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Focus on the Fun and Fascinating

2 *ID* Additions Equal A Big Plus for Readers



Michael Jordan was finishing his first NBA season. The premiere episode of “The Golden Girls” was months away. The baseball world was speculating about which day in 1985 Pete Rose would become the sport’s all-time leader in hits (September 11).

It’s now 41 years ago this spring that *Inventors Digest* launched. Long before the iPhone, long before the general public had heard of artificial intelligence or even intellectual property, the then-sparse newsletter began its now-historic mission to educate, empower and entertain independent inventors.

Today, *ID* is anchored by some of America’s most respected subject-matter experts on inventing aspects ranging from intellectual property to social media to marketing to prototyping. And starting this month, we’re adding another expert as a regular contributor while providing inventors unprecedented hope and information for funding what they do.

Our newest writer is a design patent examiner, painter and innovation advocate. How cool is that?

That’s the name of Cynthia Underwood’s video series highlighting inventive objects and their stories. Cynthia, who created her own “art academy” (cynthiaunderwood.com), will provide readers with some of the most interesting and creative design patents she has come across in her artistic travels, and their role in the finished product.

This month’s cover subject, Megan Pater, is a tireless champion for underprivileged people and communities who wants Americans to have access to all the available grant money that’s out there. The founder of Fund-Nation has supplied *ID* with a list of grant opportunities for inventors—a first for readers, a list she will add to every month—as well as tips regarding grant letter-writing musts and myths.

Forty-one years ago, no one could know that a Michael Jordan Fler rookie card, part of a set that was greeted by the sports collecting hobby with general indifference, would eventually sell in the \$6,000 range in medium-grade condition (and for a quarter of a million dollars in mint condition). Cynthia Underwood and Megan Pater are here to remind us that inventors’ imaginations and opportunities are priceless.

—Reid
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Inventors

DIGEST

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Human Genius, Ranked by... AI

THE GOOD NEWS: In connection with America's 250th anniversary and to celebrate our inventive spirit, *Forbes* recently released a list of the top 250 innovators.

The, uh, interesting news: The magazine's rankings of these living, breathing inventors who have solved some of the world's most challenging human problems were selected by artificial intelligence.

After ChatGPT and Gemini spit out their results, the top five U.S. innovators, in order, were Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, George Lucas and Jensen Huang.

A note that bodes well for the future: More than one-third of the list consists of women and people of color. SiriusXM satellite creator Marine Rothblatt, also the founder of biotech company United Therapeutics, was the top-ranking woman and No. 8 overall.

Forbes said it didn't rely exclusively on AI in compiling its list. Its beat reporters nominated nearly 1,000 candidates and then ran those names by a panel of "world-class judges" who ranked them on creativity, breadth, engagement, disruption and commercial impact. Those results went to AI.

Larry Udell, chairman emeritus of the Silicon Valley Chapter of the Licensing Executives Society who has founded or cofounded over 40 companies, alerted *Inventors Digest* to this list. He did not mention anything about AI's role in the selections but made an observation that, in its emphasis, was fittingly ironic.

"After over a half-century of working with and following creative and inventive people, many world famous, I came to the realization that creativity is an innate ingredient within all humans of all ages. ... We, as humans, are basically creative. All you have to do is challenge it."

DID DUKE FUMBLE IN SUING ITS QB?

You might have seen the late-January headlines: Duke University sues its star quarterback to keep him from entering the NCAA transfer portal. Duke drops the suit less than a week later after an agreement is reached.



The Darian Mensah saga is the latest connected to NIL (name, image and likeness) contracts that have changed the landscape of college sports (see September 2023 *Inventors Digest*).

Mensah announced his decision to transfer to the University of Miami but had an NIL contract with Duke that ran through the end of this year. Besides the embarrassing PR for the school when it sued its own quarterback, it underscored an inherent contradiction in college sports.

In its suit, Duke emphasized that Mensah was not being paid to play football, only for an exclusive license to use his publicity rights. But the legal action to prevent him from playing for a rival program strongly suggests the suit was about more than marketing rights.

The settlement, presumably resulting in Mensah paying Duke substantial money so he could leave, came a little more than a year after he had transferred to Duke because he said he coveted getting a degree from the prestigious university.

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BUT WAIT! THERE'S MORE!

Look for bonus *Inventors Digest* content online—courtesy of our new **ID Extra** feature that celebrates our popular new, streamlined website.

Check inventorsdigest.com for regular posts that supplement the uniquely educational and entertaining magazine for independent inventors, celebrating its 41st anniversary in 2026.

INVENTING 101

Funding From Manufacturers

BY DON DEBELAK

Inventors often overlook the possibility of start-up funding from a manufacturer.

Manufacturers want new business and will often bend over backwards to help you if you can make a convincing case that the product will sell. If you are trying to strike a deal for private label sales, or if you have a large manufacturer's rep group willing to sell your product, a manufacturer who can make your product might be a willing partner/investor.



Funding from manufacturers often is not outright investments. Manufacturers have lots of resources.

Sometimes, working out deals with a manufacturer that only cost the manufacturer a little bit or even nothing at all can be a huge savings for you. Often, manufacturers make these kinds of investments when you have already signed some kind of deal with them or have that intention.

When you make a deal with a manufacturer, such as for contract manufacturing, you can ask for certain investments as part of the contract. Among those arrangements:

In-kind Investments. If you need a part machined or some engineering drawings done, a manufacturer probably already has someone

on salary who can do it for you. The manufacturer is paying these employees anyway.

Amortized tooling. When you start manufacturing a product, molds and other equipment accessories need to be purchased to start making your product or speed up the manufacturing process and ensure high quality. Usually, manufacturers want you to pay upfront for these purchases, but you can also ask them to amortize the cost—which means instead of charging an upfront fee, they will charge an extra fee for every product manufactured to cover those costs. This isn't a real savings, but it keeps your upfront investments low when you will have no sales to cover the costs.

Prototypes and product development. Some manufacturers have the equipment and staff to make prototypes in-house. If you work with one of these manufacturers, either in some kind of partnership or contract manufacturing, they could help you with prototyping and finishing your product's development—provided you can demonstrate that your product has the sales potential to justify investing their time and energy. Your goal is to show that the product has so much potential that they will make lots of money manufacturing it even in a contract manufacturing agreement, so that covering the cost of prototyping and developing the product is worthwhile for them.

Outright Investments. If manufacturers like your product, they may buy stock in your company or at least loan you money to launch. Also, if you have strong orders once your product is launched, manufacturers will often loan you operating capital.

Joint-venture financing. Manufacturers also are often willing to enter into joint-venture or alliance partnerships if they like your product and believe in your business skills. These

VITAL VOCABULARY

office action

Here's a situation where a potential patent owner would prefer inaction. This is a formal, written statement from a USPTO patent examiner that details legal or technical issues with a patent application, requiring a response.



SHADES OF IP

PATENTS

TRADEMARKS

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TRADE SECRETS

You Can't Copyright Works for Hire

IN THIS SPACE in the June 2025 *Inventors Digest*, we provided a brief list of what is not protected by copyright. A fuller list from copyright.gov includes ideas, procedures, methods, systems, processes, concepts, principles, discoveries; works that are not fixed in a tangible form; titles, names, short phrases, slogans; familiar symbols or designs; mere variations of typographic ornamentation, lettering, or coloring; and mere listings of ingredients or contents.

Awareness of another important copyright exception could protect your idea from outsiders—and prevent you from losing your job while keeping you out of court.

Works for hire are the property of the person or organization that hired you, even if you created the work. Legalclarity.org provides the examples of software code written by a staff programmer or articles written by a journalist for a newspaper, provided the creation falls within the “scope of employment.”

The site includes stipulations such as “whether the work was created during work hours, is directly related to the employee’s job

description, and was motivated by a desire to serve the employer’s interests.”

More specifically, copyright.gov says the two scenarios in which a work is made for hire are 1) when the work is created by an employee as part of his or her regular duties, or 2) when a person and the employer enter into an express written agreement that the work is to be considered a “work made for hire” and the work is specially ordered or commissioned for use as a compilation; contribution to a collective work; part of a motion picture or other audiovisual work; translation; supplementary work; instructional text; test or answer material for a test; and an atlas.

Even with this precise phrasing, determining whether something is a work for hire can get complicated because so many employer-employee agreements do not provide comprehensive, written details of that mutual relationship. It’s a good idea to have written proof of your status, as either an employee or independent contractor.



agreements can vary widely, but generally this is where partners pool their resources and skills and split the profits—all of which is detailed in the joint venture agreement signed by all parties.

One key to a successful launch of a great product idea is to lower the risk of the company selling your product.

In an outright licensing deal, a person or company agrees to pay you royalties while the licensee takes on the manufacturing investment risk. An inventor lowers that risk significantly when he or she lines up a manufacturer and absorbs much of that risk.

With luck, your potential licensee will take over the relationship with the manufacturer. If not, the inventor will have to stay involved as a middleman, buying from the manufacturer and selling to the sales arm for the product—either a company selling a complementary product, a large distributor, a manufacturer’s rep group or other marketer.



Don Debelak is the founder of One Stop Invention Shop, offering marketing and patenting assistance to inventors. He is also the author of several marketing books.

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Baseball's Fashion Stretch

Who invented the buttonless uniform jerseys and elasticized, beltless pants that were the face of 1970s MLB? **BY REID CREAGER**

Hall of Famers Johnny Bench, Willie Stargell and Nolan Ryan (bottom, left to right) enjoyed peak years during the 1970s, when buttoned-down Major League Baseball switched to buttonless and beltless uniforms. The cotton/nylon fabric was more comfortable for players but facilitated some loud color statements.

Major League Baseball has been a lot of things since its inception in 1869, but it has never been cool.

In a bad reach to make his team look pornstar bad, Oakland A's owner Charlie Finley paid his players \$300 apiece to grow mustaches in 1972. Ken Griffey Jr.'s backwards-cap look that became a symbol of 1990s baseball made players look like ducks with their heads on the wrong way. Classic leg stirrups were abandoned in favor of clumsy, too-long uniform pants resembling pajamas.

At least the stretchy-uniform fad that began in 1970 had practicality and comfort in mind.

Too good of a fit?

It's fitting for MLB that one of its fashion trends began in untrendy Pittsburgh.

"This Date in Baseball History" tells us that July 16, 1970, was the date the Steel City's Three Rivers Stadium opened with the Pirates' 3-2 loss to the Cincinnati Reds. It doesn't mention that this was the debut of uniforms with a buttonless, pullover jersey and beltless, elasticized pants—which some teams were still using 20 years later.

