



Young Entrepreneurs Give Help To New Inventors

By Leah Gliniewicz

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Aspiring inventors have a new reason to be hopeful. You finally have a magazine dedicated to helping entrepreneurs sell their invention ideas.

DesignAid is not the average glossy magazine with grabby headlines and glam pics. Open up a quarterly issue of the hands-on publication, and pull out anything from a glove with an air pocket that holds in warmth to a paper-thin 1.5 volt battery.

The trade magazine, launched by Inventables, LLC in 2002, is geared toward corporate research and development, industrial design and advanced concepts departments; and it aims to spark creative product ideas and inspiration.

"It's where the dreamers meet the technology," says Zach Kaplan, president and co-founder of the Chicago-based company.

Each issue features samples of the 20 materials and technologies that subscribers can handle and examine, as well as product tags listing detailed information and uses. The Design Guide, which accompanies the samples, gives information on the products and pictures. Subscribers can then search the Inventables online database for details on sourcing, pricing, technical details, explanations of uses and related websites on the products in the issue.

The 24-year-old Kaplan founded the company with fellow University of Illinois graduate and Inventables CEO Keith Schacht, whom he met at a business plan competition on campus.

Kaplan graduated in May 2001 with a degree in mechanical engineering, and after going on several job interviews he knew just what he wanted to do - start his own business.

"I think one of the keys to coming to this decision was that I was extremely honest in my job interviews with what I wanted to do," Kaplan says. "I actually even had a couple of the interviewers say, 'maybe you should start your own company.'"

And that's exactly what he and Schacht did.

A Business is Born

In December 2000, the duo started Lever Works Inc., a software and consulting company, which they sold less than a year later.

"We recognized that although in the first business we really enjoyed running the business and liked making the sales, the actual work that the business did wasn't personally enjoyable," Kaplan concedes.

He believes that the two crucial things they learned were honesty and scalability.

"I'd say the two crucial things we learned was, one, it's extremely important to do what you want to do and you're passionate about, and, two, to be honest about it," Kaplan says. "I guess you could say honesty and selfishness were extremely important."

He said with the consulting company every product was a one-off, but they really wanted to make their own product featuring their original ideas and design to sell over and over.

So Kaplan and Schacht took about six months to figure what they liked to do and what they were passionate about.

"We also identified that we really enjoy learning," he says. "And especially learning about new materials and technologies and things that are kind of on the horizon or cutting edge."

After pounding the pavement, meeting with companies, pitching ideas, showing them prototypes and conducting focus groups, the men tweaked their product and Inventables was born.

Choosing the Best Ideas

The two partners and their team take three months to produce each quarterly issue of DesignAid and the print product. It starts with research, followed by a knowledge-sharing forum with clients, which are mostly Fortune 500 companies. The Inventables team then filters all the research down in a brainstorm session, choosing 20 of the best products for the issue. That's also when they come up with the content for products' tags, the printed issue and the online database.

"We seek out things that make something possible that wasn't possible before," Kaplan points out.

The company has since grown to three full-time employees and nine part-time employees. Kaplan doesn't hesitate to elaborate on his favorite thing about being an entrepreneur.

"We're in charge of our own destiny," he says. "We have big dreams and will realize them over time. I'd say that's the most amazing part, we get to realize our maximize potential."

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