



Weird, but Marketable

By Colleen DeBaise
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THERE'S NO OTHER WAY to put it: Your business idea is so bad that it's good. Very good. Sure, getting it from your brain to store shelves might be tough, but well...what if?

For Paul Stremple, inventor of the Banana Bunker, that "what if" has become a reality. Fruit lovers are clamoring for his plastic prophylactic that expands or contracts to fit a banana of any size, protecting the delicate fruit from nicks and bruises. The idea came to him by chance, after his sister complained that her midday snack kept getting smooshed in her briefcase. Granted, eyeing the banana-shaped container may bring a blush to your cheek. But that hasn't stopped the bunker (retail price: \$4.99) from becoming a popular item at the Museum of Modern Art's gift store. "It's a little suggestive, and that's probably helped in my marketing," Stremple concedes.

Many an inventor has stumbled across a brilliantly bizarre idea, only to be sunk by their inability to make it commercially viable. What separates the success stories from the flops is the marketing, experts say. When you've got an unusual or unconventional product, things like promoting, pricing and distributing are crucial.

"In the invention world, the hard work begins after you invent your product, not before," says Ted VanCleave, author of "Totally Absurd Inventions" and founder of InventionShowcase.com, a web site for independent inventors. "It doesn't matter if it's a great idea or not if the marketing is not behind it.

Click on the links below to see how these five entrepreneurs took their unusual ideas and turned them into successful small businesses.

- Paul Stremple¹ — Banana Bunker: A plastic container that keeps your fruit safe until you are ready to snack.
- Curt and Sue Todd² — MailWraps: A magnetic mailbox cover that features colorful artwork.
- Carl Goldberg³ — Roadie by RuffRider: An automobile safety harness for dogs.
- Bill Bradford⁴ — Johnny-Light: A toilet bowl night light.
- Patty Brisben and son, Chris Cicchinelli⁵ — Pure Romance: A company that sells "relationship enhancement" products such as bedroom toys and lotions to women via gatherings similar to Tupperware parties.

Many inventors will pour time, energy and money into obtaining a patent⁶ (which experts recommend for protecting the idea) but then drop the ball when it comes to getting the product to customers. "The biggest mistake is thinking there is a company that is going to take this off your hands, manufacture and market this for you, and make you rich," says VanCleave.

It's been a long journey, but an idea that prompted a slipper-clad Curt Todd to run out to his curbside mailbox in 20-degree weather with a magnet now brings in between \$3 million to \$7 million in revenues for himself and his wife, Sue. The invention? A magnetic mailbox cover, decorated with festive holiday artwork, that can transform a ho-hum mailbox into a thing of beauty (or at least, something the neighbors can gawk at).

Building a successful business out of an unusual item is tough work, Todd says. He and his wife faced a dual challenge: selling people not only on the product but also the concept of a decorative mailbox cover. "With a new quirky product, the hardest thing to do is educate people, and tell them why they need it," he says.

A "rookie mistake" the couple made back when they started the business in 1989 was focusing too much on the protecting the idea, called MailWraps, from imitators. "We were so

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- Is Your Small Business Idea Any Good?⁷
- Image Is Everything⁸
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concerned about knock-offs that we were hitting [customers] with brand, brand, brand," he says. Expensive packaging emblazoned with the brand name didn't properly convey the product's purpose. "People thought it was for wrapping boxes to send at Christmas time," he says. "We didn't tell the story."

Ignoring the customer is a common inventor faux pas. "Entrepreneurs will see their invention as the end all and be all," says Thomas D. Kuczmariski, president of Kuczmariski & Associates, a Chicago product-development firm, and an adjunct professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. "The biggest mistake they make is not going back to customers and doing some research to understand the extent to which the product addresses or serves a need."

Understanding customers' desires has been critical in the success of Pure Romance, a Loveland, Ohio, company that sells "relationship enhancement products" (such as bedroom toys and lotions) primarily to female customers via at-home gatherings similar to Tupperware parties. The sales pitch needs to be as effective as the products, says Chris Cicchinelli, the company's president.

For instance, saleswomen talk to party-goers about how to use the steamy merchandise, but are trained to use the proper terminology for body parts. "Don't be vulgar — that's the secret to our success," says Cicchinelli, whose mother founded the company in 1993 in her basement with \$5,000 in working capital. The gentle, romance-oriented sales pitch has paid off, as Pure Romance last year posted \$50 million in revenues and is on track to record \$60 million this year, according to Cicchinelli.

Ready to take the world by storm with your spectacularly odd idea? Start with market research. While a big corporation might spend millions of dollars in this area, there are low-budget ways an entrepreneur can test the marketplace. Here are three suggestions from marketing expert Kuczmariski:

- **Ask the shoppers.** Get approval from a store or shopping mall to do some research, and approach shoppers with a \$5 or \$10 gift certificate, saying, "Can I talk to you for 10 minutes?" Try to talk to 20 to 30 people about whether they would use your product, and how much they would pay for it. And pick a logical location; if you've invented an unusual lawn product, for instance, poll customers at a home-and-garden store.
- **Throw a party.** Invite friends, family, colleagues and/or potential customers to your house or a restaurant for a two-hour focus group on your new product. Supply the food and beverages, and pay careful attention to what these critics say.
- **Take an Internet survey.** Come up with a list of questions, buy a mailing list, and email your survey along with an incentive for people to fill it out (such as a chance to win a \$500 gift certificate). The response might be low, but the feedback can help shape your product and your pitch.

Links in this article:

¹<http://www.smartmoney.com/smallbiz/index.cfm?story=20060809&pgnum=1>

²<http://www.smartmoney.com/smallbiz/index.cfm?story=20060809&pgnum=2>

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