



BY MOLLY ALTON MULLINS

ERA's 2005 Invention Showcase – The Products, the Ideas, the Success Stories

In an industry where “product is king,” most DR professionals agree that product selection is THE most crucial element for a campaign’s long-term success. Finding a product that is new, innovative and highly demonstrable, isn’t as easy today as it was a few years ago. And with media rates rising and production costs soaring, more and more marketers are struggling to find that next hit product or that next great idea. So where do DR insiders turn to find great products in today’s uncertain marketplace? Many visit ERA’s Invention Showcase, hosted this past September during ERA’s 15th Annual Convention.

ERA launched its Invention Showcase in 1999 in an effort to bring together today’s newest inventors with this industry’s biggest players. Since its inception, ERA’s Invention Showcase has boasted hundreds of inventions and product ideas, and dozens of participants have actually signed lucrative deals onsite and after the event. Just this year alone, 11 inventors were signed by a major live shopping channel and many more are expected to garner deals from the con-

tacts they made during the show. So what kinds of products were on display? A few beauty ideas, lots of safety items and a few products that are, well, unique.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

All in all, 40 inventors participated in this year’s showcase, and included entrepreneurs from as far away as the U.K. Products with such unusual names as Kool Dogz, Easy Dump and the Zoom Spoon filled the showcase’s aisles, offering attendees a glimpse into the more creative minds of today’s newest inventors.

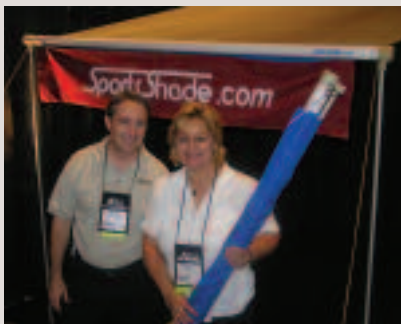
Two inventors, Tim and Lisa Washington of Huntersville, N.C., created their product with children in mind. Tim, a big basketball fan, wanted to design a product that allowed him to play basketball at night. The result is NiteHoops, a basketball hoop that glows in the dark and lets anyone shoot a jump shot into the wee hours of the night.

Another product on display, the E-Z Plucker, was a simple combination of a light affixed to a pair of tweezers. While most of us would assume this

product would be best for grooming, inventor Steve Maine explains that his product also works for auto body repair and other instances where precision is of the utmost importance.

Many products also focused on safety issues, and offered ways to protect your family and your home. Evacuation Sidekick is an alarm device that helps children evacuate their home in the event of a fire. First Escape was a product that revolutionizes fire safety, and Key-p-Out limits front door access, effectively discouraging unauthorized persons from entering your home or condo. The Maxi View is designed to enhance rear view mirror vision in automobiles and claims to be two and a half times more effective than traditional mirrors.

There were plenty of products on display that also made every day chores easier. There was the Lace Brace that keeps shoelaces from coming untied, there was the Scoutt Finder that helps locate misplaced items like remote controls, keys and cell phones, there was the incredible exfoliating mat that felt oh so good, and there was



Sports Shade



Purse Pleaser



Absoflat



NiteHoops



Kool Dogz



Safe Shopper



Maxi View Mirror



Acti-Matic



The Yard Bagger

the Pool Caddy for organizing pool equipment and accessories. There were also plenty of products to interest outdoorsy types as well. The E-Z Dump trash can makes yard work a cinch, and David Seeley and Don Dyer, inventors for the Yard Bagger, claim that their product make lawn work 50 percent faster, while cutting labor by 80 percent. The inventions to organize your purse, your keys and your groceries also drew much attention from everyone in the Showcase.

Products for kids and pets also scored well at the Showcase. An innovative treat called Kool Dogz offered pet lovers a “Do it Yourself” kit that would keep Fido entertained for days. The Zoom Spoon, an airplane-shaped, vibrating spoon, provides loads of fun for toddlers and small children as they eat their breakfast. Other products included the Rain Bounce, a water filled trampoline of fun for all ages, and the Sport Shade, a retractable tent perfect for soccer games and sporting events. All in all, the products featured at this year’s showcase seemed to be some of the most innovative and useful of any year on record.