Sixteen years ago, Paul Lukas wrote perhaps the definitive piece on this historic occasion in his column, "Uni Watch: The Obsessive Study of Athletics Aesthetics." He noted that despite widespread reports calling the unis the first polyester double-knits, the Rawlings-manufactured unis were in fact made of cotton and nylon (and eventually made of 100 percent polyester).



The blend wore lighter and cooler with more give than the woven flannels that had been the uniform standard for a century. “The nylon provided a stretch-to-fit element that was unlike anything ever seen before on a big-league diamond,” Lukas wrote.

San Francisco Giants Hall of Fame pitcher Juan Marichal told the *Sporting News* “double-knits will stretch and make it easier when I kick high. That’s very important.”

Fans and the media were generally supportive of the uniform changes as progressive and more practical. Another plus, though seldom reported, was that the absence of a belt buckle also removed a potential injury hurdle for players who slid headfirst. The uniforms could also be machine washed, not dry-cleaned.

On the other hand, baseball had succeeded in putting its own version of Sans-A-Belt slacks on widespread display.

The form-fitting uniforms wore well on the fit and chiseled. They wore especially unwell on the fat and lumpy—including Pirates manager Danny Murtaugh. Recently deceased star lefthander Mickey Lolich, who liked to call himself “the beer drinker’s idol,” was particularly exposed when his Detroit Tigers adopted the look a couple years later.

Wide-scale adoption

In a 1972 *Pittsburgh Press-Gazette* article headlined “Pirates Down the Stretch in Drip-Dries,” Pirates General Manager Joe L. Brown said he made the decisions on the uniforms’ material, color and design with Dennis Johnson of Peter Muller-Munk Associates.

According to Lukas, Johnson never envisioned a pullover jersey—that may have been Rawlings’ idea—but he had some strong ideas about the pants.

“I don’t like black belts for baseball, because it’s too much like something you take out of your regular pants and then put in your uniform,” he said. “So, I came up with a buttoned waistband.

“Remember those pants where there was no belt and you just hooked the little tab over? That’s what I was going for.”

Lukas said Johnson also had nothing to do with the uniform’s fabrication, “which means the fabric was almost certainly Rawlings’ idea.”

Although one player reportedly complained that pulling off the uniform pants “was like taking off a girdle,” the fad caught on quickly. Lukas reported the kind of stretchy-era stats that only a self-proclaimed uniform geek would uncover:

- By the start of the 1973 season—2½ years after the Pirates unveiled their new design—all 24 MLB clubs had switched to stretch-knit uniforms.
- Fourteen had adopted pullover jerseys.
- Sixteen were wearing beltless pants.
- Over the next 20 years, every MLB team except the Yankees, Phillies, Dodgers and Expos went with a pullover at some point. Those same teams, plus the Mets, are the only ones that never went beltless.

Unfortunately, the synthetic fabrics also facilitated teams’ experimentation with some truly awful color combinations that endure as a symbol of the era. The Houston Astros’ horizontal “rainbow” jersey tops are often cited as the worst; the Cleveland Indians’ all dark-red unis were said to make hulking first baseman Boog Powell look like a giant blood clot.

The Cincinnati Reds were the last hold-out on the beltless pants, through 1992. MLB had started a gradual return to more traditional looks, also eliminating artificial turf and cookie-cutter, all-purpose stadiums in favor of the natural and more aesthetically pleasing.

Classic styles always come back. Faddish styles go away like two-for-the-price-of-one doubleheaders. 🍷

INVENTOR ARCHIVES: MARCH

March 11, 1791: Samuel Mullikin became the first inventor to hold multiple U.S. patents when he was granted the seventh, eighth, ninth and 10th—although U.S. patents were not numbered until 1836.

He created three machines: for threshing grain and corn, cutting and polishing marble and raising a nap on cloths. He also received a patent for breaking and swingling hemp.

Choose Credibility

Calm consistency in marketing your product is often preferable to influencer flash **BY ELIZABETH BREEDLOVE**

When you build a product, you have to sell customers on its function and purpose—as well as on the belief that it will work and last indefinitely. With social media marketing, a similar challenge exists for many inventors and entrepreneurs: You are trying to look established while in the process of becoming established.

Social media often rewards the loud, trendy and overly casual, but most inventors succeed by doing the opposite.

Your audience, especially if it skews older, is rarely looking for entertainment first. These customers are looking for clear, steady signals of professionalism, clarity and competence.

You don't have to choose between visibility and authority. You can show up consistently, communicate with care and build trust over time, without chasing trends or turning yourself into an influencer.

'Influencer-ish' issues

Most inventors can spot an influencer vibe instantly, even if they can't describe it in technical terms.

It feels overly performative. The deeper issue is not the dancing, trending audio or emojis. The deeper issue is that influencer-style content is built on personality first and product second.

This is fine when you are selling lifestyle content, entertainment or a personal brand built around being relatable. But it becomes a problem when you are selling a product that must be taken seriously—whether you are pitching a retailer, speaking to a manufacturer or asking a customer to spend real money.

Consistency builds comfort

If you want to look established online, you do not need a large following or a single viral post. You need a presence that feels cohesive, thanks to the cumulative impression created by your tone, visuals and habits over time.

When people land on your profile, they should be able to answer three questions within 30 seconds:

- For whom is this product?
- What does it do?
- Is this person legitimate?

If the answer to any of those is unclear, people move on—not because they dislike you, but more likely because you don't give them the credibility they need to see to take the next step.

Calm confidence beats hype

Inventors are often tempted to write the way social media seems to demand: with exaggerated excitement, dramatic claims and phrases that sound like marketing slogans.

But your target audience probably does not need to be convinced that your product is “game-changing.” They need to understand what it does, why it matters, and how it fits into their lives.



A credibility-first tone on social media tends to have three qualities.

First, it is specific. Instead of saying your product “solves a huge problem,” you describe the exact problem and the context in which it shows up. Instead of saying it is “high quality,” you mention the materials, testing or durability.

Second, it is measured. You can be enthusiastic without sounding breathless. You can be proud without sounding desperate for approval. A calm voice signals that you expect your product to stand on its own.

Third, it is human, but not overly personal. Many inventors think they need to share everything about their lives to connect with their audience. In reality, the strongest connection often comes from sharing the story of the work, the learning, the setbacks and the thoughtful choices that led to the final product.

People trust competence and sincerity. You can communicate both without turning your brand into a personal diary.

Clean, professional visuals

The visual style that helps inventors look established is rarely complicated. It is often simple, clean and consistent, with the product at the center.

This doesn't mean you need a studio, professional camera or expensive lighting. It just means you need to stop letting your visuals look accidental.

A credibility-first profile usually includes a clear logo or business name, a consistent color palette, and photos or videos that feel intentional rather than random.

If your photos are dim, cluttered or overly filtered, people may subconsciously associate your product with being less reliable. If your videos are shaky, if your captions are full of typos, or if your posts look like they were made in a hurry, the viewer may wonder if the product was also made in a hurry.

Predictability prevails

Many inventors believe they need to post constantly. The better approach is to post at a pace you can sustain, with a format you can repeat.

You don't have to choose between visibility and authority. You can show up consistently, communicate with care and build trust over time, without chasing trends.

Imagine someone visiting your profile once a month. If he or she sees a steady stream of thoughtful updates, even if infrequent, that person will start to believe you are actively building something.

If your profile shows bursts of frantic posting followed by long silence, an observer may sense instability—even if your business is doing fine.

You can also create reliability by choosing a few content types that fit your business and repeating them. For example, consider a short demo, a behind-the-scenes clip of testing, a photo of packaging, a customer message, a manufacturing update, or a quick explanation of a design decision.

When you repeat formats, you start to look like a company with systems, not a person scrambling for content ideas.

Trust trumps popularity

Social media is not about being popular. It is about making it easy for someone to discover your product and take you seriously.

You simply have to show your work, communicate with care and let your presence build trust the way your product did: through one thoughtful decision at a time.

When your tone is calm and specific, when your visuals are clean and intentional, and when your posting habits are steady, you create a profile that functions like a professional storefront, draws in new customers and helps you sell your invention. 📌



Elizabeth Breedlove is a freelance marketing consultant and copywriter. She has helped start-ups and small businesses launch new products and inventions via social media, blogging, email marketing and more.

Your Holy Grail: Product-Market Fit

Invention success is measured by a great product and great business execution **BY WILLIAM SEIDEL**

I am often asked, “Can my product succeed?” Yes, it can—if you do everything right.

This is a simple question with a rather complicated answer.

What kind of success? Product success does not mean business success.

Inventors need to be product focused. Seeing their invention on the shelf is gratifying: a successful product used by the customer because it solves a problem.

Business owners, managers and entrepreneurs focus on the business succeeding by building sustainability, scalability and a competitive advantage. Their customers are the shareholders and buyers who resell their products.

Many inventors believe the product is the reason for success. But the reason is usually execution. This includes management, marketing, distribution, funding and the product.

Obviously, if the product is poorly made and doesn't perform, it will not sell for long. Similarly, if the management, marketing and funding are neglected or poorly done, it will not succeed.

Most new products don't fail because the idea is terrible; they fail because the execution is weak or misaligned with the market. A great product can fail with poor marketing, and a poor product can succeed with great marketing.

Most new products don't fail because the idea is terrible; they fail because the execution is weak or misaligned with the market.

Market tests vs. research

You can conduct research, surveys and focus groups, but those are only indicators of the market and customer behavior. And they are highly dependent on the methodology. They provide insight but cannot predict success.

Market tests are the only true predictor of success. This tells how fast it sells, where it sells best, what works and what doesn't. It also tests the message, the position and the price.

If you have a “complete product” (packaged, barcoded and priced); get a meeting with a buyer who is the right person at the right time; and have the right presentation that makes the buyer open to buy, it may be a sale. But that does not mean the product is a success.

Getting the product on the shelf is not success, either. Staying on the shelf is. If it doesn't move, it doesn't stay.

Sell-in to the store or an online presence is not necessarily success and more of a test. Ninety percent of consumer goods items that get a first order never get a second one.

Reorders tell the story

Reorders mean the product has traction, sustainability and predictability.

I worked with an innovative barbecue with no buyer interest. A license to a mid-level distributor sold it to Williams Sonoma.

With six months of reorders, Walmart and Home Depot “came-a-knocking.” The barbecue broke \$100 million in the next six months.

The objective is to catch fire. This is achieved by a rapid surge in popularity; demand outstripping supply; and the market “pulling” the product through resellers. This is proof of success and product-market fit.

Such success can be directly measured by the velocity of the reorders. When a product catches fire, it quantifies the units sold per store per week and how quickly reorders occur.

This is what most inventors imagine—and what every reseller needs.

Tiers of success

For inventors and startups seeking to achieve product-market fit, it helps to think in tiers.

