

Inventors

DIGEST

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Accessibility Vision Realized

Learning how to fail forward, 3 young inventors harness AI to create affordable text-to-speech glasses for visually impaired students

Evann Sun, a 15-year-old student inventor from Santa Clara, California, has a Michael Jordan quote on his closet door: “You must expect great things from yourself before you can do them.”

Evann, who loves to play basketball with his dad and brother, channels that belief into invention. He co-developed a prototype of affordable glasses called Visionary that uses AI to translate text to speech—all starting as a middle school science fair project and resulting in national recognition.

The first step: believing he could do it. Just like Mike.

“I feel like having that faith in yourself is where everything starts,” Evann said.

An inventive climate

Evann’s home environment played a big role. He grew up in Silicon Valley surrounded by the influence of new technologies. He met his science fair teammates—Lucas Yen and Akhil Nagori—at Cabrillo Middle School, where they

quickly became friends and encouraged each others’ interest in invention.

“Being surrounded by a bunch of like-minded peers helped inspire me to start building real-world products that can help others,” Evann said.

The idea for their invention was inspired by Akhil’s summer trip to India, where he witnessed the challenges of a blind relative who struggled reading braille.

After he shared his experience, they began to investigate assistive technologies to turn text into speech for underserved communities. During their research, they were surprised to discover that many visually impaired students in the United States also lack access to these tools.

With the local science fair approaching, they decided to team to focus on creating an affordable assistive reading device.

Combining specific skills

Evann, Akhil and Lucas each brought their individual strengths to the project: Lucas is a

Teammates Evann Sun, Lucas Yen and Akhil Nagori were finalists at the Thermo Fisher Scientific Junior Innovators Challenge last October.

“Being surrounded by a bunch of like-minded peers helped inspire me to start building real-world products that can help others.” —EVANN SUN



strong researcher, Akhil technically proficient, Evann excelling at prototyping.

“We all came together in a good way and balanced out our weaknesses, and that allowed us to create a functional prototype,” Evann said.

But they also needed to learn that no one person had all the right answers, and how to combine their different opinions to choose a path.

“Creating a system where we could all find the bright spots in our ideas and create that common-ground solution that pleased all of us was challenging,” Evann said, “but it was beneficial to hear what everyone had to say before deciding on a solution.”

Along the way, they learned another fundamental invention lesson: how to fail forward.

Their eyeglasses device depended on machine learning software to convert images into text, then into audio. But during the testing of their software, they found that it was only trained to convert black-and-white text, which didn’t work for more colorful textbooks and school materials. They had to cross-train the software with color texts and a wide variety of fonts to increase its recognition accuracy.

Another challenge was cost. Similar solutions could cost upward of \$1,000, which would be prohibitive for many students. To avoid this, they designed and 3D-printed eyeglass frames at Evann’s home and found cheaper alternatives for parts such as microprocessors.

The final prototype included the frames, a Raspberry Pi, a tiny camera, a battery and a small pair of speakers attached to the glasses.

Total cost of their materials was under \$70.

Launching further ahead

Evann, Lucas and Akhil entered their Visionary AI Glasses into local science fairs. They advanced through competitions until reaching the national level in October 2025 as finalists at the Thermo Fisher Scientific Junior Innovators Challenge, the premier STEM research competition for middle school students in the United States, run by the Society for Science.

Over the course of many local and regional competitions, Team Visionary honed their presentation and knew their project inside and out—even while finding it nerve-wracking to be on a larger, national stage.

Ultimately, the project’s inventive machine learning technology and its affordability and accessibility won Evann the Lemelson Foundation Award for Invention, which recognizes students who find innovative solutions to real-world challenges that improve lives.

“Every student, regardless of visual ability, deserves equal opportunities,” he said.

That drive is inspiring him to continue to develop the team’s glasses and think about what’s next for inventing and problem-solving.

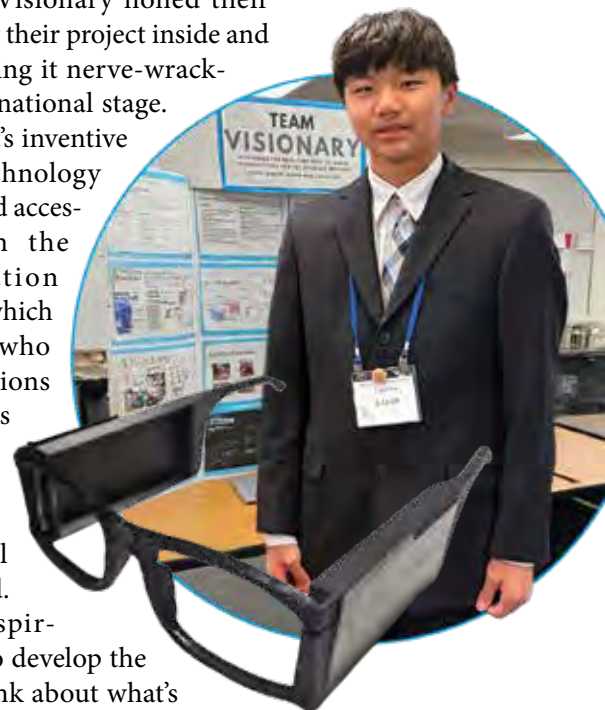
From dreaming up Visionary with his three friends in middle school to becoming a national award-winning inventor in high school, Evann’s future is starting to come into focus. He credits the experience with inspiring him to pursue a STEM career path as a mechanical engineer, where “your work can have a meaningful impact on millions of lives.”

He’s optimistic about the different uses of AI and its potential to positively affect the real world when combined with human ingenuity and empathy. He returns to those inspirational words of Michael Jordan in believing in yourself to accomplish great things, combined with working with other people and new technologies.

His advice for young inventors is to approach the world with curiosity and find challenges that require innovative solutions.

“It’s really important to just keep staying curious,” he said. “Just knowing that there’s still so much out there, that’s what keeps me going.”

Details: lemelson.org/invention-notebook



Evann Sun stands next to the Team Visionary project. **Front:** The first iteration of the Visionary glasses.



Igniting Tomorrow's Changemakers and Innovators

In a world of rapid change, ensuring a young person has the skills and mindset to create new solutions to problems they face is more critical than ever.

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Visit our website to learn more:
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- **Creates a Brighter Future:** By nurturing the next generation of changemakers, we can create a world where challenges are met with creative solutions, and opportunities abound.

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- **Explore Invention Education Resources and Programs:** Use our free resources and tools to learn how to integrate invention education into your curricula.
- **Try Invention Education Activities:** Test out activities in your classrooms and programs, and share your experiences and information with colleagues and leaders.

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Contents

August 2026 Volume 42 Issue 9

10

They Said What?

- 7** “They wrote on the bottle, ‘43% poo by volume. 100% smelly.’ They’re evoking the image of a bottle of liquid feces, your honor.”
- 10** “These Vikings, pre-Fran Tarkenton, invented overlapping wood planks called lapstrakes that created a watertight seal on a ship’s hull.”
- 13** “The smell of fresh-brewed coffee at a gas station has increased coffee sales 300 percent.”
- 34** “He’ll turn 97 next March 28. He has said that if he reaches 100, ‘then I will decide whether I want to exercise my option for 105.’”

24



QUICK READS

- 11** Inventor Archives
- 18** Fond Farewells
- 23** 1-2-3
- 27** Inventor Update



32



On the Cover
Nora Napientek,
owner of nora fleming
(photo by Michelle Turnbull)

Features

- 24** **When Customers Become Fans**
nora fleming Ceramics Line
Spurs Fandom and Collectability
- 34** **30**
Jack Lander, Inventors Digest
Legend, Ends Memorable Run

Inventor Spotlight

- 20** **Tasting Sweet Possibilities**
Ice Cream Brand's Mission

Departments

- 6** **Editor's Note**
New Art Director Jorge Zegarra
- 7** **Everybody's Talking**
More Poop and Circumstance
- 8** **Inventor School**
Elementary, Essential Education
- 10** **Time Tested**
All Aboard for Shiplap
- 12** **Think Marketing**
Marketing's Hidden Persuaders
- 15** **IDiyas Inventor of the Month**
Austin Walters Fills Tech Gaps
- 16** **Social Hour**
When More Can Be Less
- 32** **Bright Ideas**
Innovation That Shines
- 36** **Prototyping**
Need for Altruistic Packaging
- 38** **IP Matters**
Using AI to Innovate
- 42** **IP Market**
Follow the Current
- 44** **Wunderkinds**
Breath of Fresh Air
- 45** **Inventiveness**
Focus on the Fun and Fascinating

New Art Director Calm Under Fire



Last month's issue of *Inventors Digest* was 24 hours from being sent to the printer. The cover art and cover story had been conceptualized and well executed, ready to be produced with the other pages.

Then came an unprecedented event in my 10 years with the magazine: The story subject broke her promise regarding what personal information we could include—with the article 4 months in the making. Her suggested deletions would render the story an empty self-promotion pitch and devoid of human context.

I made the easy and fast decision to abort the story. Now I had to come up with a new cover and cover story and execute it basically overnight, planning with *ID* cover design specialist Jorge Zegarra.

Within 36 hours, I conceived, researched and wrote a new cover story, collaborating with Jorge on a NASA cover package that was dramatic, cohesive and entertaining.

When art director Carrie Boyd moved on to other interests, Jorge was the obvious choice to step up. His team attitude and hands-on approach are only part of what make him a special talent.



Also a photographer with more than 20 years' experience in the creative field, Jorge has worked as a graphic designer and art director for regional and national publications. He has taught graphic design and visual grammar at universities and worked with individuals and small businesses, creating websites, logos, advertising and branding.

"What I enjoy most about design is turning an idea into a visual story," he said. "For me, typography and imagery are not separate elements but equal parts of a composition that can communicate an idea, a feeling or a thought."

Born in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to parents from Lima, Peru, Jorge spent part of his childhood in Israel before moving to Peru, where he spent much of his teenage years. While finishing high school in Lima, "political violence and terrorism in Peru reached a point where we were targeted." His family decided to return to the United States.

He finished high school in Georgia before attending college in Savannah, moving to Minnesota after graduation.

When not working, Jorge can often be found experimenting with new Photoshop techniques, at the gym or spending time with his 3-year-old son, "the center of my world." He says he's curious, funny and easygoing—and let's not forget unflappable under deadline pressure.

—Reid
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Poop and Circumstance: Pour Me Another Round

After 12 years of litigation over a dispute involving a feces-themed dog chew toy, both sides still seem to be chasing their tail after a series of conflicting rulings at the federal and district level.

On August 4, a U.S. appeals court ruled that VIP Products' "Bad Spaniels" toy does not violate the Jack Daniel's whiskey trademark. On January 21, 2025, U.S. District Judge Stephen M. McNamee had ruled that although the toy—shaped like the Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey bottle and with lettering of the same font—does not infringe the spirit maker's trademark rights, it does dilute Jack Daniel's trademarks and trade dress.

In the latest ruling, the San Francisco-based 9th Circuit Court of Appeals overturned a permanent injunction against VIP Products, which was first served a cease-and-desist order for its toy in 2014.

