegogo, to raise money for developing and protecting your idea. “I think crowd funding is a phenomenal resource,” says Sarao, “because the inventor retains 100 percent of their invention.”

Find a company to license your invention

Finally, it’s time to find a company that wants to license your product and pay you a royalty. “Licensing your invention is definitely the way to go these days

for most inventors as opposed to creating a whole company built around your product,” says Yonover.

“If you’re in the business of inventing, you don’t also want to be the one manufacturing, marketing and distributing your product because that may not be your area of expertise,” explains Yonover.

Yonover wrote up a marketing plan and product description and used trade shows to meet people who might be interested in his idea. “If you can get in front of someone and pitch them your idea, it’s more effective than trying to reach them by phone or email,” he says.

For their parts, Sarao and Pitts did research to find the 10 companies that sold poster boards, and started hounding them. “By the time we got the notice that our patent was coming through,” says Pitts, “three poster companies were interested in licensing it.”

“Then we started getting creative,” says Pitts. “We FedExed a press release announcing that our product was available for exclusive licensing. It was like ‘TA-DA, here we are.’” Sarao and Pitts also offer all sorts of free helpful tips for licensing your invention at their website: AsktheInventors.com.

Sweet success

For people like Yonover, Sarao and Pitts, one good idea has made a huge impact on their lifestyle. Pitts and Sarao, whose Ghostline product garners nearly \$15 million per year in sales, never looked back. “We’ve been very blessed,” says Pitts. “We both quit our day jobs and it’s made life very comfortable for both of us.”

But they both say it can often go very differently for first-time inventors. After the sisters had already gotten a deal for their product, they attended a convention for new inventors in Washington, D.C. All the experts speaking to the crowd were very negative about the chances of having a successful invention, recalls Sarao. “Thank goodness we had never listened to the skeptics when we were starting out,” she says. “Because now we’re here to tell you: If we did it, you can too.”

Jenny Jedeikin lives in Northern California and her writing has appeared in *San Francisco Chronicle Magazine*, *Rolling Stone* and *In Style*, among other publications.



Weird SCIENCE

Here are 5 recent, strange inventions that may not make their way to your shopping cart.

Privacy shield: For those that refuse to smile and say "cheese," a privacy visor has been developed in Tokyo that uses a near-infrared light to protect the wearer from being photographed digitally, or from having facial recognition software identify their face in a crowd.

Hair-washing robot: Panasonic's hair-washing bot was developed for people who can't easily wash their own hair. The robot first scans the person's head and then uses mechanical fingers to gel, lather, rinse and repeat.

Pizza delivery fridge magnet: In Dubai, hungry pizza-craving folk can just hit a pizza shaped magnet on their refrigerators to get a pizza delivered, thanks to a device created by a Dubai pizza chain that wanted to make ordering really easy.

Twitter-feed toilet paper: A startup company is offering toilet paper with customizable twitter feeds printed on each roll. Customers can decide between ordering their own tweets or someone else's.

Survival ball: A Chinese inventor created a six-ton ball container named Noah's Ark of China. He spent over \$200,000 to build a round vessel that can withstand floods and house a family of three with enough food to live on for 10 months.