“*Evolutionary products*” are most successful. Chocolate-covered Oreos fit existing merchandising and distribution systems, and are quick to sell. This makes evolutionary products preferred by resellers.

“*Revolutionary products*” makes seismic change the way digital, downloadable music changed the music industry. They are expensive to market and often meet sizable resistance—and very tough for a startup.

“*Trickles*” have slow “trickle sales.” For 10 years, the Pluto-Platter was constantly on the edge of failure. Then Wham-O licensed it, repositioned it and changed the name to Frisbee. Now it’s a classic product.

“*One-hit-wonders*” spike quickly, then disappear. They are often fads or seasonal products.

“*Items*” are reliable, modest winners that sell a few million dollars over several years. Kitchen gadgets are items. Many companies are built on a portfolio of proven Items.

“*Product successes*” are what the name says: high-volume winners that sustain strong sales for multiple years and hold a defensible position in the category.

“*Hit products*” have sales over \$50 million, sell in leading chains and support the business. You may know someone who bought a hit product.



“*Classic products*” are world recognized and long lived. You bought it or use it but it may not be a big financial success, like Wikipedia.

“*Superstars*” are as big as it gets. They are disruptive and prompt change on a worldwide level, like the smartphone, the refrigerator and Ford’s assembly line.

Factors tried and true

These factors consistently tilt the odds in your favor: a deep customer understanding; industry experience; simple positioning; a thoughtful go-to-market strategy and readiness.

The product is the “what,” but the business is the “how” it makes money. Product success depends less on the “thing” and more on market fit, messaging and execution.

Great marketing can sell anything once. The goal is to generate repeat sales and create a long product life with predictable results. When everything is right, an invention will catch fire. 🚀



William Seidel is an entrepreneur, author, educator, innovator and court-approved expert witness on marketing innovation. In his career and as owner of America Invents, he has developed, licensed and marketed billions of dollars of products.

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Storage **Pickle** Solved

Woman's bag for Pickleball players crammed with easy-access areas and compartments **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

Melanie J. Romero of Denver invented an all-in-one storage bag for pickleball players.

According to pickleheads.com, there are now over 70,641 pickleball courts in the United States. Here is Romero's story about this invention, tailor made for such a popular sport.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): What is oktō™ pickleball? Also, for the uninitiated, please talk a little about the sport.

Melanie J. Romero (MJR): Oktō is the ultimate pickleball backpack, named for the octopus—an intelligent, adaptable creature that perfectly reflects both the spirit of the sport and functionality of our bag. I designed it after spending countless (fun) hours on the court and getting frustrated digging through bottomless bags.

The oktō bag offers unmatched organization and features: over 20 more than any other pickleball bag on the market. Its pockets and compartments are customizable, so players can adapt it their style of play and routine.

Pickleball is the fastest-growing sport in America. It's played on a court similar to tennis but about one-third the size. Players use solid paddles and a plastic Wiffle ball.

While it's easy to learn and enjoy on Day 1, mastering it can take a lifetime. The smaller court fosters a social, fast-paced doubles game that prioritizes skill and finesse over brute strength. It's inclusive for all ages and fitness levels, which is why it's booming—over 37 million players in the United States.

I picked up the sport about three years ago and started developing the oktō bag shortly thereafter. We officially launched on July 15, 2025.

EGT: What kind of market is involved in Pickleball?

MJR: Pickleball attracts players from ages 8 to 80-plus, with the 18–34 demographic leading in participation. There are over 10,000 places to play in the USA, and the market continues to grow—projected at 8 percent annually through 2028. The largest states for pickleball are California, Texas and Florida, followed by North Carolina, New York and Illinois.

EGT: Please tell us about your background and where you reside.

MJR: I'm a mechanical engineer, born and raised on a farm in New Mexico. I've worked for the past 26 years as the west coast regional sales manager for a UK-based manufacturer, Kinetrol.

I've also invented several products, including the SnapBagger (a yard cleanup tool), and the



“I’ve been building and inventing things since childhood; it’s in my DNA. I’m a creative problem solver by nature, and I typically invent out of necessity.” —MELANIE J. ROMERO

YardPup (a pet waste scoop). oktō is my first foray into textile design.

I've been building and inventing things since childhood; it's in my DNA. I'm a creative problem solver by nature, and I typically invent out of necessity. I hold several U.S. utility and design patents, along with registered trademarks.

EGT: Please share that patenting experience.

MJR: Oktō's fold-out workstation is patent-pending. I wrote the provisional utility patent myself, using AI assistance, and had it reviewed by a retired patent attorney friend. Remarkably, I filed it for under \$100. That's a huge contrast to my previous inventions, for which I spent tens of thousands of dollars on patent work. This provisional gives me a full year to test the market before filing a non-provisional application.

EGT: What are oktō Pickleball bags made from? Materials? Special features? Advantage over competitors?

MJR: Oktō is constructed with durable, water-proof materials and premium-grade hardware. Unlike most bags, which hang awkwardly or not at all, ours comes with two integrated hooks so it hangs level on a fence.

What really sets oktō apart is its 20-plus, purpose-driven features. It's a hybrid of quick-access zones (for gear you need between games) and private, zippered compartments for your valuables. Quick-access areas use strong magnetic closures instead of zippers, offering smooth, one-handed access.

The interior includes 16 customizable pockets for organizing gear at your fingertips. A removable, insulated lunchbox is included, and a patent-pending, fold-out workstation offers a space for your phone, business cards, pens and notetaking—ideal for players handling business on the court.



Oktō also travels well. It features a trolley sleeve for attaching to a rollaboard suitcase and a side bottle holder that zips flat for compact storage. And each purchase supports coral reef restoration through the Diver Mojo Foundation—because we love the octopus and the ocean it calls home.

EGT: Where are you manufacturing? In the United States, or overseas?

MJR: We manufacture in Vietnam.

EGT: Have you had any obstacles in developing the bags?

MJR: Yes. Developing a textile product was new territory for me. I'm very hands-on with metal and 3D CAD, so my past inventions were easy to prototype in-house. But with oktō, I had to rely on professional design help. Translating my ideas into tech packs and samples took longer and cost more than expected, simply because bag prototyping was outside my skill set.

Named for the octopus, the oktō bag has 20-plus purpose-driven features that include multiple customizable pockets and compartments. Quick-access areas use strong magnetic closures instead of zippers for smooth, one-handed access.

EGT: Where are oktō Pickleball bags sold?

MJR: Currently, we're selling direct to consumer on our website (oktōpickleball.com) and on Amazon. We're also in talks with major online retailers like Pickleball Central and Pickleball Warehouse, as well as brick-and-mortar stores including Dick's Sporting Goods.

EGT: What successes have you had with marketing and PR?

MJR: We're just getting started, but early momentum has come from live events and direct engagement.

Our launch at the National Pickleball Expo was a success, and we've begun experimenting with social media marketing. One of our recent TikTok videos reached 8,000 views, which was exciting for a new brand.



EGT: Will you add any new products to your website?

MJR: Yes. We plan to offer more colorways and potentially new models over time. I also have two new pickleball-related inventions in development. These will complement the oktō brand and be great additions to our Shopify site.

EGT: What insights about product development can you share?

MJR: My biggest piece of advice is to focus group your designs early. It's easy to fall in love with your own ideas, but your customers may see things differently. Getting honest feedback will help ensure that what you're creating truly meets their needs. 📌

Details: melanie@oktōpickleball.com



Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 (edietolchin.com/portfolio). She is the author of several books, including "Secrets of Successful Women Inventors" (<https://a.co/d/fAGlvZJ>) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing" (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).

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Best wishes, Jack Lander

1-2-3 Common Invention Questions Answered

BY BEN GREENBERG, FOUNDER OF INVENTIONS UNLIMITED (INVENTIONUNLIMITED.COM):

1 What's the hidden danger of skipping design for manufacturing?

You could build something that works perfectly but cannot be sold profitably. Factories care about part counts, materials, assembly time and yield. A prototype ignores all of that. If you don't design for manufacturing, manufacturing will redesign it for you—usually at a cost that kills your margins. A great idea must also be buildable at scale.

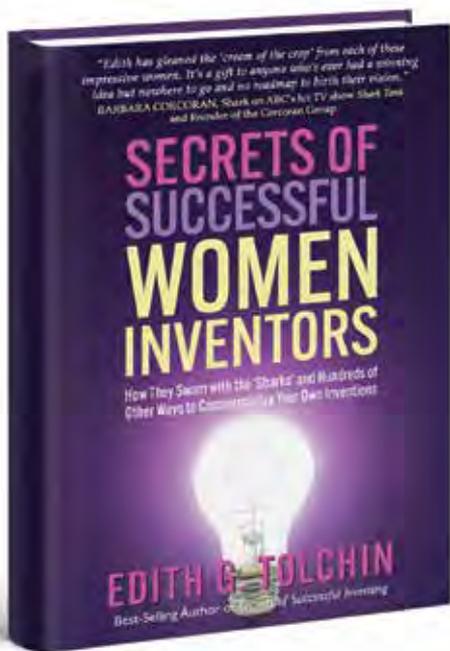
2 When should inventors focus on patents and IP?

Early, but strategically. You don't need a complete patent immediately, but you do need a filing date. A provisional patent application protects your idea while you test, refine and talk to partners. Perfect protection doesn't exist. The real danger isn't theft; it's being too afraid to move forward and never launching at all.

3 What separates inventors who succeed from those who quit?

They treat invention as a process, not a moment. The successful ones expect mistakes, redesigns and setbacks. They don't get emotionally attached to Version 1. They measure progress by what they learn, not how impressed people seem. Persistence beats brilliance every time. The ones who keep iterating reach the market.

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Available for purchase at Amazon (<https://tinyurl.com/334ntc3w>), Barnes & Noble, and edietolchin.com.



Edith G. Tolchin
(photo by Amy Goldstein Photography)

Edith G. Tolchin knows inventors!

Edie has interviewed over 100 inventors for her longtime column in *Inventors Digest* (www.edietolchin.com/portfolio). She has held a prestigious U.S. customs broker license since 2002. She has written five books, including the best-selling *Secrets of Successful Inventing* (2015), and *Fanny on Fire*, a recent finalist in the Foreword Reviews INDIE Book Awards.



(ad designed by joshwallace.com)

A Plantable Pencil?

Eco-friendly invention has recently expanded into a line of plantable makeup liners **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

The pencils work like ordinary pencils except for having a biodegradable cellulose capsule filled with seeds at the end. Once the pencil is too short to use, the stub is planted with the capsule under the soil, watered, and germinates over time.

The World's Only Plantable Pencil" is a great tagline to pique one's interest in SproutWorld.