VIP Products filed a preemptive lawsuit against Jack Daniel's shortly afterward—and lost when a federal judge found evidence of infringement in 2017. The 9th Circuit, however, later reversed the ruling, and in 2023 the Supreme Court remanded the case back to the lower courts.

Beneath an image of a cartoon dog, the toys read: "The Old No. 2 On Your Tennessee Carpet," a takeoff on Jack Daniel's "Old No. 7 Tennessee Whiskey." Lawyers for the whiskey juggernaut argue that the language evokes an unwholesome image that hurts the brand.

"They wrote on the bottle, '43% poo by volume. 100% smelly.' They're evoking the image of a bottle of liquid feces, your honor," Matthew Nicholson, an attorney for Jack Daniel's, told judges this year.

According to the ruling, Jack Daniel's did not conduct a study on whether Bad Spaniels created a harmful association. Judges believe that the dissimilarity between the two products rules out the likelihood of confusion.



LOOK WHO'S TALKING

Upcoming speakers for Successful Inventing, a free, virtual educational USPTO series co hosted with the Licensing Executives Society—Silicon Valley Chapter:

September 9—Marketing Plan & Presentation: Marianne Bekker, AI founder, head of developer relations at you.com; April Mitchell, award-winning game designer and *Inventors Digest* contributor; Bill Seidel, marketing authority and educator, *Inventors Digest* contributor

October 14—The Complete Product: Louis Foreman, Enventys Partners CEO and *Inventors Digest* publisher; Ben Greenberg, Inventions Unlimited founder; Bill Seidel

To register: uspto.gov/about-us/events/successful-inventing

SEPTEMBER

09

OCTOBER

14

CORRECTION:

In last month's Editor's Note, the reference to IPWatchdog LIVE 2016 should have read IPWatchdog LIVE 2026.

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INVENTING 101

No Money? Use Someone Else's

BY DON DEBELAK

Many people struggle raising money to introduce their product. But there are ways to get around that problem by using a shoestring outsourcing approach I call OPM (Other People's Money) deal making—or, if you prefer, the OPM entrepreneurial approach.

Not only are most functions outsourced, the outsource partners put up all or most of the money. Here are a couple of stories of successful inventors to provide some innovative approaches when introducing your ideas.

Fred Culbertson knew from experience that screwdrivers often slip out of the screw head. So, he envisioned a screwdriver handle that never had to be moved from the screw head. He thought that if could just rotate the handle back, as with a socket set, screwdrivers would be easier to use.

Culbertson believed that the product would be a perfect item for the Craftsman tool line. The problem: Culbertson didn't have the skills or money to make a polished prototype, and Craftsman doesn't typically buy from small vendors.

Still, he wasn't about to quit on such a great idea. He started by enlisting the aid of a

machinist, who made a workable prototype; he found a company in his hometown that already sold to Craftsman to present the product; and then, when Craftsman showed some interest, the company provided to Culbertson the names of manufacturers already supplying private-label Craftsman tools.

The deal was done, and now the screwdriver is sold in all major Craftsman sales outlets. The final deal has the provider supply a private-label product for Craftsman, with Culbertson getting a percentage of every sale both for his product idea and for his promotional efforts in stores demonstrating his product.

John Lawler, working for an airline, felt that both the typical video screens in front of planes and the newer embedded systems with screens in the back of each seat had many drawbacks.

First, everyone had to watch the same movie at the same time, and in the case of the big video screens, some people couldn't see the movie well. Also, if the system malfunctioned, no one could watch the movie.

To top it off, the entire system was expensive. Systems with screens on each seat cost between \$500,000 and \$1 million to install per plane.

Lawler envisioned individual movie players that could attach to the back of a seat. Players would cost \$200 to \$400 each, or less than \$100,000 for a typical plane.

Individual units could operate without the cabin crew's assistance and could be leased to the plane. Passengers could select the movies they wanted, and when they wanted to start, pause or stop the film.

But the movie players were already invented. His idea was to have the maker of the movie players lease them to airlines. What role and what value could he add to his project?

VITAL VOCABULARY

best mode requirement

This specification in patent law requires that when filing an application, an inventor must disclose the best method he or she knows for performing the invention. This is to prevent inventors from getting a patent monopoly while keeping the most valuable practical knowledge secret.





Key to a **Patent** Application: Claims

If your main reason for pursuing a patent is to prevent someone from infringing on your invention, it's imperative that you pay close attention to how you write and list your claims.

Claims define the boundaries of your invention—in other words, what your patent will and will not cover. Many intellectual property professionals claim claims are the most valuable part of a patent (repetition intended).

It's generally advised that claims should be as broad as possible so they can cover more aspects of the invention. However, the United States Patent and Trademark Office reminds that USPTO policy and case law emphasize claims must be the “broadest reasonable” but still supported by the Specification—a detailed, written description within the patent application that explains how the invention works, how it is made, and how it is used in complete and unambiguous terms.

In other words, your mission—should you choose to accept it—is to write claims that are as broad as possible but not in conflict with the part of the application where you must be very specific. (It's not impossible.)

A proper claim has three required parts. The preamble names the invention and establishes

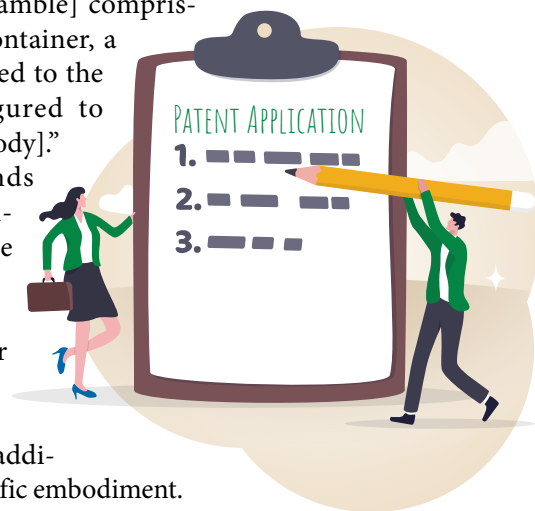
context; the transition phrase connects the preamble to the body (preferably using the word “comprising” because it is open-ended); and the body gives the essential elements and their relationships.

This isn't as long or complicated as it may appear. Novelpatent.com gives this example that uses the aforementioned three required parts:

“A water bottle [preamble] comprising [transition] of a container, a lid, and a sensor coupled to the container and configured to measure a fluid level [body].”

The two main kinds of claims are independent and dependent. The former stands alone and does not reference any other claim; the latter narrows the scope of an independent claim by adding at least one additional limitation or specific embodiment.

A recent hourlong USPTO video on YouTube—Path to a Patent, Part V—discusses the crucial role of claims in a patent application. —Reid Creager



Lawler's solution was to create a role that licensed the movies and reprogrammed the players monthly. He took the initiative to work a deal to license movies with a major movie studio, then made a deal with studios for a license fee that allowed him to reprogram the players every month at a nominal fee.

To sweeten his deal, Lawler leased the movie players from the manufacturer, which was willing to front the equipment to Lawler because he had a lease from the airline. Lawler then offered a licensing fee, which included both the player

manufacturer's fee and an additional fee for licensing the movies and reprogramming the players. This is the type of video today that is used by most airlines.

So, if your product is too difficult to introduce on your own and you can't get any help, consider the OPM plan. It just might work for you.



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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All Aboard for Shiplap

Overlapping wood planks, now an interior design staple, date to the time of the Vikings **BY REID CREAGER**

It seems safe to assume that the rugged Norsemen who reached North America around the years 900-1000 were not fashionistas. But we all know what happens when we assume.

No less an authoritative source than thevikingherald.com reports that “overall, Vikings were a diverse, well-groomed and practical people” who valued hygiene and often wore bright clothing. (And no, they did not all have blonde hair and blue eyes.)

Their practical acumen is evidenced by the fact that these Vikings, pre-Fran Tarkenton, invented overlapping wood planks called lapstrakes that created a watertight seal on a ship’s hull. These later became known as shiplap.

Sail forward oh, some 1,700 years, and shiplap is a hot commodity for a different reason. The rustic wood planks look became an iconic interior design trend not long after

being featured on an episode of the HGTV show “Fixer Upper” during its inaugural season in 2013, when stars Chip and Joanna Gaines were renovating a 1911 farmhouse.

Before drywall came into widespread commercial production around 1920, shiplap was the standard base for interior walls in U.S. homes, which were often decorated with wallpaper. A shiplap wall was covered with cheesecloth or muslin to cover the seams and give wallpaper enough grip to adhere.

Called “the Holy Grail of house flippers everywhere” by plankandmill.com, shiplap has evolved beyond a trend to become a staple in many celebrity homes, where it’s used—and sometimes overused, especially the white horizontal planks—on everything from accent walls to kitchen islands. It’s affordable, easy to install and exudes warmth.

Invented over 1,000 years ago, shiplap has gone from sturdy structure staple to décor darling.



In its December 2025 issue, *Southern Living* asked three interior designers whether shiplap has fallen out of style. The answer was a resounding “no” because of the wood’s aforementioned attributes—and the fact that the vertical planks can make ceilings appear taller, while horizontal planks can make rooms appear wider.

Rabbit runs

Vikings made their shiplap joints by cutting an identical rabbit—an L-shaped groove or recess cut along the edge or end of a piece of wood—into opposite faces of adjoining boards, then overlapping the rabbits to lock them together and prevent any caps.

Plankdandmill noted that the Vikings “had great long straight trees to work with and they had iron nails, too. They overlapped rows of planks, nailing them into place where they overlapped with the adjacent plank.”

INVENTOR ARCHIVES: SEPTEMBER

September 10, 1898: Waldo Semon, inductee into the National Inventors Hall of Fame who invented a means for how to process polyvinyl chloride into a flexible, industrial plastic, was born.

In 1926, while a chemist at B.F. Goodrich, Semon wanted to dissolve hard and brittle PVC to create an adhesive for bonding rubber to metal. Although he failed at this, when he heated PVC in a solvent, he discovered the new substance.



The overlapping plank method evolved over centuries for adaption in exterior siding on barns, sheds and seaside cottages to keep out wind and water.

In a May 2026 interview with *Entertainment Now*, Joanna Gaines said she’s happy to have helped Americans discover such an aesthetically pleasing and functional interior design style but does not want to be pigeonholed for one talent. That Viking ship may have already sailed. 🚢

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Marketing's Hidden Persuaders

Subtle techniques and messages—even emojis and scents—can help deliver more effective results **BY WILLIAM SEIDEL**

Marketing is filled with hidden persuaders that are the secrets of consumer influence. These invisible tactics are enormously effective.

Hidden persuaders are the subtle and subconscious (subliminal) and conscious (supraliminal) techniques employed to encourage consumers to buy products, adopt certain behaviors and form favorable opinions.

The main goal of marketing is to influence consumers' purchase decisions. The finesse of all messaging is targeted to persuade and influence buyer decisions.

Planned purchase decisions are conscious and understood. New products, unplanned purchases and impulse purchases are heavily influenced by factors outside of our conscious awareness.

Utilizing the subconscious

In 1957, Vance Packard wrote "The Hidden Persuaders." It quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller.

