



## PLAN | SMART IDEAS



“An ‘industry of failure,’ flooded with folks trying to build a better spatula.”

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**E**VERYONE WANTS to be an inventor. So when I had the opportunity to test-drive an idea at Quirky, a company that helps people commercialize their product ideas, I jumped at the chance.

During a presentation at Quirky’s industrial-chic Manhattan headquarters, 25-year-old founder Ben Kaufman wowed us with tales of how he took his first trip to China to sell the headphones he invented—while still in high school. I found myself fantasizing that my own idea—conjured up the night before—could yield a globe-trotting business trip. I was soon to learn, however, that the odds of seeing my product on a store shelf were less than 1 percent, according to the United

Inventors Association. And those odds are getting worse every day, thanks to a flood of would-be inventors and “want-repreneurs” egged on by reality TV shows and economic malaise, says Mark Reyland, the association’s director.

Kaufman launched Quirky after he sold his iPod accessory company. Quirky relies on crowd-sourcing, or input from an online community of experts, to improve the design process.

There are other websites with similar business models, but Quirky claims it’s the only one in which its community of helpers can share in the profits. And you can actually find some Quirky projects selling at the mall. Pivot Power, a flexible power strip, is sold at Bed, Bath & Beyond. Target sells Tether Stemware Savers, which protect wineglasses in dishwashers.

inventors. Once uploaded, my Phone Finder would be reviewed for 30 days by Quirky’s users—there are over 200,000 registered, and about 24,000 qualify as “active.” The community could give its approval and weigh in on how my device could be improved; the company picks two products a week to develop. Quirky owns the rights to any submitted product and pays for manufacturing and distribution costs. Inventors can collect as much as 10 percent of the eventual sale price—a fair deal, compared with what the inventors association says is the typical cut of 6 to 8 percent.

Excited as I was, I got a first hint of dismay when I toured the site to see the competition. My breakthrough was up against a knife holder, a fridge magnet notepad and a wet suit with zip-off arms and legs—most of it looked like stuff you’d find in the *SkyMall* catalog. Quirky says its

product line has a preponderance of household gadgets because it asks its inventors to solve everyday problems.

I waited to see what the community thought. And if my 30 days hadn’t expired, I might still be waiting. The only two responses I received were from other Quirky “inventors,” one of whom had a product that sounded eerily like my own. Neither wrote with helpful suggestions but encouraged



My brilliant idea was the Phone Finder, a clip-on device that would prevent kids from losing their cell phones by buzzing or vibrating when they got too far from their phones. Since my two sons have lost a dozen phones between them, I thought this could be a hit with parents.

Other than a \$10 submission fee (presumably to screen out time machines), Quirky’s system is free to

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me to check out their own inventions.

Crestfallen, I consulted a friend who's well-versed in technology. He helped me do some market research. I had originally tested my idea with a quick Internet search, and it turned out I had used the wrong terms. Honestly, the phrase "Bluetooth proximity alarm" never occurred to me. Now I found a whole page of results for my "unique" product, offered by assorted Chinese manufacturers. Worse, my product looked to be on sale for under \$3. One is clearly aimed at children; the design featured a picture of a dopey little dog waving its paw. Waving goodbye to my profits, I decided.

Sulkily, I checked in with Quirky's Kaufman to analyze my failure. Promoting an idea on social networks is important, he informed me. "Did you tweet your idea?" he asked. Yes, but I, ahem, don't have many followers. My submissions page on Quirky was also not so well designed. And then there's the originality problem. "Frankly," added Kaufman, "I have seen a lot of things like this." Ouch.

The conventional inventor community takes a dim view of crowd-sourcing. United Inventors' Reyland says a patent challenge could theoretically come from crowd members who contributed to a licensed product. "It's a time bomb" to manufacturers, he adds. Quirky says its experience with large retailers belies the idea that big companies don't like crowd-sourced ideas; it also says the patent risks are fully disclosed in a five-page release form that inventors sign. As for the eventual payoff, Quirky says it will send out checks totaling \$1 million this year to its community members; the average amount paid to an active member, however, is just under \$50.

As for my own invention's results, I felt marginally better after Reyland reminded me that inventing is itself "an industry of failure." The market is flooded with folks working on a better spatula in their backyard, he adds. "The common denominator is hope." ☺



## JUST ADD CREATIVITY

Some companies encourage inventors to pay up front for help with development. Just don't count on making it to the shelves of Wal-Mart.

► **Davison** For about \$10,000, Davison will research an invention, create product samples and try to tempt corporations to license the creator's brainstorm. Its biggest hit, Twister Bolts, which keeps toilet bolts secure, is sold at Home Depot and Lowe's.

► **InventHelp** This firm also helps usher products to market, for fees ranging from \$900 to \$10,000. Big seller: the SideSleeper Pro Pillow. Royalties for inventors range from 1 to 5 percent of wholesale revenue. The success rate? The company says 26 out of about 4,600 clients have made more money than they paid to InventHelp.