This patented, multi-use, eco-friendly invention will attract amateur gardeners (it's easy to use), as well as makeup enthusiasts, kids and nature lovers. SproutWorld founder and CEO Michael Stausholm of Copenhagen, Denmark, "started (in 2013) by packing boxes of plantable pencils in his living room" and as of this writing said he has sold more than 85 million units in 80-plus countries.

The product was originally invented by three MIT students.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Tell us about SproutWorld products and please share a bit about your background, country of origin, etc.

Michael Stausholm (MS): I'm born and raised in Denmark. SproutWorld is headquartered in Copenhagen.

Before starting SproutWorld, I spent many years working in international sales, production and shipping—particularly in Indonesia, where I lived for 14 years. That experience gave me a strong foundation in manufacturing, logistics and supplier relationships, which became extremely valuable once we began producing and selling physical products globally.

SproutWorld holds the patent of "plantable writing instruments." Our best-known product is the plantable pencil, which contains a seed capsule instead of an eraser. When the pencil becomes too short to use, you plant it and it grows into herbs, flowers, vegetables or trees, depending on the seed.

More recently, we introduced the world's first patented, plantable makeup liners, including eyeliner and brow liner, which follow the same simple idea: use the product, plant it, and let it grow a new life: a plant.

EGT: When did you begin selling?

MS: SproutWorld was founded in 2013, and we began selling shortly after acquiring the rights to the original, plantable pencil concept and bringing it to market under the SproutWorld brand.

EGT: How did you get involved with the three MIT students? Who holds the patent?

MS: The original idea for a plantable pencil came from three MIT students who developed



Patenting “was a long, expensive and at times challenging process but absolutely essential. Protecting the core idea is what allowed us to build a sustainable business and defend it against copycats.” —MICHAEL STAUSHOLM



the concept as part of a sustainability project. They launched it on Kickstarter with a provisional patent (application). I discovered the project online, immediately saw its potential and acquired the intellectual property rights from them.

EGT: How do the pencils and makeup liners work?

MS: All our products follow the same basic principle: use, plant, grow. The pencils work like ordinary pencils, but instead of an eraser, they have a biodegradable cellulose capsule filled with seeds. Once the pencil is too short to use, you plant the stub with the capsule under the soil, water it, and with light and time it germinates.

A major part of our business is B2B. The plantable pencils can be fully customized with logos, colors and messages, and they are widely used by other companies as sustainable giveaways for conferences, campaigns, trade fairs and internal communication.

Brands such as Coca-Cola, Marriott, Pandora, IKEA and Porsche have used SproutWorld pencils as a way to share their message as something meaningful and environmentally positive.

Our makeup liners work exactly in the same way as the pencils. They're used like standard eyeliners or brow liners, and when only the stub remains, you plant it. The seed capsule then grows into wildflowers designed to support bees and other pollinators.

EGT: Is any type of soil required?

MS: No special soil is required. Regular potting soil works perfectly well. We recommend

planting the stub so the capsule is covered with soil, using a pot with drainage, and placing it somewhere with natural light and regular watering.

EGT: How many different products are you selling, and what is the pricing for the U.S. market?

MS: We sell a range of plantable pencils in different editions, colors and pack sizes, as well as plantable makeup liners and related accessories. In the U.S. consumer market, plantable pencil packs with five pieces typically start around \$13.

We also work extensively in the promotional and corporate gifting market, where pricing depends on volume and customization.

EGT: How long did it take for the SproutWorld patents, and in which countries were they obtained? Was the process difficult?

MS: The patent process took several years and involved filings in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, China and parts of Asia. It was a long, expensive and at times challenging process but absolutely essential. Protecting the core idea is what allowed us to build a sustainable business and defend it against copycats.

EGT: Where are you manufacturing, and how did you locate a reputable supplier?

MS: Today, all SproutWorld products are manufactured in Poland. We previously had production in Minnesota for the North American market, but rising costs made it too expensive to maintain, and that production was discontinued in 2024.



The pencils are part of SproutWorld's international, eco-friendly mission.

Finding the right manufacturing partner required extensive vetting, factory audits and long-term relationship building. Quality, consistency, ethical standards and reliability were non-negotiable from the beginning.

EGT: Did you experience any quality control issues early?

MS: Quality control is always an ongoing focus when producing physical products, at scale. As we grew, we continuously refined materials, processes and testing procedures, working closely with our suppliers to ensure consistent quality across all markets.

EGT: Because the seeds turn into edible products, is there any government safety testing required for U.S. markets?

MS: There are two main regulatory considerations. Seeds and planting materials are subject to U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations related to plant health and import controls. Cosmetics, such as our makeup liners, fall under U.S. FDA (Food and Drug Administration) cosmetic regulations, which focus on product safety, labeling and compliance.

While the products themselves are not food, we take materials safety and regulatory

compliance very seriously in every market we operate in.

EGT: Do you have a presence in the USA?

MS: While we no longer maintain a physical office in the United States, we continue to operate through our SproutWorld USA company and work closely with U.S. partners, distributors and retailers. And through Amazon.

EGT: What are your next plans for SproutWorld? Are you working on new products?

MS: Our focus is on continuing to develop second-life products—everyday items that don't end up as waste but instead turn into something living. We're exploring new product categories while strengthening our existing lines and continuing to protect our intellectual property globally.

EGT: What guidance do you have for novice inventors developing a food or plant-based product, especially for exporting to the U.S.?

MS: My biggest advice is to protect your idea early and thoroughly. Patents are expensive and time-consuming, but they're critical if your concept is truly unique. At the same time, keep the product simple and intuitive: People should understand it instantly.

When exporting to the U.S., it's essential to understand regulatory requirements, whether that involves USDA rules for seeds or FDA regulations for cosmetics and consumer goods. Working with experts and planning for compliance from the very beginning can save a tremendous amount of time and cost later on.

Protecting your patent once you hold it is also crucial. We use an AI-based software called RedPoints to detect illegal copies online, which is highly efficient and saves both time and money. 🌱

Details: ms@sproutworld.com

Design Alight in Layers

Carolyn Cartwright's blown-glass lamps are a triumph of art and IP protection **BY CYNTHIA UNDERWOOD**

Carolyn Cartwright brings ideas to life in a medium that is both ancient and unforgiving: molten glass.

The founder of Cartwright New York creates sculptural lighting that functions simultaneously as illumination and object. Each lamp reflects a deep understanding of proportion, balance and the behavior of light on curved surfaces.

For inventors working in any material, her career is a reminder that mastery of process is often the gateway to original form.

Cartwright's path to product design began in the film industry as a set decorator, where she developed a sensitivity to how lighting shapes mood and spatial experience. That background translates directly into her lamps—composed with a cinematic awareness of shadow, reflection and diffusion.

Her work demonstrates an important lesson for innovators: Skills gained in one field can become the conceptual foundation for invention in another.

The ability to observe how people experience light became the seed, consciously or not, for a

line of objects that now defines her brand. Intensive work with Venetian glass techniques became a turning point in her development.

By engaging directly with traditional methods and adapting them to contemporary forms, she built a design vocabulary rooted in history and experimentation. Her lamps often appear minimal at

first glance—yet closer inspection reveals subtle asymmetries, layered glass structures and carefully tuned geometry. This balance between control and material spontaneity is where true design innovation lives.

Cartwright's portfolio also highlights the strategic value of design patents in the decorative arts.

In a category where the basic function of providing light is well established, competitive distinction comes from visual configuration. Protecting the ornamental aspects of a lamp secures the identity of the product and allows a small studio to compete in a crowded marketplace.

For independent designers and makers, the model of protecting the visuals when the innovation itself is visual is particularly wise.

Working from her Brooklyn Navy Yard studio, Cartwright collaborates with fabricators, engineers and fellow artisans to bring her gorgeous blown-glass lamps to market. Her practice shows that invention can grow within networks of skilled partners.

Her story offers three clear sparks of inspiration: develop fluency in your material; allow prior experiences to inform new inventions; protect the distinctive appearance of your work. When those elements align, a functional object can become a signature design and a sustainable business. 📌

Details: cartwrightny.com



Cynthia R. Underwood is a design patent examiner, painter and innovation advocate. She is co-creator of the "How Cool Is That?" video series, which highlights inventive objects and their stories. Her creative work is at cynthiaunderwood.com.



Figure 1 from U.S. Design Patent No. 673,728 (below left), granted on January 1, 2013, shows subtle asymmetries, layered glass structures and carefully tuned geometry. Cartwright composes "with a cinematic awareness of shadow, reflection and diffusion," resulting in the quality of lamp above.

YOU CAN DO THIS.

Megan Pater says inventors seeking grant money only need to know where to look—and the right strategy

BY REID CREAGER

She discusses the childhood memory with characteristic rapid-fire delivery, as if reading a weather forecast for the California town where she grew up.

“I went begging for money from Catholic charities. It was like, ‘Hey, we need money to pay our electric bills.’ That’s what we would do on the weekends. My dad would take me to different churches, and we’d get money from different churches to pay our bills. That was normal for me.”

Megan Pater lived with her mother in Huntington Beach and quit school in the seventh grade when her mother became ill, so she could work. “I would come home and the lights would be off. The power would be off. So,

I made it so I could make sure we didn’t have that problem anymore.”

For the founder of California-based Fund-Nation, finding money is as normal as her owning 300 cats (many of them are sheltered). A recent virtual interview revealed an effervescent, compassionate, intelligent, sometimes frenetic presence—a problem solver who would prefer to flip a switch and help people turn on their latent financial power.

The latter is why she calls herself a frustrated person with the best intentions.

“I like to win,” she says with a laugh. “I feel like I’m a nice person, but more so I’m a frustrated person [because] I saw so many people running up against that wall and then giving



up and not getting anywhere when they have a million free resources available to them.

“They have so much free help that it’s, it’s just, it’s nauseating how much stuff is out there that doesn’t get used.”

That passion manifests itself through her commitment to inform *Inventors Digest* readers about grant opportunities for inventors and startups, beginning monthly with this issue.

Hard-earned lessons

With her assistant already on the virtual call, Pater flashes into screen view a few minutes after the interview’s scheduled start and blurts out, “I just found out yesterday I’m running for Chamber of Commerce president” in Boron, California, a historic mining community in the Mojave Desert. “I had no plans on doing it, but I had to answer the call.”

This probably isn’t going to be a conventional interview with conventional advice. It quickly becomes apparent this is a fundraising expert with an expansive, innovative, community-building worldview—telling us what is worthwhile, what is misunderstood, and how to help and trust ourselves.

“Empowering Underprivileged Communities Through Equitable Financial Resources

and Education” is the large-type pledge on Fund-Nation.org/home. “Helping Nonprofits and Small Businesses With the Funding They Deserve” is the proclamation on Fund-Nation.org.