It shocked the public, exposing consumer motivational research and psychological techniques used by advertisers and politicians to manipulate and induce desire for products and candidates.

A leading psychologist and the father of motivational research, Ernest Dichter, took it further with the advertising industry. Modern-day subliminal advertising works in the same way to influence consumer behavior, with the help of hidden persuaders.

Advertising agencies were quick to publicly condemn Packard's and Dichter's assertions of exploiting the subconscious. Ironically, behind the public view, these agencies were quick to take advantage of the hidden persuaders to

influence consumer behavior. The potential to increase market share using subconscious techniques was too great not to use.

The subconscious mind represents 90 percent of total brain function. When it comes to processing information, the subconscious is more powerful than the conscious mind. Marketers use subconscious motivations to manipulate buyer behavior, and customers do not know it.

Subliminal and supraliminal

Subliminal refers to anything that happens below our conscious threshold. Subliminal advertising attempts to reach the subconscious mind with hidden messages that influence thoughts, emotions and buying decisions.

This is banned in many countries. It is not illegal in the United States but is not protected by the First Amendment: The Federal Communications Commission will revoke the license of any company that uses subliminal advertising in broadcasts.

Despite this, it is an advantage—and companies use it everywhere they can.

For example, audio and visual subliminal messages are regularly used in songs, films and ads to persuade, enhance and reinforce their message. Something as simple as increasing the volume for ads can subliminally influence the listener.

The FCC has been receiving complaints about loud commercials since the 1960s. It is subconsciously influencing you to "buy my product and vote for me."

In 2010, Congress approved legislation to quiet excessively loud television commercials with the Commercial Advertisement Loudness Mitigation

(CALM) Act. It requires the reduction of the decibel level of regular programming, but it becomes impossible to enforce for streaming, radio, cable and many forms that are not regulated.

A European study of liquor stores analyzed how music influenced wine sales. When researchers played French music, they found that French wine substantially outsold German wine. When they switched to German music, buyers were more likely to purchase the German wines.

These messages are in our face, but we do not recognize the influence and the behavior manipulation.

Supraliminal is stimulus that is seen or heard but not consciously perceived. An ad shows what it is promoting, but a supraliminal strategy touches the subconscious mind and adds meaning.

Amazon's logo is a supraliminal message because it uses an obvious and direct tactic of getting a more profound message. The arrow connecting A to Z lets customers know they sell everything from A to Z; the arrowed smile infers it will be a happy experience and make you smile, too.

How stores control you

Where the product is located in the store is crucial to the manufacturer and reseller. There is a direct correlation between placement and sales.

Is it at eye level (best), bottom shelf (not good) or the wrong aisle (very bad)?

Studies show that 70 percent to 90 percent of people automatically turn right when entering a store. This means the right-hand wall is what shoppers see first and the prime location.

In many stores, the best-selling products are to the right and also cross-merchandised for repeat exposure and increased sales.

In a supermarket, the staples like milk, eggs, coffee and often sale items are at the very back of the store and spread out so you must walk through the entire store to get to the most purchased products.

Impulse products like candy, magazines and mints are at the checkout lane where you must wait, read the headlines and be tempted by the candy.



The subconscious mind represents 90 percent of total brain function. Marketers use subconscious motivations to manipulate buyer behavior, and customers do not know it.

A whiff of genius?

Scent marketing is a type of sensory marketing targeting a shopper's sense of smell.

Scents are chosen to match the merchandise. The sense of smell influences our mood and creates a pleasant place to stay longer, shop longer and purchase more. Our sense of smell ties to our emotions and memory.

Think about the aroma of coffee when you enter a Starbucks—called an “ambient scent.” It is reported that Starbucks adds the coffee scent to the ventilation system. The smell of fresh-brewed coffee at a gas station has increased coffee sales 300 percent.

The strategic use of ambient scents is inexpensive and a powerful way to positively influence behavior. It is approaching a billion-dollar industry and proven highly effective in casinos, hotels, cruise lines and retail operations.

The effect of emojis

Emoticons or emojis are a secondary communication about content interpretation. They add personality to flat text, create closer

relationships and add positive effects of good feelings. There are also negative and angry emojis.

With more than 10 billion emojis used every day, they have become the first language born of the digital world. In 2015, the Oxford Dictionary awarded the emoji or “face with tears of joy” the “Word of the Year.”

Emojis have a hidden meaning in plain sight, which is why they are supraliminal influencers. They enrich communications, convey an alternative meaning and have become shorthand for things hard to describe in text. Humor in text can be misinterpreted, but seldom with emojis.

Neuromarketing tools

The recent book, “The Neuroscience of Knowing Without Knowing,” Is about the science of what we know subconsciously that we do not recognize consciously.

Neuromarketing is an emerging field, scanning brains using magnetic resonance imaging. This reveals the subconscious reasons for consumer behavior and decisions as a way to predict how and why consumers make choices.

Neuromarketing uses MRI mapping to learn customer preferences. Psychologists can see increased and decreased activity in different parts of the brain, which explains the subconscious response.

In a Coca-Cola and Pepsi taste test, consumers brains were mapped. Based on taste only, the scans revealed brain activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which is the reward system and predicts preferences.

When viewing a Coke logo while tasting Coke, more activity was at more locations in the brain associated with emotion and memory. This was not the same for Pepsi.

What’s really going on?

The influence of subliminal advertising has always been controversial.

Psychology is a cornerstone of marketing. Many consider it an unfair advantage, but it depends on how it is used.

There is contempt for marketing’s use of psychological techniques. Marketing is blamed for childhood obesity, cigarette-related disease, poor self-esteem, alcohol misuse and many problems in society.

Hidden persuaders are not determiners of response. When there is no need, subliminal advertising has no effect. If a person does not own a dog, subliminal ads would not persuade him or her to buy dog food.

However, when there is a need, subliminal messages make a difference in their emotions, perception and purchase intentions.

Knowing how to use it in copywriting, advertising, packaging, signs, branding and even your logo can add meaning to your message. 📌



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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Out of Slack, Into the Vault: How Austin Walters Rescues Inventions from the Corporate Graveyard

BY MISHA GHOSH

Austin Grant Walters is the founder and CEO of IP Copilot, a company built around a deceptively simple observation: World-changing corporate inventions should not be allowed to die quietly inside buried Slack threads, chaotic Jira tickets, orphaned spreadsheets or late-afternoon patent committee debates.

A computer science alumnus of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Walters seamlessly bridges the gap between high-level machine learning research, hands-on engineering and prolific inventing. His technical credentials are backed by 670 patents. His IP portfolio spans deep-tech domains—including machine learning, enterprise data protection, financial fraud detection, biometric authentication, blockchain, natural language processing (NLP), generative AI and AutoML.

Before stepping into the LegalTech spotlight, Walters spent years managing applied research teams, launching generative AI products, and leading open-source initiatives for Fortune 100 enterprises. During these stints, he kept running into the same organizational paradox: Modern engineering teams were cooking up brilliant technical solutions far faster than legacy corporate IP systems could capture them.

What started as a years-long personal hobby project to answer a deep intellectual fascination—quantifying what an idea actually is and tracking how it evolves over time—eventually turned into his company. Building IP Copilot into a reality is a genuine dream come true.

Today, IP Copilot acts as an intelligent bridge between engineering, legal and innovation teams. By integrating directly into existing workplace tools, the platform sniffs out early invention signals, helps engineers polish disclosures, assists counsel in evaluating filing decisions, runs rapid AI-assisted prior art searches and turns everyday workplace brainwaves into protected assets. To date, Walters and IP Copilot have raised about

\$6.5 million in funding, backed by prominent investors including Salesforce Ventures, Preface Ventures, NextGen Venture Partners, Notation Capital and others.

Walters balances high-tech algorithms with a grounded personal life. A father of five, he frequently spends his free time playing soccer with his kids. He is also an avid hunter and a longtime farm owner who recently sold his property, though he is already eyeing his next one.

After long weeks spent analyzing abstract neural networks and patent claims, he finds genuine satisfaction in the simple, tangible labor of riding his tractor and baling hay. 🐾



Austin Grant Walters



Misha Ghosh is an inventor and data science leader, the founder and CEO of IDIYAS, a global patent and inventor analytics platform. He holds 101 U.S. utility patents. Ghosh has held senior analytics leadership roles at major financial and technology institutions, including Bank of America, Mastercard, Wells Fargo and ADP. He works closely with corporate and independent inventors, research institutions and the innovation community.



Inventor Badge
 USPTO Data Jan 1 1976 - Aug 4 2026



678 Utility Patents
 #1 in Columbia, TN
 #1 in Tennessee
 #88 in USA
 #137 in the World


 Columbia, TN, United States of America

Austin Grant Walters
Forward Citations = 1,707

Company Filing History:

 677 out of 6,695  patents

 1 out of 834,063 Other patents

When More Can Be Less

Being everywhere on social media isn't as important as knowing your objective and audience **BY ELIZABETH BREEDLOVE**

If you spend time reading marketing advice online, it quickly becomes apparent that everyone seems to have a different opinion about social media.

One expert insists you should post on LinkedIn every day. Another says Instagram is essential. Someone else claims TikTok is the only place with real organic reach, while another predicts YouTube is the future.

Before long, it feels as though success requires maintaining a constant presence on every platform available.

The reality is that most independent inventors have a limited capacity to invest in social media when they are already balancing product development, manufacturing, customer service, licensing conversations, trade shows and countless other responsibilities. Social media is only one piece of the puzzle, and treating it as a full-time job often means something more important gets pushed aside.

Fortunately, effective marketing has never required being everywhere. In fact, trying to be everywhere often produces the opposite result.

Don't chase every platform

Every few years, a new social platform captures everyone's attention. Businesses rush to create accounts, marketers declare it the next big opportunity, and business owners feel pressure to join lest they are left behind.

There is nothing wrong with experimenting with new channels, but a profile that sits empty and unused for months does little to

build credibility. Likewise, posting the same content across six different platforms without considering the audience rarely creates meaningful engagement.

Instead of appearing active, businesses often appear stretched too thin.

Consistency almost always outperforms quantity. Someone who publishes thoughtful content on one platform every week is usually in a much stronger position than someone who posts sporadically across five different networks.

Social media rewards regular participation. Maintaining the consistency you need becomes increasingly difficult as the number of platforms grows.

Think goals, not platform

Before choosing where to spend your time, it helps to ask a more important question: What are you actually trying to accomplish?

When the objective is clear, selecting the right platform becomes much easier.

LinkedIn, for example, works particularly well for professional networking, industry relationships and thought leadership. If your goal is connecting with manufacturers, retailers, licensing professionals or other business contacts, LinkedIn deserves serious consideration.

Facebook continues to perform well for many small businesses, particularly when reaching mature audiences who actively participate in community groups and hobby-focused discussions. Despite frequent predictions about its



Posting the same content across six different platforms without considering the audience rarely creates meaningful engagement.

decline, many consumers older than 50 still spend significant time there.

Instagram remains highly visual, making it an excellent choice for products that photograph well or benefit from demonstrations. Whether you create woodworking tools, kitchen gadgets, crafts or outdoor products, compelling images can tell your story quickly.

