



PHOTO CREDIT: JOANNE HAYES-RINES

S A U L ' S S M A R T S P I N



by Joanne Hayes-Rines

SAUL PALDER BRAINSTORMED his invention to perfection at a small table at his “corporate headquarters” as he worked with prototyper Hank Lippisch. At each meeting they pored over blueprints, critically evaluated the practical viability of the designs and constantly asked, “What

Oblivious to the activity around them, Saul Palder (left) and prototyper Hank Lippisch brainstorm the Smart Spin at a small table at Saul's corporate headquarters — a McDonald's on Route 128 in Newton, Mass.

if?” As the design evolved, the two men were oblivious to the activity around them at Palder’s “corporate headquarters,” which is actually the McDonald’s on Rt. 128 in Newton, Mass.

With a twinkle in his eye, the 78-year-old Palder generously shares his story of invention. The idea for what was to become the Smart Spin began as most inventions begin; he was trying to solve a problem. “I was in the kitchen and couldn’t find a cover to fit a plastic storage container,” he says. “I got to thinking there should be some way to organize the containers and the lids.”

As he began to think about a solution, his mind went to the circular

racks that hold poker chips. He envisioned containers and lids in a circular storage system that would spin around so everything would be easily accessible. “I went to a wood worker and had him make a prototype for me,” he says. “It cost \$125. I knew the fin-



showed me why he
couldn't use it."

When the unit was put on a shelf, the shelf above it made it impossible to take

out a container because there wasn't enough height. So, back to the drawing boards.

“As I thought about it, I realized the

“WHEN I WALKED INTO MERCHANT MEDIA, I WAS PREPARED. I HAD DONE MY HOMEWORK. I HAD MY PATENT, MY BLUEPRINTS. I LOOKED SUBSTANTIAL.”

ished product wouldn't be made of wood, but I wanted to be able to show people what I had in mind."

Prototype in hand, Palder's first stop was to a friend who owned a restaurant. "I thought the product would be perfect for restaurants," he says. "But when I showed it to my friend, he

unit had to pull out so a container could be removed," he says. It was about this time, through a mutual friend, that Palder met 78-year-old Hank Lippisch who was a retired industrial designer with years of experience in plastics. Palder hired Lippisch to pre-

(Continued on next page)

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pare formal drawings for a prototype of his invention and drawings that he could use to present to potential licensees or marketers.

As the concept evolved to a workable solution, Palder's next step was to look into protecting his idea. Years earlier, when he tried to invent a new catalytic converter, Palder had sought the advice of now 78-year-old Boston patent attorney David Wolf of the intellectual property law firm, Wolf Greenfield. Although the catalytic converter project didn't materialize, Palder knew Wolf was the attorney he needed

for this new project. "We did a patent search for Saul, and no prior art even came close to what he has created," says Wolf. Palder and Lippisch finalized the design, and Wolf filed the patent application.

Palder is a very experienced businessman, with years owning his own retail tire sales business, and he knew that a patent was nothing if people didn't like the product. "I asked everyone I knew what they thought of it," he laughs. "I was like an old time peddler because I even asked women on the street if they liked it." Responses were

very positive so now he was faced with marketing. "I knew I didn't want to do it," he says honestly, "so first I thought I'd give it away. I even called Paul Newman's company to give it to them for charity. I never got a call back."

Stymied, Palder started to network, but "everybody said no. They liked the product but couldn't help." But one connection led him to a local company, Merchant Media in Framingham, Mass., which is a direct response TV and retail marketer. "When I walked into Merchant Media, I was prepared," he says. "I had done my homework. I had my patent. I had my blueprints. I looked substantial. Unlike other responses I had gotten, no one there was negative about it."

Michael Antino, president of Merchant Media, echoes Palder's comments. "Saul had done it all right," he says. "He had his patent, and he'd perfected the design. I knew this was a great product within the first ten seconds. He hit it!" Antino knows a hot product when he sees it. His company, which he started in 1997 with his father, Michael, Sr., has represented some of the biggest products in the infomercial world. "One great seller was the Perfect Pancake, which made pancakes using two small fry pans that

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you flip over," he says. "That was invented by a 78-year-old retired guy from Milford, Mass. We created the Pasta Pro ourselves. We didn't have a patent on that because there was too much prior art, but it sold very well. But if we'd had a patent, we'd be billionaires!"

As many inventors know, the infomercial industry is fraught with players of dubious character. "Our business, unfortunately, has a history of snake oil salesmen," says Antino. "We don't do any copy cat promotions. All of our products are original. We're a good fit for someone like Saul who had his plans and a patent, but we've also worked with folks who came in with 'cocktail napkin' ideas." In Palder's case, Merchant Media licensed the rights to his invention and did everything necessary to get the product to market.

"We get the products manufactured by our contacts in the Far East,"

"SPEED TO MARKET [IS ESSENTIAL], BECAUSE EVEN WITH A PATENT, COPY CATS WILL BACK INTO IT AND AVOID A PATENT"

explains Antino. "Speed to market is what's going to give us the biggest share of the market because even with a patent, copy cats will back into it and avoid the patent. So, it comes down to a race. But we can compete and have the muscle to let a small inventor go head to head with a Rubbermaid or other big company."

And race to market was exactly what Merchant Media did. They struck a deal with Palder in the fall of 2003, and Smart Spin hit the market a year later. Flooding the airways with infomercials, it didn't take long before sales exceeded capacity. But Merchant Media was ready and production was ramped up.

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"Manufacturing capacity is critical," says Antino. "As soon as you can't fill all the orders, the sellers will look for other avenues to get the product." From infomercials to 24/7 home shopping channels to catalogs and, finally, to retail, Smart Spin was everywhere. In less than six months, more than six million units were sold, and the sales pace


isn't slackening. "I think the Smart Spin could last forever," predicts Antino.

So, why didn't a company that sells food storage containers come up with the way to organize them? From his years of experience, Lippisch has the answer. "Companies have a very rigid structure," he explains. "Risk taking or developing new remote products is not encouraged by the corporate structure." (Continued on next page)

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devising improvements to an already great product. Attorney Wolf explains that “if you’re a good inventor and a good lawyer, you don’t sit on your hands. Saul has patent applications pending that may surprise a lot of people about how broad his protection is.” Wolf has enjoyed watching his client’s success and says, “Saul is a down-to-earth inventor who doesn’t play games or treat his lawyer like an enemy. He saw beyond the invention. He had a little luck, but he knew people he could trust and he made the connections.” With 50 years experience as a patent attorney, Wolf says that in many ways a product’s success depends on the inventor. “Saul has the bug,” he laughs. “He’s not about to stop now.” 

There is much hand wringing when they are faced with anything new. Saul was free from the constraints that face corporate people who are responsible for a product line.”

With a grand slam at nearly his first time at bat, is Palder ready to relax and head to Florida to enjoy his golden years? No way. He and Lippisch still meet at the “corporate headquarters”


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