It’s all part of getting money for people who need and deserve it. Pater, a Native American, started the organization in 2022 alongside her credit-repair agency, ECE Solutions, to help empower as many people as possible.

“I was seeing that clients did not just have credit problems; they had a funding problem. My original plan was to create a Community Development Financial Institution, but I realized that putting people into more debt was not always the right solution. Grants allowed people to access capital without having to pay it back, and Fund-Nation became a way to teach that skill instead.” She is determined to pass along how to play the grant-writing “game” through lessons she learned the hard way.



“I got into grant writing out of necessity. I run two nonprofits and a for-profit social enterprise, and I had to learn how funding systems work in order to keep programs alive.”

One of those nonprofits is the East Kern County Community Foundation, which she founded. Its mission is to address Boron-area community needs “through impactful initiatives empowering individuals to overcome challenges and fostering sustainable solutions.”

As more people and media learn about Pater’s gift for understanding how systems work and how people think—essential components in landing grant money, she says—the more they want her help, and the more she wants to help.

A February 2025 *Economic Insider* story, headlined “How a Small Mining Town’s Bold Economic Plan Could Revolutionize Rural America,” highlighted Boron and Pater’s innovative program featuring concepts such as guaranteed income and individual development accounts.

The pre-write foundation

Fund-Nation offers an array of specific and all-inclusive grant education packages involving writing, mentoring, strategy and more. But Pater—honored by Best of Best Review as the best strategic grant writer the past two years and, as the founder of Birthmom Buddies, the author of a bill to Congress protecting the mental health of mothers who have given up a baby for adoption—wants to cultivate other skilled grant writers who can deepen the pool of education.

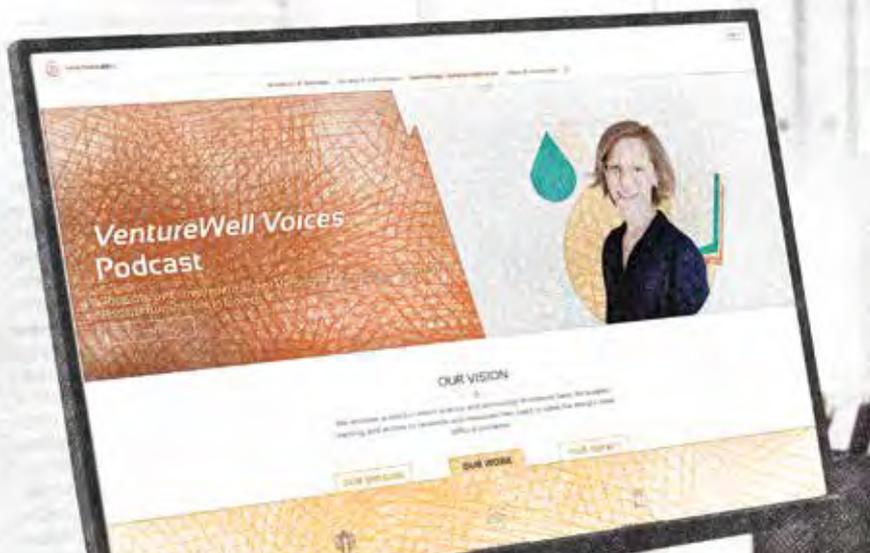
She says the ideal grant application is not defined by a great invention concept, or even a consistently great source of funding.

“A major myth is that fundraising is about how good your idea is,” she says. “In reality, it is about positioning, relationships and alignment. If you don’t know the tricks and tips of the strategy, no matter how good your idea is, you’re probably going to be sitting on the outside.”

“Another myth is that grants are only for experts or institutions. Many grants and free public programs exist, but people do not know how to access or use them correctly.”

“A major myth is that fundraising is about how good your idea is. In reality, it is about positioning, relationships and alignment.” — MEGAN PATER





CURRENT GRANTS FOR INVENTORS

From Megan Pater, founder of Fund-Nation. Beginning with the April Inventors Digest, Pater will feature a different grant opportunity each month on the Inventiveness page (Page 46).

NON-GOVERNMENTAL Student and early-stage inventor grants

VentureWell E-Team Program, Spring 2026. Offers up to \$25,000 in grant funding for early-stage innovator teams to develop scalable innovations that address sufficient social, health or environmental challenges. Requires student science/engineering teams (minimum of two people). Deadline: April 28. venturewell.org

VentureWell Aspire Program (ongoing). Funding varies for this five-week, in-depth, hybrid program that prepares startups for investor engagement. Investor-mentors work one-on-one with startups to simulate due diligence conversations and integrate feedback into deal room materials in real time. This program aims to prepare startups to raise equity investment. venturewell.org

General technology and innovation grants

Comcast Innovation Fund Grant (ongoing). Offers from \$3,000 to \$150,000 in grant funding for a diverse group of applicants, including individuals and organizations working

on projects within the fund's areas of interest—innovative projects that contribute to the internet in novel ways. The program supports technologists, researchers and academics in advancing internet technology and connectivity services. The fund offers open-source development grants, general research grants and targeted research grants. innovationfund.comcast.com

Sustainability and environmental innovation grants

The Lemelson Foundation Grant (general, ongoing, by invitation). Offers from \$50,000 to \$500,000 for inventors at all stages, with a focus on projects showing social, environmental and economic impact. lemelson.org/funding

Small business and startup grants

Skip Instant Grants (Tuesdays and Fridays). Offers from \$500 to \$2,000 awarded live to entrepreneurs, typically within 24 to 48 hours of listing, with winners announced during livestreams (inventors often must watch the livestream to receive the grant). The grants are part of the Skip platform, helping entrepreneurs

access funding, grants and business growth tools. It provides AI tools and resources to simplify applications and business planning. Grants are generally open to all entrepreneurs unless the subject area is specific. helloskip.com

FEDERAL

Challenge.gov Federal Information Challenges. This program features 100-plus active challenges in the technology, health, environment and innovation sectors with rolling deadlines, and funding ranging from \$1,000 to \$1 million per challenge. Challenge.gov is the official U.S. government platform for federal prize competitions and crowdsourcing campaigns. It connects federal agencies with the public to find innovative solutions to complex problems and advance technological goals. challenge.gov

Small Business Administration Non-Small Business Innovation Research/Small Business Technology Transfer Grants. These grants, focusing on small business growth and innovation with typical funding between \$5,000 and \$100,000, are rolling and program specific. sba.gov/funding-programs/grants

THE RICH FUNNEL TUNNEL

It's important to note that federal or state grants are rarely awarded directly to private citizens. They are usually awarded to state and local governments that then distribute those funds to eligible organizations or people.

But as Pater says, there is a tremendous amount of federal grant money to be funneled down: Congress.gov reported last June that “federal funds (the vast majority of which are comprised of grants) account for a little over one-third of total state government revenue.”

Pater recommends a two-pronged plan for people who want to write a grant. The first step has nothing to do with writing and involves openly accessible assistance that is often underutilized.

“For inventors, I feel like their best bet isn't grant writing out of the gate. Their best bet to get everything going is the easy and small business stuff through the Small Business Development Center, because they'll actually walk you through all the processes. And then come to me.”

The SBDC provides free or low-cost assistance to small businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs. Services include business

planning and development; access to capital and connecting with potential investors;

market research and analysis; legal and regulatory guidance; technology and innovation support; and training and workshops.

Pater says the SBDC offers an essential knowledge foundation that can help prepare inventors for different scenarios.

“Readiness is key,” she says. “If somebody comes in and says, ‘Hey, we're gonna give you this much money,’ are you ready to take it and know what to do with it?”

“A lot of times inventors will do a little bit of research and development, but they don't really have all the data they need to proceed. So, it's not just like you're not ready. It's just more like, ‘Let's figure this out together and kind of bridge that gap.’ SBDC does that so perfectly.”

What's your fit?

A number of websites tell grant applicants about the importance of storytelling. But regardless of how compelling or promising an invention story is, it's secondary to knowing the person or people to whom you're relating said story.

The SBDC and Fund-Nation don't want to see inventors trying to jam a square idea peg into a round hole.

“The biggest mistake is trying to make a grant fit, instead of applying to grants that

“Many grants and free public programs exist, but people do not know how to access or use them correctly.”



already align,” Pater says. “Another mistake is thinking the process is about storytelling alone.”

It’s crucial to know the potential funder, what the entity cares about—and how it thinks, if possible.

“Inventors who do best [in getting grants] are those who can clearly explain what they are building, who it serves, and how it aligns with existing programs or public priorities,” Pater says. “It is less about being an invention expert and more about being able to frame the work in a way that makes sense to funders.”

Despite her well-established framing acumen—securing more than \$6.3 million in grants for nonprofits and small businesses at last count—Pater and Fund-Nation aren’t going to write your grant for you.

“I don’t believe anybody else should write your grant,” she says. “I think that you need to be able to write your grant.”

In her 6-week mentorship program, “I’ll teach you how. I will give you strategies on how to go after grants. I’ll give you actionable things to make that strategy work and lessons on how to form these relationships. But I don’t write grants for other people because it is not from me, and I will never write about it as passionately as you will.

“If it’s your invention, it’s something that you created in infancy. You know it better than anybody else. Why would you ask somebody else to be able to put that in words? It’s silly. So I will teach you how to write background.”

Fund-Nation’s Grant Funding Accelerator, a plan for writing a grant and getting it funded within six weeks, offers three to five real funding leads “not pulled from Google” and personally matched to your mission, also providing AI grant tools where you build your own bots.

Angels all around

A gemologist by trade who also worked in a pawn shop, Pater taps into her diverse work experiences that have centered around people’s need for money in varying degrees. She reiterates this constant: Money is out there to be given away if you know where to look and use the right strategies to get it.

“For the longest time, I had no idea that grants existed. I knew they existed for schools, for nonprofits, but not for businesses. There’s tons of funding. If anybody tells you there’s not money, you just ask somebody else.”

But first, she says, you have to have the determination to get what somebody has for you.

“If you have a nonprofit, if you have a business, if you have anything that you need funded, you should be talking to every single person available.

“Like 37 Angels”—a community of female angel inventors who help female-owned startups secure funding. “You can go there, you can have these people who are ready to invest in whatever you have. And they’re just willing to give you their money. It’s the craziest thing. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Your mileage may vary, of course. Pater was driven to create a database of angel investors “from finding people and listening to people. I listen a lot to what they’re trying to get done in their lives.

“This database of people who want to help, sometimes they just don’t know how to help. So, I’m trying to bridge that gap.”

Crowdfunding your invention, though often hit and miss and a huge time commitment with intense competition, should not be overlooked.