YouTube requires more effort but offers exceptional long-term value. Unlike many social media posts that disappear within days, helpful videos can continue attracting viewers for years through search results.

None of these platforms is a universally right or wrong choice. Their value depends entirely on your audience and your business objectives.

Think customer preferences

Never choose a platform based solely on popularity rather than customer behavior. Just because millions of people use a platform does not mean your buyers are among them.

If your invention solves a problem for retirees, your marketing approach may look very different from a business's marketing approach targeting college students. Likewise, products designed for contractors, engineers, educators or outdoor enthusiasts each have their own communities and preferred sources of information.

Always ask: "Where are my customers already spending their time?" That small shift

in thinking can prevent countless hours of creating content that never reaches the people most likely to purchase your product.

Your time investment

Every social media platform asks something different from its users. Writing thoughtful LinkedIn articles requires a different skill set than recording short videos for TikTok or editing polished Instagram reels. Each platform has its own expectations, content formats, algorithms and learning curve, and it is easy to underestimate the amount of time required.

Creating one quality post may involve taking photographs, writing captions, editing images, responding to comments, answering messages, researching hashtags and monitoring performance afterward. Multiply those responsibilities across several platforms, and social media can quickly consume hours every week.

Most inventors do not have unlimited time. Recognizing your limits often leads to better marketing decisions, because you can concentrate your efforts where they have the greatest impact instead of constantly feeling behind.

Better beats more

The quality of what you publish usually matters far more than the number of posts you create.

People enjoy seeing the progress behind an invention. They appreciate demonstrations that



solve real problems, explanations of how products work, customer testimonials, trade show experiences and the occasional glimpse into the development process.

Content that teaches or informs generally provides much more value than posting simply to satisfy an arbitrary schedule. This is particularly true for inventors, because your product already has a story built into it.

Share the challenges you overcame, the problem you identified, the improvements you made through testing, the lessons learned during development. These types of posts are

material that potential customers will find genuinely interesting.

Build a sustainable strategy

The most successful social media plan is rarely the most complicated one. Instead, it's the plan you can realistically maintain month after month without sacrificing the work that grows your business.

For many inventors, that may mean choosing one primary platform and one secondary platform. It may mean publishing once a week instead of every day. It may mean investing more time creating helpful content and less time chasing every new feature that appears.

There will always be another platform promising greater reach and faster growth. Those opportunities will continue to come and go. Your time, however, remains one of your most valuable business assets.

Rather than trying to be everywhere, focus on being present where it matters most. A thoughtful strategy, carried out consistently over time, will almost always outperform scattered efforts spread across every corner of social media. 📌



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.

FOND FAREWELL

Herman Chernoff, a mathematician and statistician who invented the information visualization drawings known as Chernoff Faces, died July 6. He was 103.

He developed the faces to represent data that encompassed up to 18 variables. Facial features were mapped to multiple variables, with size, orientation, shape, color and placement potentially representing different attributes of a single observation.

The Stanford Department of Statistics wrote: "His remarkable contributions to our field included work on large sample theory, experimental design, sequential analysis, presenting statistical data in visual form, and statistical decision-making.

"His enthusiasm for mentoring was almost equally well known. He proposed the creation of an annual New England Statistics Symposium to support young researchers and, in honor of his contribution to the symposium and profession in general, the New England Statistical Society established the Chernoff Excellence in Statistics Award in 2019."





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Tasting Sweet Possibilities

Ice cream brand for lactose-intolerant people is part of a global food culture mission **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

Who doesn't love ice cream? Who is lactose intolerant? According to Coco Fro co-inventor Pierce Freelon of Durham, North Carolina—who learned at a young age that he couldn't have ice cream—“65 percent of the human population is lactose intolerant, with the highest rates among Asian (90 percent), indigenous (79 percent) and black (75 percent) folks.”

Freelon and his wife, co-inventor Kathryn (Katie), invented a freeze-dried, plant-based (non-dairy) snack with winning flavors such as Sweet Potato Pie, Vanilla Cardamom and a few other standards.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Please tell us about yourself and how Coco Fro came about.

Pierce Freelon (PF): I was born and raised in Durham, where I still live with my wife, Katie, and our two kids. I grew up within walking distance of the North Carolina Museum of Life and Science—where I was thrilled to discover

Astronaut Ice Cream. It's a freeze-dried snack developed for astronauts by NASA which tastes just like frozen ice cream, except it's crunchy, bursting with astronomical flavor, and doesn't melt until you put it in your mouth!

I used to love Astronaut Ice Cream, but I can't eat it anymore because I am lactose intolerant. I created Coco Fro to offer the millions of other ice cream lovers a delicious, dairy free, plant-based, freeze-dried ice cream experience.

This year, we're excited to launch a “nice cream shop” and creative community space in Durham. The project reimagines ice cream by centering the dietary realities and flavor traditions of the global majority—billions of people worldwide who cannot digest dairy.

Inspired by Afrofuturism and global food culture, Coco Fro will combine plant-based frozen desserts, storytelling, music and children's literature to imagine a more inclusive future of food. (*Editor's note: Afrofuturism is a cultural movement that incorporates art, science and technology with African and African diasporic history to envision alternate futures.*)

Over the next year, I will build Coco Fro as both a physical space and a creative platform: a neighborhood ice cream shop, a hub for community gatherings and the launchpad for a children's picture book that helps lactose-intolerant kids see themselves in the story of ice cream.

“Inspired by Afrofuturism and global food culture, Coco Fro will combine plant-based frozen desserts, storytelling, music and children's literature to imagine a more inclusive future of food.”

—PIERCE FREELON, CO-INVENTOR OF COCO FRO

EGT: How many different flavors are you selling?

PF: We have four flavors right now: Vanilla Cardamom, Rich Chocolate, Strawberry Cream and Sweet Potato Pie.

Coco Fro is more than a dessert; it's a cultural and culinary movement. Our mission is to reclaim that joy by crafting better-for-you, shelf-stable, plant-based ice cream that everyone can enjoy, with bold and culturally inspired flavors.

Our Sweet Potato Pie is an example of that. We're also working on a Caramel Plantain flavor.

EGT: Was it difficult developing a food invention?

PF: Developing a new food took a lot of experimentation, and it was worth it. Coco Fro's delightful bites are "poppable," yummy, melty and more delectable than the dairy version.

EGT: During manufacturing, must you follow any local or government regulations relating to a "freeze-dried" food product?

PF: Yes; we follow local food and national regulations with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.

EGT: Is any special certification required to certify a vegan product?

PF: Vegan products are not required to be certified in order to be advertised as such—in the same way that USDA Organic, for example, requires an official certification. There are, however, independent accreditors, such as "BeVeg."

EGT: Which startup or ongoing business challenges have you experienced?

PF: Our biggest challenge has been determining how to scale. We considered two options: partner with a co-manufacturer, or build our own production facility.



Katie and Pierce Freelon want to build Coco Fro as "both a physical space and a creative platform: a neighborhood ice cream shop, a hub for community gatherings and the launchpad for a children's picture book that helps lactose-intolerant kids see themselves in the story of ice cream," Pierce said.

We had so much demand in our first quarter that we could barely produce enough freeze-dried ice cream to keep up. It was overwhelming! Since then, we have reached out to several major co-manufacturing partners in the "freeze-drying space" but have yet to find a good fit for our product.

This year, we purchased a new production facility and are working on enhancing our capacity to produce a larger volume; however, we foresee this being a challenge as we continue to scale—a good problem to have!

We launched Coco Fro using the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, garnering hundreds of



Coco Fro comes in four flavors, with more to come soon.

pre-orders and email list subscribers in 2024. Kickstarter helped us raise some startup capital for Coco Fro.

EGT: Have you done any research to determine the best flavors to develop?

PF: We have done research on popular flavors and will be launching Mint Chocolate Chip this year. We're also developing Caramel Plantain and a few others.

EGT: Where are you selling? Website? Amazon? Retail pricing?

PF: We are selling Coco Fro on our website coco-fro.com, as well as [via] multiple physical and online retailers, including Faire and Grommet.

Our focus is on expanding into more museum gift shops, onboarding new wholesale accounts, and increasing direct-to-consumer sales through digital marketing. With higher production volume and stronger distribution, we're positioned to increase revenue quickly and build brand visibility in retail markets and beyond. Our pricing is \$8.99-\$9.99, depending on the flavor.

EGT: What shipping methods do you use?

PF: We pack and ship every order by hand, via our Shopify store.

EGT: Are there or will there be any seasonal flavor offerings?

PF: Yes. Our Sweet Potato Pie flavor was initially seasonal, but it was so popular we kept it year-round. We will be developing other seasonal flavors in the coming months.

EGT: Have you any advice for inventors thinking about creating a new food product?

PF: Try lots of different recipes. Making a new food product requires a lot of trial and error.

Make sure you love whatever it is that you're developing, because you're going to be eating a whole lot of it! Get your taste buds ready for some research and recruit your friends and family to chime in on their favorites. Consider your inner circle to be your first set of customers, but don't stop there.

Develop a plan for customer discovery, so you can make informed decisions on where to take your product. We have interviewed dozens of customers and uncovered key pain points and exciting new directions through those processes.

EGT: What are your future plans for Coco Fro?

PF: Our future plans include Coco Fro operating as a vibrant, neighborhood ice cream shop and cultural hub – serving dairy-free frozen desserts inspired by global traditions. Families will gather for ice cream, storytelling, music and community events that celebrate imagination and belonging.

Beyond my wildest dreams, Coco Fro has become the beginning of a new category of ice cream—one that centers the tastes and dietary realities of the global majority. Our flavors travel beyond Durham through products, books and creative collaborations, inspiring people to rethink what ice cream can be and who it's for. ☺

Details: info@cocofro.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>).

1-2-3

Common Invention Questions Answered

BY BEN GREENBERG, FOUNDER OF INVENTIONS UNLIMITED
InventionUnlimited.com • Ben@InventionUnlimited.com

1 How do you know when a prototype is good enough to move forward?

When it answers the questions it was built to answer. It doesn't need to look perfect, but the core function should work consistently enough that you understand what needs to happen next. Inventors can waste enormous amounts of time polishing a prototype that was only meant to prove a concept. Each version should have a purpose. Once you've learned what you needed to learn, move forward.

2 What is the difference between proving that an invention works and proving that it is ready for the market?

Making something work is an engineering milestone; making something market ready is a business milestone. A product can function perfectly and still be too expensive, difficult to manufacture, confusing to use, or unwanted by customers. Market readiness requires functionality, demand, manufacturability, pricing, reliability and a clear reason to buy. An invention isn't ready simply because it works. It's ready when the entire business around it starts making sense.

3 Why is simplifying an invention often harder and more valuable than adding features?

Adding features is easy because every new idea feels like an improvement. Removing them forces you to decide what matters. Every additional component can add cost, assembly time, failure points, tooling and complexity. The best products aren't usually the ones that do everything; they're the ones that solve one important problem extremely well. Simplicity isn't removing value. It's removing everything that gets in the way of value.

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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.



