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Business

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Inventors: All dressed up, nowhere to go

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Greg Conley is an inventor, or at least he would like to be.

"I've got over three notebooks crammed with ideas for wacky consumer novelty items, but I don't know how to get them from there to a store shelf," said Conley, a Grosse Ile resident who has been all over the metro area looking for a way to translate his ideas into products.

The goal, Conley said, can seem daunting at times. "It sounds very difficult, but I have enough energy to do it if I can only find out how."

Conley is not alone, but at present there are no answers.

"People have this image of inventors either weird or magical people with a cure for cancer, but they never see them as people with ideas and problems," said Barbara Eldersveld, director of the Inventors Council of Michigan — a subsidiary of the Metropolitan Center for High Technology in Detroit.

Being average people, most inventors have no idea how to market a product, sell a product or make a proposal to a manufacturer, Eldersveld said.

She is working on a grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Energy to set up an inventor tracking program to contact inventors throughout the state to see who has been successful. Then she intends to work with business representatives to determine how corporations get products to market.

TIM PAWL, president of Auto Innovations in West Bloomfield, a company specializing in bringing automotive-related products to the market, said the options for independent inventors are expanding.

Manufacturers and companies have reduced the amount of money they spend on research and development, which opens up opportunities for independent inventors. "You would figure there would be some trickle down."

Companies such as General Motors and Ford encourage their suppliers to build new products, which may also improve an inventor's chances of getting a product to market, Pawl said.

For example, GKN Automotive Inc., an automotive parts supplier with an office in Auburn Hills, has started what it calls a "product's extra program," which openly encourages independent inventors to come to them with ideas.

"To stay in business, these companies have got to go out and find new products," he said.

But companies still rely on inside research and development divisions, fear lawsuits from inventors who think their ideas were stolen, and the process of getting a product to market is still very complicated.

J. DOWNS HEROLD, director of liaisons for the industrial development division of the University of Michigan, concurred on the difficulty of getting a product to market.

Like Eldersveld, he suggests that inventors attempt to seek out partners. "The more people involved with a product, the better the chance for success," he said.

Herold suggested inventors determine their product's market value before approaching a potential partner. "If you've got a $30 can opener, and it's the greatest can opener in the world, you're not going to sell it unless you can convince people it's 30 times better than a $1 can opener."

Still, the independent inventor's position continues to improve, he said. In addition to the inventors council, there is the Inventors Entrepreneur Network newsletter, which is published out of Ann Arbor by Ed Zimmer, Herold said. The purpose of the newsletter, which has a circulation of nearly 5,000, is to get inventors and entrepreneurs together.

Another program is the Ferris State Manufacturing and Productivity Center, located north of Grand Rapids, he said. A state-funded program, the center evaluates the independent inventor's ideas for their marketability.

Eldersveld said although agents and manufacturer representatives sometimes attend inventor council monthly meetings, the council's real value is that it gets inventors together to share experiences and give advice.

Eldersveld hopes inventors' ideas can receive more attention through product demonstrations, which are a regular part of the council meetings. But at present only a few manufacturers, agents and patent attorneys attend regularly.

MICHAEL STEER, vice president with Random Games and Toys in Ann Arbor, specializes in getting an inventor's ideas to companies like Parker Brothers and Kenner.

Steer, an inventor himself, started Random Games and Toys along with Garry Donner in 1985 after more than a decade of creating games and getting them to market.

Because of the time and hard

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Randy Wotring (left) and Dick Clark (right) show their new invention, the Remote Caddy, a one-handed holder for two or more remotes they say will eliminate the problem of losing and handling multiple remote control units.

How the Remote Caddy was born

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

'An inventor has to be ready for anything.'
— Dick Clark

When Thomas Edison said invention is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration, he may have been talking about how tough it is to get an idea to market.

Randy Wotring and Dick Clark, inventors of the Remote Caddy, knew perspiration was going to be a big part of bringing the product to market, said Clark, president of RND Products Inc. "But it's not enough to perspire; we've had to sweat smart."

Clark and Wotring, who are introducing the Remote Caddy this month, related their experiences marketing their product to other inventors at a recent meeting of the Inventors Council of Michigan at the Livonia Civic Center library.

Wotring, who invented a game called Skyball in college, said he came up with the idea for the remote caddy after he began getting royalties for his first invention.

"I bought all kinds of stereo equipment with these remotes, and I didn't want to buy a universal remote."

There are probably a lot of people, he thought, who had more than one remote, so it seemed like a good idea to develop something to hold them together and prevent them from being lost.

Through INCOM he met up with Clark, who is a president of the TEC-LA Company of Walled Lake, and they decided that Wotring's idea had merit.

TO SUCCEED, an inventor has to rely on market-driven management, Clark said. Market pressures should guide a product's development and should dictate the marketing strategy.

Once they knew what the caddy was going to look like, there was much to be decided, Clark said. Should it be made of plastic or metal? Molded by an extrusion or injection method? How should the remotes be fastened to the caddy? Are there any things that could be added to improve the project for consumers.

Manufacturing a product can be extremely expensive, Clark said.

"You can count on spending from $5,000 to $20,000 just to get a (mold) made."