“Crowdfunding is not to be snubbed,” she says with a soft chuckle. “I just saw a litter box built from nothing to something in 60 days. I was like, ‘Geez, they raised a lot of money.’

“I’ve seen things happen over some stupid stuff that I think should never have been funded.”

Then comes a louder laugh.

“Yep, that’s America.” 🇺🇸

Details: info@fund-nation.org; 1-769-920-1379

FREE WEEKLY SESSIONS

Megan Pater’s Organize, Prioritize, and Unite initiative to help organizations become grant ready is every Wednesday at 6 p.m. Pacific Time. Though the sessions are meant for nonprofits, they can help all smaller, underresourced organizations learn the keys to getting grant funding.

The link: www.Fund-nation.pro

WEDNESDAY
6 PM

A NEW LIFE, SAVING LIVES

Wireless tech pioneer swings out of retirement with stroke-detecting device

BY ALYSON DUTCH

He quit golf to save lives. That's how this second act began.

After decades as a wireless pioneer—one of the architects behind 4G and 5G wireless infrastructure and a prolific patent holder in radio frequency (RF) engineering—Shih Mo assumed retirement in 2016 would be restful. He had helped shape how the world connects. He had built companies. He had earned the fairway.

But golf grew repetitive. Standing still felt unnatural. His mind didn't slow down just because his calendar did.

And somewhere between tee shots, he began thinking about signal speed—not for smartphones, but for survival.

“I spent my career in wireless communications and RF (radio-frequency) engineering, but I'd never worked in medical devices,” he said. “Around the same time, both of my parents died from strokes.”

That got him thinking.

“We're in the 21st century, and stroke is still one of the leading causes of death and disability worldwide. With all

Shih Mo's Tiposi MWI brain scanner combines microwave imaging with AI to produce high-resolution brain images for fast, portable and radiation-free stroke detection.



the technology we have, why are we still losing so many people to something that's often treatable if caught early enough?"

Though immersed in the personal loss, his curiosity accelerated when a colleague mentioned that medical device companies had been using wireless chips from his former company for years.

The convergence was quiet but persistent: What if wireless technology could be used not just to move data but also detect catastrophe inside the human brain?

That question eventually became Tiposi.

The microwaves factor

Shih's expertise is in RF engineering, the invisible architecture behind modern connectivity. Having built the backbone of 4G and 5G, he understands signal penetration, interference, propagation, latency. He understands how microwaves behave in complex environments.

Microwave sensing is not new. It has long been used in military ground-penetrating radar systems to detect buried landmines. But he saw something different: What if those same principles could detect hemorrhage or ischemic changes in brain tissue?

The leap between a technology that can be used for mobile phones to the battlefield is where this inventor's true colors unfurled—a classic cross-domain thought. Shih jumped in.

Tiposi uses microwave wireless imaging to detect stroke in seconds, and not in an MRI suite that takes hours to reach. This can detect life-threatening situations during a hospital transfer, in an ambulance, at a bedside—and in clinics without advanced imaging infrastructure.

Already used in hospitals in China, the device—a 2026 Consumer Electronics Show Innovation Awards Honoree® in the AI category—is designed to address one brutal truth

of emergency medicine: When “time is brain,” the ride to the MRI is often too long.

His own gold standard

Shih admitted that early on, he thought about competing with MRI. If microwave imaging can create images, why not replace the gold standard?

Because the gold standard is entrenched. Instead, he reframed the opportunity.

The real problem wasn't image quality. It was the delay. His opportunity lay in the gap between symptom onset and definitive imaging that happens every day, everywhere in the world: the time it takes for emergency transport, being far away in a rural clinic or a traffic jam that steals neurons by the minute.

He found the unserved interval.

That's strategic maturity. And it's a lesson for every entrepreneur tempted to attack giants head-on: Don't fight the incumbent on its strength. Find the suffering it doesn't solve.

Time, money recalibrated

Development began in 2017. Shih thought it would take four years. It has taken nine—because deep innovation in regulated industries resists optimism.

He came from telecom, not medical devices. Early assumptions about sensor placement were wrong.

RF interacts with biological tissue differently than with antennas and base stations. Designs were scrapped, form factors reimaged. Months evaporated.

Then, COVID hit.

Hospitals closed to external testing. Labs went dark. Hardware could not be prototyped over Zoom. Funding tightened in 2022.

Experimental results didn't align cleanly with theory. Timelines slipped. Investors became restless.

He describes those times as the worst period—not because the science failed, but



“These are experienced neurologists who’ve seen thousands of scans, and they were looking at our technology like it had just done something they didn’t think was possible.” —SHIH MO

because his financial runway shrank while proof remained incomplete. His biggest fear wasn’t technological collapse; it was running out of time before validation.

For inventors reading this, this founder says: “Budget three times what you think—in time and money.”

The moment of validation

One moment recalibrated everything.

During early hospital testing, Tiposi detected a stroke that CT and MRI had missed. Experienced neurologists, accustomed to traditional imaging, stared at the results in awe.

“My most joyful movement was watching the doctors’ faces when we showed them the results,” Shih said. “These are experienced neurologists who’ve seen thousands of scans, and they were looking at our technology like it had just done something they didn’t think was possible.”

In product development, there’s a massive difference between incremental improvement and category disruption. That moment signaled the latter.

For Shih, it wasn’t about outshining MRI. It was about proving that portable, RF-based brain monitoring could catch what standard pathways sometimes overlook—and do it quickly—that critical time gap when people were dying.

That’s when he knew his second professional act might matter more than the first.

Escaping a startup trap

But soon after loomed a Catch-22 that revealed his operational maturity.

As with most startups, the Milpitas, California-based company initially planned to outsource manufacturing and keep R&D internal. Let an original design manufacturer scale production.

Then, reality intervened. No serious manufacturer would take low-volume work unless it would be paid premium prices—“sometimes millions for small batches,” Shih recalled. But you can’t promise volume until the product is proven, a classic startup trap.

So he built internal manufacturing capability. He calls it his company’s “manufacturing academy.”

The company could not afford to make the tiniest of mistakes. “One defect could mean a missed stroke. You have to be self-responsible for how your product is made.”

As someone who has shepherded countless launches, Shih knows that founders must not treat manufacturing as an afterthought. He understood that from the start—or at least, early enough to correct course.

The senior CEO advantage

As someone with a history of building and scaling companies, he refers to himself as a “senior CEO.”

He has negotiated international manufacturing contracts. He has managed cross-border engineering teams. He knows when to raise capital and when to wait. He reads financials with fluency. He knows how quickly hardware timelines expand.

The company began in 2017 with a neurologist and a handful of R&D engineers. Everyone did everything.

As prototypes matured, manufacturing expertise became essential. As clinical validation approached, regulatory and hospital collaboration teams expanded. In 2024, internal manufacturing scaled, pushing headcount significantly higher.

Today, roughly 60 percent of the team is engineering and R&D, 20 percent clinical, 20 percent management and operations.

That ratio wasn't pre-planned. It evolved in response to recurring bottlenecks.

The company holds multiple patents around its core dual-comb spectroscopy and RF-based detection technology, along with a trademark for the Tiposi brand.

The IP strategy is pragmatic: Patent what can be reverse engineered. Keep proprietary manufacturing processes and calibration algorithms as trade secrets.

Invention isn't just about discovery. It's about protection architecture.

Loving the problem

Asked about how he manages stress, Shih didn't talk about work-life balance. He talked about belief.

For inventors, the hardest discipline isn't technical; it's psychological.

“You must love the problem itself, not just the idea of success,” he said.

His advice is direct.

Don't attack established systems head-on. Instead, “Find the gap the established players aren't filling. For us, it was the time gap before patients reach an MRI.”

Bring in domain experts immediately if you're crossing industries.

Perhaps most important: “Hire those who believe in your mission. They will stay when things get rough. My biggest fear through this process was not being able to deliver, and part [of that] might have been having to lay off valuable team members.

“My team was committed to finishing what they started, and we made it through. Together.”

Chasing faster minutes

The next focus for Tiposi is on regulatory pathways and broader deployment. Long term, Shih sees a broader platform for portable brain monitoring—traumatic brain injury, seizures, cognitive decline—and eventually, perhaps, new forms of brain-computer interfaces built on RF rather than traditional EEG.

But he is not chasing futurism. He is chasing minutes.

When he left the golf course, it wasn't to build another telecom empire. It was because just playing golf felt wrong while other kinds of more important strokes remained undetected.

In an industry obsessed with first-time founders and overnight disruption, there is something particularly special about a man who retired, grew bored and decided the next signal he cared about wouldn't be data. It would be life.

And after a first career that connected billions of devices, this one may connect something far more fragile: the moments that make a life salvageable. 🧠



Alyson Dutch has been a leading consumer packaged goods launch specialist for 30 years. She operates Malibu-based Brown + Dutch Public Relations and Consumer Product Events, and is a widely published author.



National Inventors Hall of Fame

to induct **15**

May induction ceremonies to feature 7 living honorees

Sara Blakely made sure that footless, control top pantyhose was the shape of things to come. Teresa Meng's groundbreaking research, engineering expertise and entrepreneurial leadership made Wi-Fi more energy efficient and affordable. Olive Dennis made the railroad passenger experience an easier ride.

These three women of high standards and achievement—clear minorities in the traditionally male-dominated field of inventing—are among the most 15 recent selections by the National Inventors Hall of Fame.® The seven living and eight posthumous inductees will be honored May 7 at the NIHF's 2026 induction ceremony at The Anthem in Washington, D.C. The day before, new inductees will place their names on illuminated hexagons in the National Inventors Hall of Fame Museum's Gallery of Icons.®

The hall of fame has been in partnership with the United States Patent and Trademark Office since 1973. The total of NIHF inductees will reach 667 this year.

The Class of 2026



Louis Argenta and Michael Morykwas: Vacuum Assisted Closure® (V.A.C.®). The co-inventors developed a medical device that uses controlled suction to draw excess fluid from a wound while promoting its closure. V.A.C. therapy has been used to help millions of patients worldwide by treating a wide range of difficult-to-heal wounds.



Sara Blakely: SPANX® Shapewear. The Spanx brand revolutionized and became synonymous with shapewear. Founded with a \$5,000 personal investment, Spanx Inc. made Blakely the youngest self-made woman billionaire and a role model for entrepreneurs.



Gebisa Ejeta: Sorghum hybrids. His higher-quality sorghum hybrids are resistant to drought and disease. By increasing the production and availability of sorghum, a versatile and important cereal grain, Ejeta has helped feed millions of people around the world.



Teresa Meng: CMOS Wi-Fi. The founder of Atheros Communications, Meng pioneered the integration of all communication functions onto a single CMOS chip, laying the technical foundation that drove the widespread adoption of Wi-Fi.