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when Customers become fans

nora fleming ceramics line taps into powerful emotional triggers to build a collecting community **BY ALYSON DUTCH**

Nora Napientek, once the owner of a paint-your-own pottery studio, transitioned into a similarly artful business where customers have a rare spirit of engagement and camaraderie—in part because “few products allow the end consumer to become the artist.”

Above: Dish and love notes mini.

When marketing your product or invention, word of mouth shouts louder than anything else. Every time.

On the occasions when that word of mouth morphs into a like-minded, impassioned throng who collect your product, the result is fandom—something very rare. And Nora Napientek is a very rare inventor/entrepreneur.

For more than 20 years, the beautiful and energetically delicious Chicago native has built an extraordinarily devoted following around a very simple invention: interchangeable, hand-painted ceramic “minis” that fit into serving pieces.

A customer can use the same platter, each with a small hole in the edge into which one can press in an adorable painted porcelain Christmas tree, pumpkin, Star of David, Easter bunny, basket of flowers, or a porch goose with a ribbon bow around its neck.

Nora's concept saves a lot of pantry space from multiple sets of dishes for each holiday. But that's not the reason she's so successful.

People collect her minis, trade them and scour eBay for retired pieces. They belong to Facebook groups devoted to them. Hundreds line up at Nora's personal appearances, sometimes traveling hundreds of miles. Gen Z has discovered the brand on TikTok, bringing an entirely new generation into the fold.

These are not your granny's Hummels in her window-paned china cabinet. This is Hello Kitty or Labubu-mania on steroids—and it's not like the Pet Rock that came and went within the same year.

nora fleming isn't a story about dishware with interchangeable ceramic minis. It is a case study in how a product trips a human emotional trigger and, in the process, turns customers into fans.



© LEFT PHOTO BY MICHELLE TURNBUL • RIGHT PHOTO BY ANGSTROM CREATIVE

Watching customers pays off

Before there was Nora Fleming, Napientek was a young mother of two who owned a paint-your-own pottery studio. It was a great business to have while raising small children and gave her a front-row seat watching how women were using tabletop products.

She noticed customers painting separate platters for different occasions: a turkey platter for Thanksgiving, a pumpkin and fall leaves one for Halloween.

She remembers thinking: *This is crazy*. Why did someone need to store a different serving piece for every holiday?

So, she began sculpting small three-dimensional figures that could be changed on a single platter. She sold them at craft fairs and church bazaars. To her fascination, people started asking where they could get them and wanted more.

"It was a very slow, natural beginning, without a big launch strategy behind it," she said. But her younger brother, Jon Neidlinger, saw

"something magical here. We need to turn this into a business."

Through a friend who had experience making porcelain bedpost finials, Jon traveled to China to see whether the pieces could be manufactured. That presented the next very familiar entrepreneurial problem: money.

Five banks refused them for the \$30,000 startup capital needed. Nora went to her grandmother, who cashed in a CD and loaned them the money. Her name, Fleming, got second billing in return for the favor.

Their first shipment, 12 different designs with a minimum order of 144 of each, landed in Nora's garage. From there, they went to their first wholesale gift show and began taking orders.

There's a lesson here that inventors sometimes overlook. Nora didn't invent something because she was determined to become an entrepreneur. She noticed something consumers were doing that didn't make sense and found a better way for them to do it.

Nora now meets grandmothers, mothers and daughters who all collect—such as at this paint-your-own mini event in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. She hears people say, "My grandmother got me started." Families come to signings together and give minis to one another as gifts.

Nora Napientek didn't invent something because she was determined to become an entrepreneur. She noticed something consumers were doing that didn't make sense and found a better way for them to do it.



The customer as the artist

What Nora understood later, however, may be even more important than what she understood at the start.

“Few products allow the end consumer to become the artist,” she said.

That sentence gets to the heart of why the product has had such longevity. A nora fleming platter isn't really finished when the customer buys it.

The customer finishes it.

“The customer chooses the mini that goes into it that day. She decides whether a pumpkin means Halloween, Thanksgiving or simply fall. One family might choose a horseshoe because they love horses; another because it represents luck. Someone else chooses a heart because of a person or memory attached to it.

“It gives control to the owner to create their own piece of art.”

What may sound like a small distinction is enormous from a marketing perspective.

Personalization gives the consumer some ownership of the product, and ownership creates attachment. Once that happens, you aren't simply asking someone to come back and buy another piece of merchandise. You're giving her another way to express herself.

It also turns what might have been a one-time purchase into a product with almost unlimited reasons to return. Now, that's a customer.

Know your business

Nora has turned down many opportunities. She has watched plenty of brands grow by trying to be everything to everyone. Her philosophy: “You have to pick your lane.”

That conviction was tested when nora fleming was still relatively small and received a large purchase order from Bed Bath & Beyond. At a point when the company could have used the money, she said no.

Independent boutiques had helped build the brand, and many of those small retailers depended on it. She believed that putting the line everywhere could damage both those relationships and something else that turned out to be critically important: the way customers discover the product.

nora fleming needs a little explaining the first time you see it. Nora found that placing the product at the point of purchase was brilliant because a store employee can pick up a platter, remove the mini and show a customer how it works. She compares it to cosmetics in a department store, where someone behind the counter brings the product to life.

The company puts significant effort into educating its retailers, even creating the soon-to-launch nora fleming University to teach stores how to merchandise and sell the line.

Could the product be sold in a Target or Walmart?

Nora questions whether it would work the same way, sitting anonymously on a shelf. “We have experimented repeatedly with packaging groups of minis together, such as Q4 holidays or romance or football team collections, but they want to pick them themselves,” she said.

For inventors, the bigger point is that distribution isn't simply about getting into as many doors as possible. Where and how a product is sold can become part of the product itself.

nora fleming's independent retailers aren't merely stores. They are the local evangelists who teach customers how to enter the world of the brand.

The next level: Collecting

Collectability takes fandom to a different level. nora fleming maintains a relatively small core collection, while other minis rotate in and out. New pieces arrive several times a year; older ones are retired. That creates anticipation and urgency.

The company says it isn't intentionally trying to create a speculative market or convince customers they need every single mini. Nora describes the sweet spot as the person who buys the pieces that speak to her personally.

Fans took it further on their own.



The line features interchangeable, hand-painted pieces, such as this cracker tray and smooches mini.



A nora fleming platter isn't really finished when the customer buys it. The customer finishes it.

In numerous independent Facebook communities, collectors show their displays, trade pieces, hunt for retired designs, speculate about what might be coming next and help one another locate hard-to-find minis. Some of the largest groups collectively represent tens of thousands of memberships. They were largely created by customers, not the company.

This created a secondary market.

A purple-and-gold party hat mini has sold for more than \$2,000. An original pair of Victorian shoes sold for \$1,604, a spooky spider for \$1,525. A private collection of more than 375 minis was once listed for \$40,000. Normally, minis sell for \$18 each.

Scarcity contributes to those prices, but scarcity by itself doesn't create fandom.

If you discontinue a product nobody cares about, all you have is obsolete inventory.

Scarcity becomes powerful when people are already emotionally invested.

From grandmothers to Gen Z

After 22 years, another remarkable thing is happening to nora fleming: The collecting habit is becoming generational.

Nora now meets grandmothers, mothers and daughters who all collect. She hears people say, "My grandmother got me started." Families come to signings together and give minis to one another as gifts.

At the same time, Gen Z has begun discovering the brand through TikTok.

@WabbyRose discovered nora fleming independently and began sharing her collection. Her content helped the company's paper towel holder go viral, and younger influencers have since begun documenting their own collections.

Then came the “porch pal,” a tiny version of those wonderfully kitschy decorative porch geese that many people remember from their mothers’ or grandmothers’ houses.

The company noticed porch geese coming back into fashion and created the mini almost on a whim. It placed a relatively small initial order. It sold out in days. A reorder sold out as well. At the time of this interview, the company was on its third order.

What’s happening there is more interesting than the TikTok trend. Gen Z is rediscovering objects they remember from childhood and reinterpreting them as their own.

The company didn’t abandon its identity to attract a younger consumer; the younger consumer found something meaningful in the identity the company already had.

That is a much harder feat, and a much more sustainable one.

Understanding Nora

You cannot fully understand the nora fleming fan base without understanding Nora herself.

Several times each spring and fall, she visits select independent retailers around the country for signing appearances. Hundreds of people can show up, with attendance sometimes reaching 600. Mothers and daughters,

sisters and groups of friends make a weekend of it.

For the retailers chosen to host these events, the impact can be enormous. The company says a store can sometimes generate more sales during a single signing than it would during an entire holiday season.

But conversations with Nora and her marketing director, Danielle Elderkin, revealed that people aren’t waiting all those hours simply because they want an autograph.

They want Nora.

Elderkin remembers noticing Nora at an event before she joined the company. She wondered, “Who is that?” Her energy attracted people.

“Nora has this magic,” she said. Even with hundreds of people waiting to meet her, “she makes that person feel like no one else is there.”

The fans come with stories, and Nora listens to them. That relationship is strengthened by the fact that doesn’t present a highly polished, protected version of herself to her customers. She talks about her family and has been open about painful parts of her life—including the unexpected death of her brother, her daughter with medical complexities and the loss of a partner to suicide.

“I wear my heart on my sleeve,” she said.

Charm and elegance are reflected in this assortment of nora fleming minis and bases.



That vulnerability matters because the brand is built around life moments, and life moments aren't all happy.

She remembers hearing about a woman experiencing domestic violence whose husband had shattered her beloved nora fleming collection. Other collectors began sending replacements to her.

Nora is also a philanthropist. Shortly before Jon died, the siblings selected St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and began creating dedicated minis whose proceeds benefited kids with cancer.

They raised \$1.2 million—an extraordinary amount for a company that had only 15 employees. Some of those pieces sold out within hours.

Fans have been known to travel hundreds of miles to meet Nora at her personal appearances.

"People want to be part of something bigger than themselves," she said.

