

Confessions of a serial inventor

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Financial Post

Monday, January 08, 2007

Gilad Shoham is a serial inventor. "I come up with one new product idea every single day," says the award-winning industrial designer and chief executive and founder of Medonyx Inc. in Toronto. "Most of those ideas don't go anywhere, but some keep reverberating in my memory." That was the case with gelFAST, Mr. Shoham's go anywhere, wearable hand sanitizer that has hospitals around the world placing orders. The device--about the size and shape of a pager that operates the same way wall-mounted antiseptic alcohol gel dispensers do--has garnered a lot of attention since hitting the market. It won Gold in the National Post's Design Exchange Awards in 2004 before being selected as one of the few Canadian inventions entered in the 2005 World Fair in Aichi, Japan. This fall, on CBC's Dragon's Den, gelFAST had the expert panel of investors in a bidding war. Not bad for someone who spent years making other people's napkin sketches into products for consumers and medical companies. Although he incorporated Medonyx in April, 2004, Mr. Shoham kept his job as a product developer at one of the research labs in Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital until January, 2005, when the first units came off the assembly line. The rest, as they say, is history.

Q: How did you come up with the idea for gelFAST?

A: My brother, a doctor of infectious diseases, came to me with a problem: Doctors and nurses, he said, wash their hands less than 40% as often as they are supposed to. As a result, roughly one in 10 people who go to a hospital pick up an infection they didn't have when they went in. From that group, one in 23 die. Even though there are rules and hand sanitizers all over hospitals, caregivers simply weren't using them. Our idea was to put the sanitizer on the caregiver and make it super easy to apply -- they can put it on using just one hand. That way it becomes a reflex. Just like putting on a seatbelt. It's essentially putting social engineering into a product. Making just a product is not that interesting. Making something that can help change people's behaviours and ultimately help the world is awesome.

Q: Walk me through the process from concept to market.

A: I did up some drawings in 2003 and started showing them to hospitals who essentially said, "Good luck." Then SARS hit. At about the same time, my other brother, an MBA, Ph D business guy, stepped in and laid out why it was a good idea: It saves lives, it's relatively simple to make--and it's got a great business model, which is one cartridge per nurse or doctor per shift.

He wrote me a cheque for \$20,000 and said, "Go." In February, 2005, I took gelFAST on the road, sharing tablespace at a medical trade show where I sold them right off the floor.

Q: What was the most difficult part of the process?

A: Breaking out of my design/engineering background and becoming a Swiss Army knife. One of my biggest lessons has been learning when design is the solution and when it's not. Sometimes you need to think like a salesperson; sometimes you need to think like a logistics person.

Q: What mistakes did you make along the way?

A: Thinking that all I had to do to sell a product designed for hospital workers was to go directly to the hospitals. Two years in, I now understand that, to sell to a hospital, you have to go through distributors and build your business model around that. Distributors have 25-year relationships with the hospitals. They walk into the purchasing department and they are on a first-name basis with someone they golf with. As a product developer, you hear salespeople talk about how the world is built on relationships and you say, "No, it's built on solid tooling and the proper plastics." Not true. It is built on relationships and leveraging relationships, and there is no CAD program where you can plug in relationships as the variable. That's the human element and you can't underestimate it.

Q: How did you know you had a winner?

A: When a stranger I met on the floor of a trade show said, "That's cool," and then gave me money -- that's when I knew we had a market.

Q: What does innovation mean to you?

A: Finding the right problem. Once you realize you have a good, solid problem to bite into, that's when you've got something. That's innovation.

Q: What advice would you give would be inventors?

A: Tackle the right problem. Often I see inventors who have a really clever solution for a non-problem. You can't rely on your own enthusiasm for a product to build momentum.

Profile of Gilad Shoham.

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