Henry Samuelli: Broadband communications. The electrical engineer's solutions enabled affordable, high-speed digital data transmission to homes and businesses. He is the co-founder of Broadcom Inc., a global leader in wired and wireless communications.



Feng Zhang: CRISPR gene editing. Zhang invented transformative technologies to improve human health, including first demonstrating the use of engineered CRISPR-Cas9 systems for genome editing in human cells. He has co-founded several companies to commercialize these technologies.



Donald Alstadt: Chemlok® rubber-to-metal adhesive system (posthumous). The chemist's invention is used across many industries, including the automotive, aerospace, agriculture, off-highway, defense and energy markets. Chemlok and Chemlok-derived technologies are used in almost every vehicle in the world.



Olive Dennis: Railroad passenger car improvements (posthumous). A civil engineer for the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad Co., Dennis traveled tens of thousands of miles annually for nearly 30 years in her efforts to develop many significant innovations for railroad passenger cars.



Frank S. Greene Jr.: Semiconductor memory technology (posthumous). A pioneering electrical engineer, inventor and entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, Greene developed high-speed semiconductor memory systems, including the fastest microchip then available for the ILLIAC IV supercomputer. Recognizing the need for greater participation in STEM fields, Greene also was dedicated to mentoring the next generation.



The National Inventors Hall of Fame was founded in 1973, in partnership with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.



Maurus Logan: Ty-Rap® cable ties (posthumous). An electrical engineer, Logan invented cable ties to address worker safety and wiring installation inefficiencies in the aviation industry. Now a billion-dollar market segment, cable ties, also known as zip ties, are used in industries and projects ranging from aerospace to agriculture to DIY home improvement.



George Maison, Irving Porush and Charles Thiel: Metered dose inhaler (posthumous). Introduced in 1956 to manage asthma, the MDI was the first portable inhaler that effectively delivered medicine to the lungs. It has saved lives and improved the quality of life for hundreds of millions of patients.



Reuben Trane: Lightweight convactor radiator (posthumous). Trane, a mechanical engineer, began making advancements to heating and cooling technologies early in the 20th century that provided reliable comfort for homes and commercial buildings around the world. His Trane Co. became an industry giant. 🌐

DETAILS: invent.org/inductees/new-inductees

2025 NAI CLASS OF FELLOWS

185 elected to the highest professional distinction awarded solely to inventors

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Gregory Abowd, Northeastern University
Anant Agarwal, The Ohio State University
Ali AL-Marzouqi, United Arab Emirates University
Mansoor Amiji, Northeastern University
Ana Claudia Arias, University of California, Berkeley
Aravind Asokan, Duke University
Gregory Auner, Wayne State University
Jennifer Avari Silva, Washington University in St. Louis
Ahmad Bahai, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Hua "Kevin" Bai, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
David Baker, University of Washington
Sathy Balu-iyer, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York
Dafna Bar-Sagi, NYU Langone Health
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Haim Bau, University of Pennsylvania
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Vineet Gupta, University of Texas Medical Branch
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An ‘F’ for Function

Prototypers, marketers should partner to ensure common products don't sacrifice utility for cosmetics **BY JACK LANDER**

We all own products that we complain about. In most cases, my complaint is about the packaging, not its contents.

I have knocked over our filled, 1-quart water pitcher three or four times. It stands on an attractive but unstable base that curves under to a ridge that is about two-thirds the width of the container.

Function is sacrificed for cosmetics. A prototype that was consumer tested before producing its expensive mold would have saved the aggravation of spilled water cleanups.

The plastic lid on our glass coffee pot rests at an angle of a few degrees off vertical when open. A light breeze will close it, or the slightest touch of the full coffee pot will shut just as I'm about to pour the coffee into my Thermos jug.

Not a big deal, but life is made up of thousands of such minor aggravations.

Bottle, packaging flaws

As an engineer by profession, my life is guided by the three Fs: Form, Fit, Function. I would add T for testing under realistic consumer use.

But testing would seem to fall under the domain of the marketing department. Yes, it could—but the prototyper and marketer should become partners in discovering flaws, shortcomings and potential design improvements before assuming a seemingly handsome product is ready for the market.

Bottle and package design is a field ripe for improvements.

Is this a field worthy of the woman or man who devotes her or his time and talent to products that earn millions of dollars? I believe it is.

Large jars have a variety of standard openers that adjust for several diameters. But bottles, especially those made of plastic, suffer from failures ranging from the need for a substantial

pipe wrench to open to those that yield with a standard pair of pliers.

Bottles are not as often annoying as little boxes, but cosmetics often have priority over function. Under our sink is a 1-quart, no-grip plastic bottle that is impossible to grasp and hold in one hand while attempting to refill a smaller container.

I've never had a leaking bottle arrive by mail, but these are often factory tightened to well beyond the essential, leak-proof torque.

The worst of the group are those of one-piece plastic that provide their own hinge. They are machine-closed perfectly at the bottling plant—but you can't get them completely closed at home, and the contents tend to dry up.

The main bitching in the Lander household is devoted to the tiny candy wrappers that should easily tear open using one's front teeth as a clamp, and thumb and index finger for a bit of pull—but you'll break off an incisor before they'll yield. Keep scissors handy.

Remember the mission

So, introduce yourself to the person who is most directly concerned with building sales through customer satisfaction—the marketing manager.

Caution: A grateful marketing manager may attempt to transfer you into his or her domain.

Resist! Your genetic mission is to design and improve your company's products, not to directly market them. 🚫



Jack Lander, a near legend in the inventing community, has been writing for *Inventors Digest* for nearly a quarter-century. His latest book is "Hire Yourself: The Startup Alternative." You can reach him at jack@inventor-mentor.com.



BRIGHT IDEAS

Neró Lux

PERSONAL, PORTABLE BIDET
nerorefresh.com

This device is a sleek, compact water sprayer that delivers a powerful, targeted stream with one press. (A bidet is a hygiene device designed to clean with a stream of water after using the toilet.)

To use: Detach the water tank and fill it up; reattach the tank securely; position Neró Lux either in front or behind your private area; slide up the nozzle cover; press the button to start cleaning. The spray includes an integrated UVC light system.

The 300ml tank holds enough for a complete rinse without constant refilling.

Neró Lux will retail for \$120, with shipping to crowd-funding backers set for June.



Lockin V7 Max

SMART LOCK
lockin.com

Powered by wireless optical charging technology, the V7 Max features a small receptor on the interior panel of the lock. Plug in a separate transmitter within 13 feet of the lock, which beams power to the lock.

The V7 Max doesn't have to be within range of sunlight for solar power and doesn't require disposable or rechargeable batteries.

You can unlock the V7 Max with your fingerprint, palm or face. It has two high-definition cameras on the exterior of the lock, providing a panoramic view and enabling video doorbell functionality.

The Lockin V7 Max smart lock will retail for about \$1,300, with shipping scheduled for July-August. The Venio Pro Wireless, set for April release, will retail for about \$350 but without video doorbell features.

ThinkBook Plus Gen 7 Auto Twist

LAPTOP WITH PIVOTING SCREEN

lenovo.com

The Auto Twist's screen features a motorized, pivoting hinge, allowing it to track your head and automatically adjust to your position or posture. It can also be manually controlled.

The screen follows you around a portion of a room while giving a presentation. Knock on its closed lid and it automatically opens.

The Auto Twist will also have an emoji-like AI companion software, turning to follow you and react to your actions. It supports live language translation, turning the screen back and forth to each speaker.

Specs: 2880-by-1800/120Hz OLED touchscreen with stylus support; weight 3.09 lbs./1.4 kg; Intel Panther Lake chips. It will launch in June for \$1,649.



“The sentence is the greatest human invention of civilization.”

—JOHN BANVILLE

Ayon

SMART HOME WORKOUT COMPANION

ayon.fit

Ayon allows you to train smarter with real-time form correction, voice coaching, rep tracking and adaptive workout plans.

Other features include 500-plus expert-designed workouts, post-workout insights and personal recommendations. Ayon connects via Bluetooth or cable to any screen you already use—phone, tablet, TV. Place it 4-8 feet from your workout space and connect.

Ayon only analyzes your body movement. Neither your avatar nor any raw video leaves the hardware. Closing the device physically covers the camera, ensuring complete privacy.

With a future retail price of about \$500, Ayon is to be shipped to crowdfunding backers in October.



Sued for Patent Infringement.

Now What?

A list of actions to take—and not take—when you get that dreaded letter or email **BY GENE QUINN**

Once upon a time, small businesses might be able to fly under the radar even if they were infringing, because the cost associated with going after such folks was prohibitive.

But welcome to the brave new world where certain nefarious bad-acting patent owners seek to enforce dubious patent rights against those who are engaged in a business vaguely related, but who are almost certainly not infringing. These bad actors—who seek to extract licensing payments with threatening letters or lawsuits if necessary—know that because it can be expensive to fight, most will simply fold and pay what amounts to extortion.

It is only a matter of time before technology-based businesses, regardless of size, find themselves facing a patent infringement issue. As with most things in life, there are many things you can do that are wrong, incorrect and/or harmful, with a small handful of appropriate things you really need to do.

When you get that first threatening letter or get sued without warning, you need to know the following.

True or false: I should contact the lawyer sending the letter or representing the party suing me because if I can only talk to them, I'm sure I can convince them I am not infringing.

False. You have been sued or targeted with a threatening letter for a reason. Typically, that reason is to extract money from you, or perhaps get you to stop doing what you are doing.

If you have been targeted by a patent bad actor, the reality that you are not infringing is

of no consequence. These bad actors, sometimes called patent trolls, sue small businesses to extract payments, knowing that the overwhelming majority of patent infringement lawsuits will settle.

It is a huge mistake to contact the attorney who represents the party coming after you. You may say certain things that compromise your negotiating position; you could give them crucial information about your business that they can use against you; you might demonstrate that you are scared to death and willing to do whatever it takes to get the case to go away.

None of these things are good.

True or false: I can just ignore the matter because it will go away if I don't respond.

False. Burying your head in the sand is not an effective strategy to deal with what may or may not be a meritorious patent infringement lawsuit.

Certainly, if the lawsuit or dispute is meritorious, you must take it seriously—lest your business be in jeopardy. If the lawsuit or dispute is frivolous, you still have to take it seriously because that almost certainly means you are a target of a patent troll who is not going to go away.

When you are sued, there is a limited amount of time to act. In fact, you have days to act, not months. You might be able to get an extension of time to act, but you cannot assume that you can deal with the case when you get around to it.