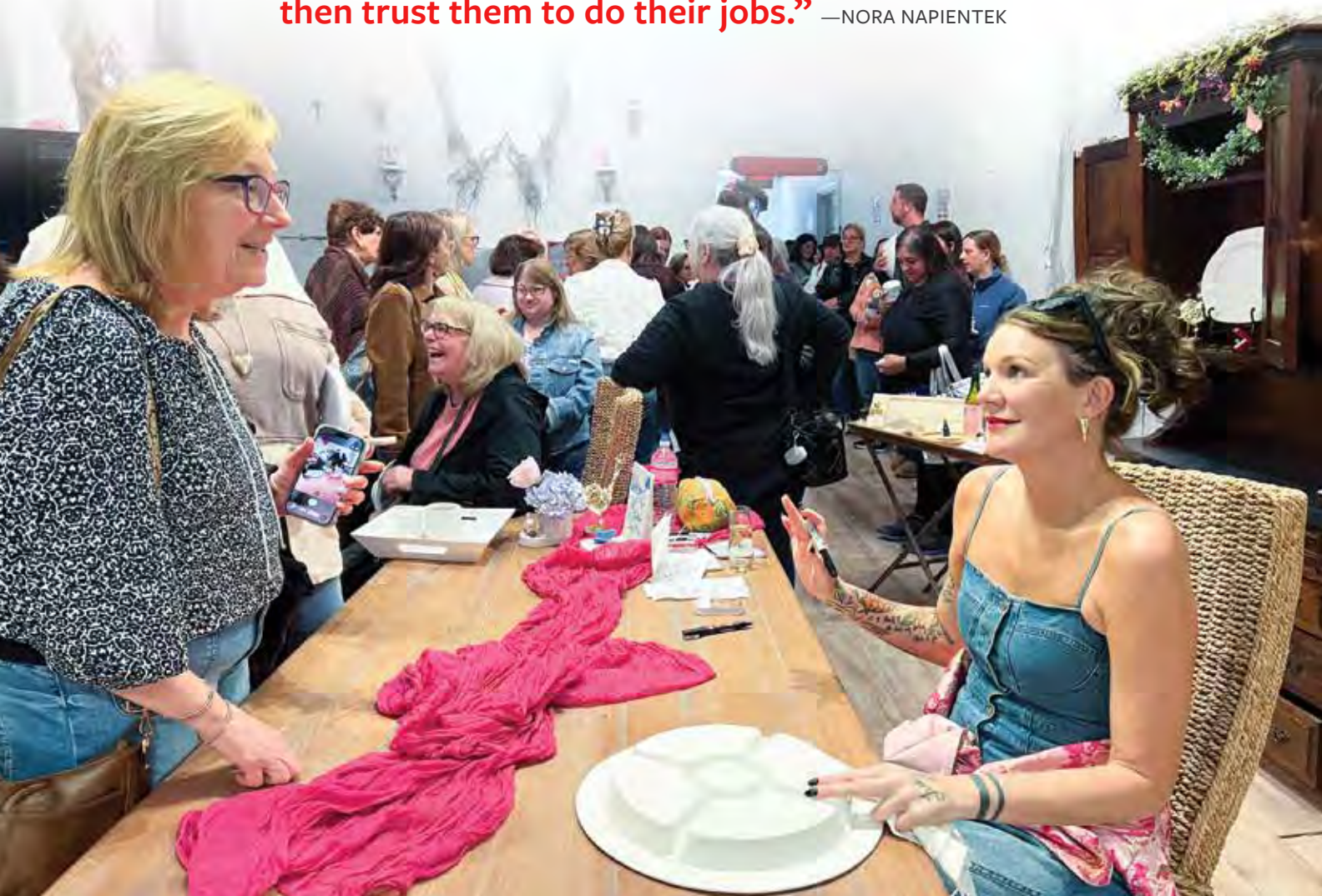
This April, a one-of-a-kind Creative Quill mini hand-painted by Nora sold at auction for \$3,200 to benefit The Chicago Academy for the Arts. Once again, the object was simply the vehicle. People were buying the participation.

A consistent culture

Talking with Nora revealed that the external fan culture doesn't seem much different from the internal company culture.

nora fleming is still a surprisingly small operation, with 27 employees and a larger network of outside sales representatives. Family members work there. Friends work there. During the fourth-quarter rush, everybody packs boxes.

"I surround myself with others who are smarter and better than I am. It's uncomfortable. You have to give up control, then trust them to do their jobs." —NORA NAPIENTEK



BRIGHT IDEAS

A-Nap Air

TRAVEL PILLOW
THAT YOU CARRY
traveland.store

Lighter than an egg, A-Nap Air is a 40g travel pillow built to give 360-degree support wherever you rest. It folds down to just 5-by-2.5-by-9cm in a palm-sized pack.

A-Nap Air wraps around your neck to help keep your head comfortably supported from the front, sides and back, so you can rest without constantly correcting your position. Its dual front support chambers gently support your chin and jaw area. It replaces the old cord-style adjustment with a large, easy-to-use Velcro fit system.

The pillow includes a removable, lock-in, elastic band that helps secure the pillow to your seat.

A-Nap Air is to be shipped to crowdfunding backers in November. It will retail for about \$50.



TriReso

NOISE-CUTTING MODULAR
RESCUE WHISTLE SYSTEM
eckidea.com

TriReso is a three-module rescue whistle system that creates irregular frequency shifts and a distinctive, siren-like resonance to help your signal stand out.

The system reaches up to 120 dB and produces a distinctive multi-frequency signal spanning 3,600–4,800 Hz. The Alert Chamber is sharp and piercing for crowds, traffic and campsite noise; the Power Chamber is loud and full for distance, valleys and open ground; the Echo Chamber adds layered resonance for a more recognizable signal.

Each module features a dedicated tritium slot for quick identification in the dark.

TriReso will retail for \$66. It is to be shipped to crowdfunding backers in October.

OddCube

AIR PURIFIER KIT
WITH COMMON PARTS
oddcube.com

This simple-to-repair kit, using 3D printing files, features a modular design that uses common parts like PC fans and furnace filters.

The OddCube pulls air through six filters simultaneously. Its foundation is eight modular triangles connected by flexible O-rings, using high-performance computer fans that are quiet and energy efficient. The triangles create six square openings that are designed to fit many different 10-inch furnace filters. The outer O-rings secure the filters without tape or screws.

The complete physical kit with 3D printing files and access to the OddCube Workshop will retail for \$279. Delivery to crowdfunding backers is set for May 2027.



**“Whoever had invented long
division has a lot to answer for.”**

—OAN LINGARD



Breakfast, Automated

EGG-COOKING ROBOT
AND SYNCHRONIZED TOASTER
cheffy.ai

This service provides two breakfast staples, tailored to your tastes when you want them using a scheduled timer.

EGOR uses its automatic finishing lid to gently steam-finish whites and yolks to your desired doneness. Place the lid on the pan at the same time as you load eggs and select your recipe. No flipping or monitoring is required. Or, use the egg tray and lid to cook up to six soft, medium or hard-boiled eggs at a time.

Automatically crack eggs for other recipes like cakes and desserts with no mess, no shells, no getting your hands dirty. TOASTR is automatically timed with EGOR.

Breakfast, Automated, which will retail for \$399, is to be shipped to crowdfunding backers in December.

30

Jack Lander retiring from *Inventors Digest* after 3 decades—but his work is not finished

Jack Lander (at right with wife, Mary) began writing for *Inventors Digest* as a mere lad of 66.

The symbol above is a journalistic tradition dating to the early days of telegraphy, a writer's notification at the end of a story that it is ready for editing and/or typesetting. You'll still see it on some printed or digital press releases.

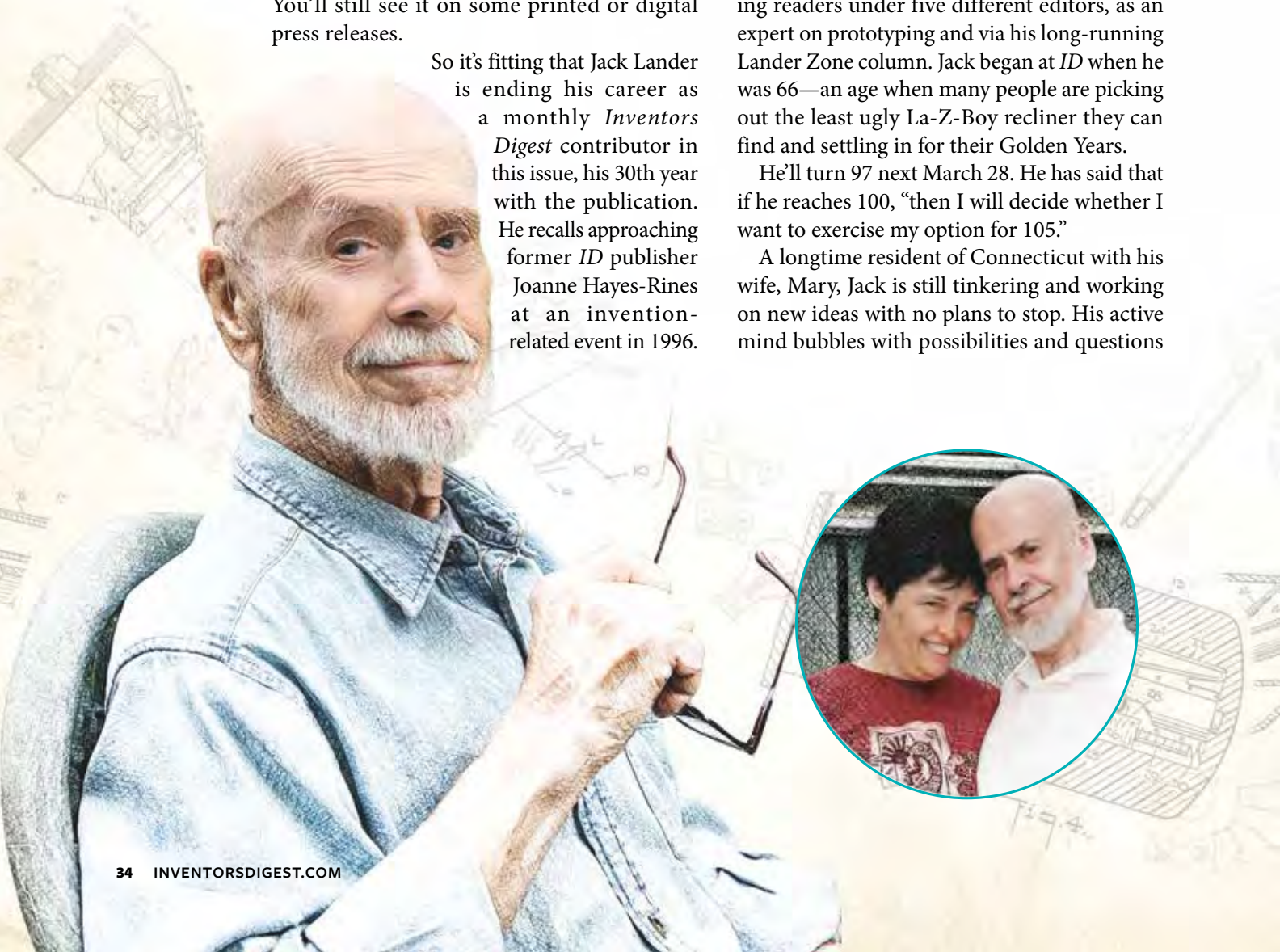
So it's fitting that Jack Lander is ending his career as a monthly *Inventors Digest* contributor in this issue, his 30th year with the publication. He recalls approaching former *ID* publisher Joanne Hayes-Rines at an invention-related event in 1996.

"She was walking down the hall, and I stopped her and said, 'How would you like an article on inventing?' And she said, 'Well, I'd love that.'"

Thus began a monthly odyssey of educating readers under five different editors, as an expert on prototyping and via his long-running Lander Zone column. Jack began at *ID* when he was 66—an age when many people are picking out the least ugly La-Z-Boy recliner they can find and settling in for their Golden Years.

He'll turn 97 next March 28. He has said that if he reaches 100, "then I will decide whether I want to exercise my option for 105."

A longtime resident of Connecticut with his wife, Mary, Jack is still tinkering and working on new ideas with no plans to stop. His active mind bubbles with possibilities and questions



on many subjects, many of which we have contemplated in phone conversations.