After answering hundreds of questions and developing several prototypes, an inventor must be prepared to deal with the unexpected, Clark said. In his case, the die-maker, who makes a product's mold, died.

"So we just about had to start all over. An inventor has to be ready for anything."

Wotring said while the death of the die-maker was discouraging, they still hadn't resolved all the problems with the current prototype. "Sometimes, you've got to help the engineer."

The manufacturer, who works more with metals than plastics, was trying to treat the mechanism for joining two of the caddies like aluminum. By working with the manufacturer, Clark and Wotring were able to develop a way to connect them using the more flexible properties of plastic.

But even after a product is nearly completed, the inventor still has a ways to go, Clark said.

PACKAGING CAN make or break a product, Clark said. "In most cases, you've only got 15 to 30 seconds to grab a consumer's attention, and unless your packaging does that people may not be able to figure it out.

"And how will the product be displayed? In our case, we thought the stores would probably want to put the caddies on peg hooks so we included that in the packaging."

An inventor even has to be concerned about who's buying his product, Wotring said.

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View phones, over- wire services no longer fiction

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

It's been talked about for years.

Two-way, real time picture phones, on-line information via the television, movies on demand, home shopping — the stuff of science fiction until only recently when technology caught up with the fantasy.

Many of the potential uses anticipated for the computer can be done on a television screen with a simple device not unlike today's remote control, according to David Decker, research manager at GTE laboratories.

Instead of a keyboard, the user makes selections from multiple choice menus, he said.

GTE has taken the concept out of the laboratory and into the field. "These things are already in operation in a test project in Cerritos, Calif., and if everything continues to work as expected, much of the country could be wired by the year 2000.

"What we're seeing now is the forerunner of what will be available in the 21st century," he said. "All this technology is available in the labs and in experiments — this is not a fantasy; it works."

Now that the technology is available, the two biggest obstacles to having such a system in homes by the end of the decade is public acceptance and federal regulations.

"What is the market acceptance?" he asked. A great deal of the acceptance will depend on costs and what services are offered.

GTE envisions a system offering home shopping, financial services, entertainment, travel, restaurants guide, public services, and even on-line data bases — all at the touch of a button.

Costs, Decker said, should be comparable to current cable television rates with additional services costing more.

But offering such services at a relatively low cost is dependent on who offers the services. Under current federal regulations, which the telephone companies are attempting to change, companies like GTE and Michigan Bell are restricted to offering only telephone services.

IF THOSE LAWS are not changed, GTE and other phone companies would have to lease out capacity on the systems and allow private firms to offer the services.

"You would probably see a higher cost if that were to happen," he said. GTE's pilot project in Cerritos, which is being done in cooperation with local cable companies, was given a special waiver by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Although it sounds simple, the technology is complex, he said.

Some technology necessary for two-way visual communication has existed for years, he said. Picture tubes provide the main communication media, and computers make possible some of the difficult tasks that must be performed automatically.

Conventional copper wires cannot transmit video signals quickly enough for the two-way communication necessary in an interactive system, Decker said.

Coaxial cable, which is primarily used to transmit video signals via cable systems, has shown promise for more advanced roles and the switching necessary for two-way communication is possible, but wiring the entire country to one cable system would be a daunting task, he added.

"And why would we when we already have the entire country hooked up to telephone lines?" he added.

FIBER OPTICS, the ultra-thin, ultra-fast medium used for most long distance telephone calls provide greater possibilities, he said "Fiber optics provide the superhighway for data transmission."

When coupled with a new broadband switch developed by GTE late last year, fiber optic cables will permit the transmission of broadcast quality video signals, opening the door to two-way visual communication.

CMS has one powerful year

CMS Energy Corp. restored its dividend, posted a 15 percent earnings increase and saw the market price of its stock jump 56 percent last year, shareholders were told last week.

William T. McCormick Jr., chairman and chief executive officer, said at the annual meeting that the Jackson-based utility is "carefully diversifying into non-utility, energy-related businesses" but gave no details.

Its principal subsidiary, Consumers Power, saw electric sales grow 1.3 percent and gas deliveries climb to their highest level in eight years. Consumers Power also improved its position as the nation's most productive utility, with each employee serving 304 customers, compared with an industry mean of 162, he said.

"The company's independent power subsidiary, CMS Generation, began seeking to convert abandoned or mothballed nuclear projects throughout the nation. CMS Energy is uniquely qualified to manage all aspects of such conversions, given its successful development of the Midland Cogeneration Venture (MCV) — America's largest cogeneration plant and the first-ever conversion of an abandoned nuclear power plant to natural gas," McCormick said.

In 1989 The Oxford Energy Co., of which CMS Energy is a 49-percent owner, began construction of a 30-megawatt waste-tires-to-energy facility in Sterling, Conn. — the world's largest tire-fueled power plant.

Oxford and CMS recently agreed to create a partnership for at least three other waste-tires-to-energy projects elsewhere in the United States, McCormick said.

CMS reduced its total debt from $4 billion in 1985 to $3.46 billion by year's end, and its outstanding preferred and preference stock from $1.08 billion in 1985 to $190 million in 1989, said McCormick.

CMS Energy, with $3 billion in sales, serves about two-thirds of the state.