WHAT THE SHOWCASE IS REALLY ALL ABOUT

“This industry is really one of the last platforms where entrepreneurs can come up with an idea and bring it to fruition, making their dreams come true,” says Eileen Simms, president of Infotainment Media and chair of ERA’s Invention Showcase. “I see hundreds of products each year, and many of them simply won’t work in today’s competitive marketplace. What is so unique about ERA’s Invention Showcase is that we provide ERA members with so many quality products in a protected environment. Very, very few other programs can boast the same level of excellence that ERA’s Invention Showcase can.”

During the course of the year, ERA executes multiple invention seminars around the U.S. in an effort to attract top notch inventors to the Showcase. Each inventor is pre-qualified and the product is prescreened before the Annual Convention to ensure that only the best ideas get selected and the highest caliber of inventors receive the final invitation. At INPEX,

one of the largest invention trade shows in the country, ERA hosts an educational session on the full process and helps warn inventors of potential pitfalls, should they forget to patent their idea or product. In an effort to protect the inventors even more fully, all applicants must have a patent or a patent pending on their product and/or idea, and only ERA members are allowed into the Invention Showcase during the convention. While to some this might seem over the top, Simms has seen too many inventors get their ideas or product concepts stolen.

“While I think that the majority of marketers in this industry are good, I’m always concerned that there are a few players out there who would take advantage of an inventor who is a bit too trusting. While many wish all conference attendees could enter the showcase, we limit it to ERA members only in an effort to protect the inventors for the long term,” muses Simms. “In the end, my primary concern is the safety of the inventors and the integrity of the Showcase.”

WHAT INVENTORS TOOK HOME

During the course of three long days, each inventor had opportunity to meet with hundreds of ERA members and pitch their product ideas. Many were given business cards to contact once they got home, while some finalize deals right there onsite. In addition, showcase participants also received valuable information on which DR mediums their products would work best for.

Throughout the conference, ERA members are given the opportunity to utilize their expertise and vote for who they think are the best showcase participants. At the showcase's grand finale, five category winners are announced that have the best "potential" to work for DR. This year, Kwame Jackson, runner up on NBC's hit show *The Apprentice* and ERA's closing general session speaker, made the announcements on Wednesday, September 21. The award for Best Potential Print/Catalog Product was given to Sport Shade, which was invented by Carrie Jeske. First Escape

won for Best Potential Radio Product and AbsoFlat, a stable fitness ball, won for Best Potential Long Form Product. Smart Hammer and its enthusiastic inventor Roland Staana won for Best Potential Short Form Product and there was a tie for Best Potential Live Shopping Product. Inventor Terry Newton and her purse organizer, the Purse Pleaser won, as did the Sport Shade, which took home its second award. All in all, the voting was extremely close as so many of the inventions had potential to do well in multiple forms of DR marketing.

And sometimes, ultimate success takes an inventor full circle. Just this year, two former Invention Showcase participants were among the finalists for the 2005 ERA Awards. Easy Crown Molding, which was invented by Joe Fowler, and the Portable Towel Holder, created by Jane DeNoble, were among the three finalists for the show and up for top honors during the event. In fact, Easy Crown Molding, which has aired on home shopping channel powerhouse QVC, took home the crystal

trophy for Best Live Shopping On-Air Guest. Seeing the program actually bring a product from prototype to an award winning success is something of which Simms is quite proud.

"Great inventions truly are what make this industry so unique. Having an incredible product idea and actually turning it into a marketable reality isn't something you see every day. I am so proud of each of the inventors who participated and I wish them all life long success. I know that many of them truly can make this happen," muses Simms.

ERA is always seeking inventors who are interested in participating in upcoming showcases and DR professionals who are willing to judge the submissions. For more information on ERA's Invention Showcase or how you can get involved, contact Carrie Harper at (703) 908.1035, or via email at charper@retailing.org.

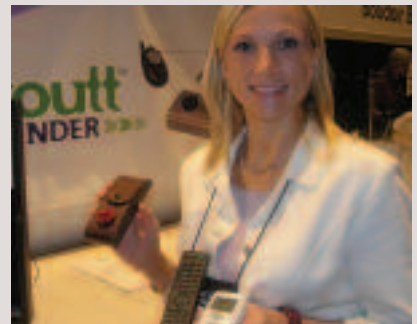
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Evacuation Sidekick



Keyper



Scoutt Finder



Flamingo Exfoliating Back Scrubber



SpeedWatch



The Zoom Spoon