These discussions only scratch the surface of what goes on in his Northwestern University-educated head (mechanical engineering degree).

The subject of a November 2021 *ID* cover story—which he modestly agreed to only at the strong urging of family—Jack has been granted 13 patents. His best-known patented invention played a leading role in the process of laparoscopy, a minimally invasive surgery that checks for problems in the abdomen or a woman's reproductive organs. It resulted in the world's first disposable laparoscopic instrument.

Having written several books to help inventors, Jack has built a life of giving back. He has

mentored countless inventors during his career and made many loyal friends who adore him.

“Jack Lander has been a key figure helping inventors without asking for big money in return,” said fellow *ID* contributor and One Stop Invention Shop founder Don Debelak. “He is a man who just wants inventors, no matter what their resources, to succeed.”

He remains loyal to the magazine, with its mission to educate and inspire independent inventors present and future. “So many people feel like they're kind of an inventor, but they don't call themselves that,” he told me last month. “They have these ideas that come every once in a while.” Mine have always come to me all the time. It's all I know.”—Reid Creager

A Fangirl Letter

Writer and author Edie Tolchin, herself a decades-long monthly contributor to *Inventors Digest*, penned this ode to Jack Lander upon hearing of his leaving the magazine. She calls it “A Fangirl Letter to Jack Lander.”

Dear Jack Lander,

This is from your biggest fangirl with thanks for all you have done for the inventor community, as well as your most informative contributions to *Inventors Digest*.

We met almost 30 years ago at an inventors' club you facilitated in Connecticut, when I was a newbie to “the circuit.”

As a newly minted customs broker, I used to try speaking about sourcing and manufacturing new products safely overseas and legally importing them into the USA. I was terrified, and you made me (and my two then-preteen children who operated the AV equipment) feel empowered. Thank you for this because that did, ultimately, result in my “doing the circuit” around the country for many years.

Then there was the Yankee Invention Expo (held annually in Waterbury, Connecticut through 2008). I remember you running around that large armory, trying to get my presentation equipment hooked up (again, I was clueless) to prep for my lecture, as my knees shook with my Fear of Public Speaking—which remains with me to this day.

I remember when you met and married your lovely Mary. Sorry it couldn't have been me, but I was already spoken for! (Just kidding.)

Your company, inventor-mentor.com, has aided countless, otherwise intelligent, yet frequently uninformed inventors to learn the realities of this often-challenging industry. During COVID, I edited two of your books on the dawn of man. Not everyone can write about this topic. It takes a Mensa brain like yours. (When will you publish them, so others can benefit from your extensive knowledge of this topic?)

Your work for *Inventors Digest* has doubtlessly empowered thousands of inventors these past 30 years with your quiet wisdom. It may be a cliché to say there's no one like you, but those who know you will agree.

You are a gift to the industry, to this magazine, and most definitely to our world. Wishing you many years of good health and peace.

Your forever Fangirl,

—Edith G. Tolchin



In typically humble fashion, Jack—owner of 13 patents—had to be talked into being the subject of a November 2021 cover story.



How About Some Altruistic Packaging?

It's time for manufacturers to make design prototypes that are functional for everyone **BY JACK LANDER**

"Selfless concern for the welfare of others." That's the standard definition of altruism. So, how does it apply to a mechanical article like a prototype?

Most prototypes are made by manufacturers that develop new products. In our capitalistic society, Investors in corporations expect a return on their money, and the profit motive is conveyed from the Articles of Incorporation down through branches and departments to the shipping department. (Even here, we discover Amazon substituting rugged envelopes for the

more expensive cartons when possible. No argument there.)

But where I have an endless list of complaints is in the packaging department, where package design is probably a trivial concern and therefore subordinated in the product design department.

Now, let me get very bitchy.

5 frustrating examples

Example 1: Small bottles, such as for eyedrops, are sealed with a tough plastic band that surrounds the cap and prevents me from unscrewing it. (Fine; I would be uneasy about using drops that someone else had used and returned.)

But why can't the package designer include a small tab at the end of the band so that I can grasp and pull it, thereby freeing the band?

I have tried a knife, nail clipper, scissors, small screwdriver, even an icepick, with none safe or effective. Oh, well—another chip out of the countertop.

Some small, hard-to-open packaging can require the use of a knife, scissors, screwdriver or more.

Again, a penny's worth of added plastic results in a design that actually works. But I'm only the customer. Never mind.

No doubt such amendment would cost a penny or two but would earn dollars in customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Example 2: Small plastic jar or bottle caps, with a small segment that is intended to flip up using only one's finger or fingernail. Being part of the cap, the segment is the same color and texture, making it impossible to see unless it protrudes far enough to stand out—which it doesn't.

Why fight it? Just unscrew the entire lid and empty half a jar of mustard, hot sauce, whatever, on a food serving that needed only a drop or two.

Again, a penny's worth of added plastic results in a design that actually works. But I'm only the customer. Never mind.

Example 3: Larger jar lids that are thin and do not have a knurled edge. (Hey, there's an idea—a knurled edge.)

Example 4: Small cans, such as for soup and fruit. Not too much to complain about. But my wife, Mary, complained that her fingers got sore from using her "miniature" can opener. I paid \$20 for a large model that has a crank.

Not one complaint since then. A friend of mine claims to have an electric can opener. What will they think up next?

Example 5: Cardboard boxes such as those that contain a bottle of something you need immediately, without the frustration of trying to determine why you can't just open the thing as it was designed to open. Aha!

There's a tiny, sneaky piece of non-reflective plastic tape midway along where you are supposed to be able to insert your thumbnail, which you broke off trying to open a similar box yesterday. "Oh, Hon, can you get me your Exacto knife again?" (Thumbnails never did work.)



Closing salvo

You get my point. No need to belabor it with more of these great examples.

You probably could name at least five more if I asked. I won't.

Just because it's cardboard doesn't mean it's always easy to open.



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.

INVENTOR UPDATE

A 'Saving the World' Celebration

At a recent party in California celebrating **Terry Thorens'** 50th anniversary in animation, frequent *Inventors Digest* contributing writer and PR maven Alyson Dutch noticed he had framed the December 2019 *ID* cover story she wrote about him.

The party was filled with educators from all over the United States, who have been using his films and animation tools to help underprivileged kids and children who are emotionally damaged from abuse in dysfunctional families.



"Terry is still extremely busy," Alyson said. "He is saving the world with animation."

"Over the last 10 years, he's focused on making animated films for all kinds of issues about kids who can't speak up for themselves. Because kids relate to animation, the sensitive subjects really get through to them in ways that nothing else does."

Thorens created an animation studio that goes into schools to teach kids camaraderie and team building skills. "He's just a force of nature."

Using AI to Innovate

Unresolved questions make the landscape hazy for inventors and business owners **BY ANDREA L. ARNDT**

Historically, patent inventorship interpretation focused on whether legal rights belong to individual inventors, organizations or other entities. But as artificial intelligence evolved, the debate shifted to whether inventions generated with AI involvement qualify for patent protection and who should be recognized as the inventor.

The United States Patent and Trademark Office has specific requirements for patentability and provides guidance on what qualifies as an invention. Patent protection is generally available when an invention is useful, adequately described, novel and non-obvious. Patentability excludes laws of nature, physical phenomena, abstract ideas and mere suggestions.

The USPTO and United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit provide guidance on inventorship. Corporations, universities and sovereign entities cannot be named as patent inventors, although they may be listed as applicants or owners. Instead, an inventor must be a natural person who significantly contributes to the conception of the invention—that is, to the formation of the inventive idea itself.

People who collaborate on an invention may be co-inventors.

They do not need to work at the same time, place or contribute equally, but each must contribute to at least one patent claim.

A new inventorship issue has arisen regarding contributions by AI to a conception of an invention. In the landmark case *Thaler v. Vidal* (2022), AI was the sole contributor to the

conception of the invention and was listed as the sole inventor. The federal circuit decided that AI cannot be listed as an inventor on a patent—but did not fully address how inventorship should be determined when AI plays a substantial role in developing an invention.

So, what happens when a person uses AI to significantly contribute to the conception of the invention?

AI's disruptive role

AI's contributions to the conception of inventions complicate traditional inventorship definitions.

When used as a supplemental tool, AI can streamline brainstorming and problem identification, helping human inventors identify areas of improvement they might not have considered before. At the other end of the spectrum, certain AI systems can autonomously generate solutions with limited human direction, using human prompting primarily to initiate the process.

The first scenario is relatively uncontroversial, because using AI as a research tool is generally accepted in modern patenting. The second scenario, however, raises concerns about whether a human or AI satisfies the conception requirement.

Under current understanding, if a human satisfies conception, then the human is the inventor and the invention is patentable. But what if AI conceived the invention?

Under *Thaler*, AI cannot claim inventorship. So, does the invention become unpatentable?



Several unresolved questions need to be addressed—such as the type and percentage of human contribution, the qualification of a mental act in AI conception, and the USPTO patenting AI-conceived inventions originated or patented in other countries.

Determining an allowable amount of AI contribution will likely stem from a third scenario, which lies between refining an already conceived idea and relying entirely on AI to invent on its own. The use of AI does not prevent patentability; however, the permissible level of AI contribution remains unsettled.

In 2025, administrative rulings by the Patent Trial and Appeal Board clarified that AI may be used as a tool during the inventive process. However, the human inventor must make meaningful contributions to the invention and generally cannot rely solely on AI-generated output.

Current laws and guidelines do not emphasize bright-line rules. However, the USPTO and courts are attempting to establish boundaries.

Other emerging issues

The evolution of AI use has spread worldwide. While *Thaler* pushed for AI inventorship in the United States, the patent applicant also submitted patent applications in other jurisdictions—namely, the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and South Africa.

The U.K. and Europe paralleled the United States and denied the applications. Australia and South Africa granted patent inventorship

rights to the AI system, finding no limitation in their patent law language.

These differing approaches may create challenges for international patent strategies and could encourage applicants to consider jurisdictions with different rules regarding AI-related inventorship.

Outside the realm of patents, the U.S. Copyright Office repeatedly denied a copyright registration for a piece of visual art generated autonomously by an AI system (the “Creativity Machine”) because it lacked a human creator.

Thaler again took this issue to court and lost. The court’s decision in *Thaler v. Perlmutter* aligned with the findings and recommendations of the U.S. Copyright Office’s January 2025 report. The guidance provides that if AI generates a work entirely on its own, it enters the public domain and cannot be copyrighted.

However, the Copyright Office has indicated that if a human provides significant creative input (e.g., heavily editing, arranging or combining AI elements with human creation), the human-created portions may be eligible for copyright protection.

These guidelines provide insight into the limits of AI-generated use. However, ambiguity

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Whether your concern is how to get started, what to do next, sources for services, or whom to trust, I will guide you. I have helped thousands of inventors with my written advice, including more than nineteen years as a columnist for *Inventors Digest* magazine. And now I will work directly with you by phone, e-mail, or regular mail. No big up-front fees. My signed confidentiality agreement is a standard part of our working relationship. For details, see my web page:

www.inventor-mentor.com

Best wishes, Jack Lander

remains regarding the degree of human involvement necessary to obtain protection.