If you have yet to be sued and are being threatened, there are some ways to take the



When you are sued, there is a limited amount of time to act. In fact, you have days to act, not months.

offensive and attack. Some of what is available to turn up the heat on the party threatening ceases to be available, or is far less useful, once a lawsuit has actually been filed. So, definitely take those threatening letters seriously and become informed of your options.

True or false: I should contact a patent attorney to discuss the threatening letter or federal complaint to understand what my options are.

True. There are a few things you never want to really need in life. You probably never want to be in a position to really need a dentist for an emergency procedure, but that doesn't mean you ignore that excruciating pain in your tooth.

Likewise, you never *really* want to need a lawyer, but sometimes you find yourself in a position where you absolutely need the assistance of someone who has been in the trenches and can navigate the rocky waters on your behalf.

Having been sued several times in my life, having filed lawsuits on behalf of clients and having defended clients who have been sued, I know firsthand the thoughts and feelings that go through the head of someone thrust into a legal dispute. It can be all consuming—particularly when it comes by surprise, which is almost always.

The ordeal can be all consuming even if you have seen it coming a mile away, because there is nothing like the finality of it coming to a head and your adversary turning to the courts.

A patent attorney can take the mystery out of what can be a truly mysterious and foreboding process. A patent attorney can also take up the fight, represent you and allow you to the greatest

extent possible to continue to focus on business rather than being distracted.

True or false: When I get sued by a patent bad actor, there is little that can be done. You might as well give in, pay and move on.

False. Ultimately, you might decide to pay to make the dispute go away. But make no mistake, there are always things that can be done to facilitate a resolution.

Even if you are going to give in and pay, make sure that this happens in a way that doesn't paint a bull's-eye on your back identifying you to all other patent owners as someone who caves and pays rather than fights.

If you are an easy target, then expect to get shot—metaphorically speaking, of course. You need to consider not only this case but others down the road.

Early in my legal career, I learned that sometimes you need to turn up the heat on the opponent to achieve a favorable resolution. Patent trolls have little to lose, but they certainly want to keep that patent they are so fond of trying to enforce against you. So you really need to consider trying to strike a blow at the heart of that patent and render it useless.

You also must consider an array of counterclaims that you might be able to bring against the bad acting patent owner, who is simply trying to interfere with your business operations enough to get you to pay on a specious claim.

Turning the tables on the patent troll can be an effective strategy—one that, unfortunately, is not employed very often.

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Of course, you probably want to avoid fighting an all-out war, but if both parties fear a long battle, there is incentive to come to a resolution. To be a party at the peace talk table, however, you need to have leverage of some kind. Otherwise, you are not a party to talks as much as you are having terms dictated.

True or false: I've been sued, and the bad acting patent owner is also suing some big companies for the same patent. I can just sit back and let the big companies fight the case, because they have far more to lose.

False. Your interest is not necessarily the same as another defendant, so relying on other parties to fight your battle is risky.

In fact, large corporations sometimes cave to patent trolls, finding it easier to pay than to litigate, which might not be in your best interest. Still other times, large corporations will fight hard, going deep into a case before even considering settlement, perhaps even taking the case all the way to trial.

The same way that caving might not be in your best interest, fighting an all-out battle to the bitter end might not be in your best interests, either.

Your case is unique

There is little generalized legal advice that any attorney can give that applies to everyone who might find themselves in the same or similar situation. The advice you need, and will get if you hire an attorney, will be tailored to your unique circumstances.

The facts that are legally relevant to your situation are but one piece of what needs to be considered. Your business reality is unique and clearly far different than the larger or smaller companies that might also be sued in the same case.

Relying on others to do the heavy lifting, which I have heard as a strategy of some who are sued, is an enormous risk.

Would you feel comfortable putting the future of your business in the hands of a large competitor? Likely not. So, why would you tie your litigation fate to that large competitor? 🎯



Gene Quinn is a patent attorney, founder of IPWatchdog.com and a principal lecturer in the top patent bar review course in the nation. Strategic patent consulting, patent application drafting and patent prosecution are his specialties. Quinn also works with independent inventors and start-up businesses in the technology field.



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Patent ‘Tax’ Won’t Happen

Secretary of Commerce says he will not implement earlier proposal to charge patentees **BY EILEEN McDERMOTT**

All Eye on Washington stories originally appeared at IPWatchdog.com.

During a recent subcommittee hearing of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick confirmed to Sen. Chris Coons (D-Delaware) that he does not plan to implement his proposal to charge patent holders a percentage of their patents’ value.

The Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies Subcommittee held the hearing February 10 primarily to ask Lutnick about issues surrounding broadband deployment funding. Coons, however, took the opportunity to ask Lutnick about a proposal first reported by the Wall Street Journal in July 2025 to charge a 1 percent to 5 percent patent “tax” on the value of granted U.S. patents.

Few details were revealed about the plan, but it drew harsh criticism. Gene Quinn, IPWatchdog founder and CEO, called the idea “catastrophically stupid” and “fraught with peril”; a letter sent by 36 conservative organizations in September said it would be decidedly bad for the United States.

Coons said at the hearing that he has been “impressed with Director Squires’s leadership” of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and urged him to support the pending Patent Eligibility Restoration Act of 2025 (PREVAIL). However, he expressed concern “with reports that you’re considering a value-based patent tax that would charge inventors different fees based on the PTO’s valuation.”

Coons echoed critics’ view that such a plan would be unworkable, as “it is very complex and difficult to value a patent.” Such a system

would “potentially impose a crushing tax on American innovation, something no other major country does.”

In response, Lutnick promised Coons that “we will avoid harming innovation by not doing a valuation, or any valuation fee or tax on patents.”

Even with Lutnick’s plan off the table, some in the IP community believe the USPTO’s fee structure needs to be overhauled due to the changing nature of who gets patents today.

“Reform will enable the agency to be what recently confirmed USPTO Director Squires described as ‘the Department of Commerce’s Central Bank of Innovation,’” said authors Edgar Baum, Julie Burke and Peter Harter in a recent

“That is not a plan. That is not going anywhere. We are totally on side. That is not a thing the patent office is going to do, is try to say, ‘This patent is worth X.’ How in the world could we do that? How in the world could anyone reasonably do that?”

—HOWARD LUTNICK

article for IPWatchdog. “It’s about acknowledging that the patent system has become corporate infrastructure, yet we govern and fund it as if individual inventors still dominate.”



Eileen McDermott is editor-in-chief at IPWatchdog.com. A veteran IP and legal journalist, Eileen has held editorial and managerial positions at several publications and industry organizations since she entered the field more than a decade ago.

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Stewart to Patentees: ‘Tell Your Story’

USPTO deputy director discusses PTAB procedural changes meant to provide balance for the process **BY EILEEN McDERMOTT**

U.S. Patent and Trademark Office Deputy Director Coke Morgan Stewart urges patent owners responding to petitions at the Patent Trial and Appeal Board to tell their stories, and for petitioners to focus on patents in need of clear “error correction.”

Stewart, interviewed by IPWatchdog founder and CEO Gene Quinn for the website’s annual Virtual PTAB Masters Program, discussed the many procedural changes that have been implemented at the PTAB—first under her leadership as acting director, then under current Director John Squires.

She recalled that at the start of her tenure as acting director, she was particularly “dismayed at the state of the office,” especially workforce issues.

Leveling the field

Stewart told Quinn that she felt “right out of the gate [after the 2011 America Invents Act (AIA)], we got off on the wrong foot with discretionary denials.” Petitions challenging patents were treated as if they were going to be instituted unless the patent owner could prove why they shouldn’t be.

“Patent owners were already behind before the proceeding started. We just tried to level the playing field.”

Under the leadership of Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick, Stewart felt she had the opportunity to move forward with reforms that had been discussed for years but never pursued.

“We wanted to get judges out of the business of trying to make policy decisions,” Stewart said.

She noted that when she began as acting director, the institution rate was about 50-50. Now it’s about 60-40 on the side of denials of institution for PTAB challenges to patents.

Plowing the weeds

Stewart also wanted to create more stability by going back to the original intent of the AIA, which was to weed out “bad” patents.

“The AIA came from a concern that there were patents that shouldn’t have been issued, but that’s not what was happening,” she said. “It was more just second-guessing decisions that had been made by the office before.”

Stewart explained that under the AIA, judges had come to a point where they were doing what the statute told them to do—which was to find claims brought to them unpatentable.

Now, Stewart said, particularly with respect to director review decisions, the USPTO is looking chiefly to do error correction.

“If you think there’s been a mistake in your case, let us know ... I do not want to send decisions to the federal circuit that have errors.”

Stewart also noted that the USPTO now does postmortem training with every supervisory patent examiner (800-1,000 people) on any case where errors are found.

Quinn and Stewart agreed that lawyers and inventors have strayed too far away from effectively telling the stories of their inventions. So, to patent owners, Stewart implored: “Tell your story and talk about secondary considerations. That’s what we’re looking to see.”



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IoT Corner

The recent headline in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* is either food for thought or a notion that could eat us up. *Inventors Digest* prefers the former.

“2026: The year IoT became core infrastructure” discussed how IoT has crossed a threshold from simple devices such as sensors, trackers, cameras and terminals to “core operational infrastructure, on par with payments rails, fleet systems, and enterprise networks.”

Ross Hickey, founder and CEO of Trinity, an IoT service provider, said that when that infrastructure fails, “operations stop, revenue is impacted, risk increases, and reputational damage follows.”

Wunderkinds

While the Consumer Electronics Show was the dominant U.S. innovation focus during the first full week of January, Inventors’ Day 2026 enlivened Bangkok. These two students from Prince Royal’s College, a private school in Thailand, were part of a team that won a **Thailand New Gen Inventors Award** in the health and medical category for an early breast cancer screening system that features cross-sectional images and AI.



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WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

- 1** Which of the following is not a registered trademark by the NCAA?
A) March Madness **B)** March Mayhem
C) IP Gluttony **D)** Final Four
- 2** Which was invented first—Liquid Paper, or painter’s tape?
- 3** **True or false:** About 20 percent to 30 percent of utility patents lapse due to nonpayment of the first maintenance fee at 3.5 years.

- 4** **True or false:** Lawrence Welk had a design patent for an accordion-themed lunch box.
- 5** The musical technique of artificial double tracking was invented in 1966 by a technical engineer working for which music group?
A) Beatles **B)** Rolling Stones
C) Who **D)** Doors

ANSWERS: 1. C. 2. Liquid Paper, 1956 by Bette Nesmith Graham, mother of the Monkees’ Mike Nesmith; painter’s tape, 1988 by 3M Co. 3. True. 4. True. 5. A. Ken Townsend, who worked at Abbey Road Studios, developed the process that simplified the need for recording vocals without needing multiple takes.

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