Who is the inventor?

The United States is at a legal crossroads with the use of AI to contribute to inventions.

One possible approach would allow broader patent protection for inventions developed largely through AI-assisted processes, potentially expanding the range of innovations eligible for protection. This will support America’s position as one of the largest contributors of patents worldwide. Additionally, it broadens acceptance of AI-assisted patents that might otherwise be denied under *Thaler*.

Another approach would continue requiring substantial human involvement before patent protection is available. This path will follow the current trajectory of AI limitations given by the USPTO and U.S. case law.

Requiring significant human contribution and conception would maintain the core values of creativity and ingenuity that contribute to the understanding of an inventor. Further, requiring a human element will support ethical accountability of inventors, which AI systems consistently lack, and prevent the patent system from being flooded with AI-generated patent applications.

Regardless of the United States’ position, AI will continue pushing legal and intellectual boundaries. Before clear lines can be set, several unresolved questions need to be addressed—such as the type and percentage of human contribution, the qualification of a mental act in AI conception, and the USPTO patenting AI-conceived inventions originated or patented in other countries.

Until then, inventors, businesses and practitioners should approach these legal gray areas with caution while courts and policymakers continue to define applicable rules. ☐



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intellectual property portfolios globally. Contact 737-484-5536 or AArndt@dickinsonwright.com.



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Follow the Current

Recent developments in the IP industry show how the system redirects like a stream **BY LOUIS CARBONNEAU**

Inside of three weeks recently, we got the abrupt exit of the most consequential USPTO official of the decade; and a data set showing that the entire validity-challenge industry quietly moved house while everyone was watching the front door.

We start in Alexandria, Virginia, where United States Patent and Trademark Office Deputy Director Coke Morgan Stewart cleaned out her desk on July 27 after 18 months spent rebuilding the Patent Trial and Appeal Board in her own image—and where the architecture she built will now be maintained by people who did not draft it.



Coke Stewart, who left the USPTO in late July, could be the office's most consequential official of the decade—despite never having held the top job on a permanent basis.

Stewart's lasting impact

About a year and a half ago, almost nobody outside the USPTO's Madison Building could have picked Stewart out of a lineup. She departs as arguably the most consequential USPTO official of the decade—and never held the top job on a permanent basis.

She took over as acting director on January 20, 2025, having already spent a decade inside the agency (associate solicitor, counsel to the director, acting chief of staff) before a detour through Regent Law, the Virginia attorney general's office, and Los Angeles law firm O'Melveny & Myers.

On February 28, 2025, she rescinded the memo by former USPTO director Kathi Vidal and brought *NHK-Fintiv* back from the dead. (Editor's note: *NHK-Fintiv* refers to a USPTO policy framework that allows the PTAB to discretionarily deny inter partes review petitions when

Then, the extraordinary numbers: inter partes review (IPR) petitions at an all-time low, *ex parte* re-exams at an all-time high, and a validity-challenge industry that did not shrink so much as emigrate.

From there to Capitol Hill, where the Patent Eligibility Restoration Act reached full committee at last and where Sen. Thom Tillis, R-North Carolina, counting the days until his retirement in January, has started handing the drafting pen to his opponents.

As I have often written, this system does not reform. It reroutes. The only question worth asking each quarter is where the water went.

there is a related parallel litigation that could lead to duplicative proceedings.)

After other pro-patent actions, the numbers are the tell. Average PTAB petition institution rates by patent challengers fell from roughly 65 percent in October 2024 to about 37 percent by February 2026. Whether you agree with the policy or not, that is the fastest reversal of an administrative regime any of us have witnessed in this business.

When John Squires was confirmed as USPTO director in September, the obvious guess was that Stewart would be quietly sidelined. Instead, she spent her last 10 months as the intellectual engine of a machine somebody else was steering.

The architecture is Squires' now, signed in his own hand, and he has shown zero appetite to unwind it. The pro-patentee tilt is structural, not personal.



Water finds another crack

Unified Patents released its first-half report on July 9, and buried in it is the structural story of 2026.

IPR patent challenge petitions fell to 57 in the second quarter—an all-time quarterly low, down 83.8 percent year over year. First-half PTAB petitions totaled 201, against 732 a year ago.

But before anyone in my camp uncorks anything, read the other column of numbers.

Ex parte re-examination requests hit 336 in the second quarter, breaking the record of 330 set in 2012. First-half requests reached 594, up 162.8 percent. Re-exams now account for 74.7 percent of all post-grant filings, up from 23.6 percent 12 months ago.

The demand for patent invalidation did not evaporate. It relocated.

I have argued in this space for years that the IPR experiment should be put out of its misery, and I stand by every word. But let us be honest about where the traffic went.

Ex parte re-exam has no standing requirement, no real-party-in-interest disclosure, no estoppel worth the name, and no three-judge panel—just one examiner, and a requester who can stay anonymous indefinitely.

As a patent owner, you may find you preferred the devil you knew.

The USPTO has noticed. Its July 22 proposed rule would require re-exam requesters to name their real parties in interest, explicitly citing the flood of requests aimed at patents already through IPR.

The other number worth marking: District court filings fell 18.4 percent to 1,921 in the quarter.

Fewer suits, fewer IPRs, record re-exams. That is not a system calming down.

That is a system rerouting around its own plumbing, and the water always finds the cheapest crack.

PERA gets a bigger room

The Patent Eligibility Restoration Act has finally graduated from the IP Subcommittee to the full Senate Judiciary Committee. On July 14, the committee held the bill's first full-committee hearing—"From Genes to Machines: the Patent Eligibility Debate"—nine months after the subcommittee took its turn last October, and roughly four years into the eligibility-reform project generally. In this Congress, that qualifies as brisk.

The entire fight now sits on one clause. PERA excludes an "unmodified human gene" from eligibility, then restores eligibility for genes isolated, purified, enriched or otherwise altered by human activity.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley said many members are "still

studying the bill," and no markup has been scheduled. In an election year, that sentence does a lot of work.

Net/net: real progress, genuinely, and still perhaps a 30 percent shot this Congress.

Watch for revised gene language in September. If a markup is not noticed by Halloween, PERA becomes someone else's bill—and its author will be watching from the private sector, like everyone else. 📺



Louis Carbonneau is the founder and CEO of Tangible IP, a leading patent brokerage and strategic intellectual property firm. He has brokered the sale or license of 4,500-plus patents since 2011. He is also an attorney and adjunct professor who has been voted one of the world's leading IP strategists.

Breath of Fresh Air

Youth's class project to innovate inexpensive filter leads to state funding initiative, and a larger goal

Born 12-12-12, Eniola Shokunbi was about to turn 12 when she learned the clean-air class project she led was awarded almost \$12 million in state funding. But there are other incredible numbers associated with her story.

In 2022, while attending Macdonough STEM Academy in the Middletown Public School District of Connecticut,

Eniola learned of a news story about scientists bringing an air filter to the White House—a DIY model called the Corsi-Rosenthal that cost about \$60 to put together.

After some online research, she wrote a letter to Marina Creed, director of the University of Connecticut Indoor Air Quality Initiative, asking for blueprints of the air filter

so she and her classmates could build one for their aging school. Creed obliged and offered to send a group of scientists from the university to help the class construct their own filter.

Eniola decorated her class's iteration of the filter with an owl (the school mascot) and named it Owl Force One. The device is built from a box

fan, furnace filters, duct tape and cardboard; 24-by-24 in size, it takes only a half-hour to assemble and can last as long as 6 months.

On October 22, 2024, the Connecticut State Bond Commission approved \$11.5 million in funding for the University of Connecticut's Supplemental Air Filtration for Education Program, with the intention of producing and installing the purifiers throughout public schools.

On her website, Eniolashokunbi.com, she discusses a larger vision.

"My goal is to take this initiative nationwide. A key component of my mission is to involve students directly in the process by having them build the air filter boxes themselves. This hands-on involvement will provide educational benefits in STEAM fields while also fostering leadership skills and raising awareness about environmental health."

Her project has roots in the global COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in December 2019 and became widespread in America in early 2020, when she was only 7. As researchers began exploring ways to reduce the number of pathogens in the air in indoor spaces, demand for air purifiers skyrocketed. Engineers Richard Corsi and Jim Rosenthal created a cheaper alternative, which became the Corsi-Rosenthal box. 🐼



Eniola Shokunbi's quest for clean air resulted in \$11.5 million in funding for air purifiers throughout Connecticut public schools.

GO FOR IT

Registration opened in early August for the Young Inventor Challenge International Championship.

Youths from ages 6 to 18 can submit their original toy or game inventions for a chance to win prizes and have their creations published.

All entries are submitted online. All participants are invited, but not

required, to attend the International Championship on November 7, 2026, during the Chicago Toy & Game Fair, North America's largest consumer toy and game event.

Winners will be announced during a live awards ceremony. Participants do not need to be present to be eligible to win.

One junior and one senior invention will be awarded in the following categories: Best Pitch; Most Innovative; Most Engaging.

Registrations and virtual submissions are due October 25.

Details: toyassociation.org

Follow the Money

GTC Advisors has a webpage that discusses 2026 innovation grants—specifically, inventions, prototypes and nonprofit projects. It lists the five best methods of identifying innovation grant opportunities:

- Government funding programs that usually focus on technology, sustainability, health care;
- Private foundations and nonprofit innovation funds with grants for projects involving social, environmental or educational issues;
- Corporate innovation and corporate social responsibility programs, which finance projects that are in line with business interests, industry requirements or sustainability;
- University and research institution grant portals that provide information on grant opportunities in faculty, student and affiliated innovation;
- Active grants, eligibility requirements and deadlines collected on online grant databases and innovation networks.

Learn more at gtc360.com/government-grants/innovation



What IS That?

“Prank like a pro!” the ad on Amazon says for these vinyl wall outlet stickers, said to look like the real thing. Surprise your favorite or least favorite victim who’s expecting to plug in.



ID Flashback

February 2017: Nine years ago when we researched and produced this cover story, crowdfunding was fairly new and novel. Now it’s a commonly known option for people and companies who are trying to fund their early-stage inventions, with a global market of about \$20 billion in 2025. Look back on

some major success stories, the best crowdfunding sites, and more. inventorsdigest.com/issues

Get Busy!

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WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

1 The first cordless drill was invented and released in which year?

- A)** 1954 **B)** 1961
C) 1967 **D)** 1976

2 **True or false:** It costs nothing to “register” or protect a trade secret.

3 Which cooking device was invented first—the air fryer, or the microwave?

4 **True or false:** Baseball Hall of Famer Stan Musial is said to have invented the modern fist bump in the 1950s-60s because he wanted to avoid germs from shaking hands.

5 This known stupid invention is not on the list of *Time* magazine’s 50 worst inventions:

- A)** Pet Rock **B)** Hair in a Can
C) Baby cage **D)** Fake ponytails



ANSWERS: 1. B (Black and Decker). 2. True. You do not need to file with any government office. 3. Air fryer, patented in 2005 by Dutch inventor Fred van der Weij; microwave, 1945 by American engineer Percy Spencer. 4. True. 5. A (probably because it made an estimated \$15 million).

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