

Inventique

The newsletter of Wessex Round Table of Inventors

August 2003

Brian talks the talk

NEW SMART-BACKED INVENTION LAUNCHED

Entrepreneurial WRTI member Brian Stickley launched his latest invention, *Talking Tins*, onto the market earlier this month.

The product, which was developed “almost by accident” after Brian had spotted the basic technology at an electronics exhibition in Hong Kong, has been created for the visually-impaired population both at home and abroad.

The end-user speaks into the device to record the contents of a tin, bottle or other receptacle – and *Talking Tins* repeats the message at the touch of a large, colour-contrasted button whenever required.

“Because *Talking Tins* is a voice-recordable product, there are no language barriers to worry about,” Brian enthused. “Whatever is recorded is played back.”

Distribution deals in the UK have already been agreed with the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), plus smaller charities and county-based associations.

A triple pack of *Talking Tins* retails at £9.99 in the UK.

Overseas interest

Brian took the product to the USA earlier this year in order to gauge market reaction through focus groups and meetings. He has succeeded in gaining the approval of the National Association for the Visually Handicapped (NAVH) in

New York, who are recommending *Talking Tins* through their own Talking newspapers, and will include it in national exhibitions.

“I am discussing terms with a very large distributor in the USA at the moment,” Brian said. “I also have a distributor lined up for Germany and another for France.”

Almost 7.5m Europeans suffer some form of visual impairment, compared to an estimated 20m in the USA. Intriguingly, only 2% of the visually-impaired community read Braille.

In a class of his own

Brian created Talking Products Ltd after winning a SMART Award to develop his idea with the aid of Business Link Wessex (who hold a 5% interest in the company). He also formed REXCOM Ltd two years ago in order to market his previous inventions, *Record-a-Card* and *Voice Pad*.

“I don’t class myself as a real inventor,” he said. “I like to find an existing technology and develop it into a new application.”

“Anyone can have a good idea, in my opinion, but the satisfaction for me is in taking the idea, making it work and then getting it to market. In other words, seeing it on the shelf of a retail store and knowing that I did that.” ■

www.TalkingProducts.com



Brian Stickley has set up distribution deals in the UK for his product, with France, Germany and the USA to follow once contracts are signed.

WRTI diary date

WEDNESDAY 10 SEPTEMBER

Club visit to the IBM Research Laboratories, Hursley.

WHAT A GREAT IDEA! by Jill Moore



jillmoore@maculimited.net



VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

IT IS A GREAT privilege to be involved with an organisation which seeks to protect and enhance the commercial prospects for inventors. Wessex RTI is now held up as an example to others planning to start inventors' clubs throughout the UK – and there are many in prospect.

It is a well-documented fact that much of our inspiration came from the efforts of the RTI set up on Isle of Wight by Paul & Dawn Bone. Their motto "A club for inventors run by inventors" is as important now as when it was first thought of.

Of course, our club has changed. We started life with six members and now have nearly ten times that number.

To give credit where it's due, it was Dr Richard Penson who advocated closer association with Southampton Institute, and they now provide us with our own club room and enable us to become student members of SI and to use their engineering facilities at greatly discounted fees.

These arrangements have already paid dividends because a number of members have used the Institute's facilities to carry out work to make and test prototypes – Brian Flynn's Autocone project and Sam Barzanji's Gravity Pump being two examples. Other projects involving the Institute and grant funding from the Small Business Service are now in the pipeline.

Finally, I must mention the great work put in by our erstwhile Treasurer Brian Pascall, who retired from the post last month. It is very pleasing that Mike Overy has agreed to take over this voluntary position.

Sincerely,

DAVID NICHOLAS MBE, Chairman

INVENTORATOR Mandy Haberman

Patently wrong

PATENTS CAN BE BAD FOR INVENTORS' WEALTH

IF YOU HAVE invented something of significant commercial value, other companies will try to copy your idea. But, because of the high costs involved, the current enforcement system effectively encourages big business to ride roughshod over inventors' patents. They know that lone inventors cannot afford to see them in court – so they infringe. If the inventor *does* attempt to fight back, the infringing company may simply settle out of court, paying the inventor a small royalty for a licence.

Courting disaster

Like most independent inventors, I had spent years self-financing and developing my idea and paying out a small fortune on patent agents' fees. All the searches had been done by the Patent Office, and the Examiner had granted my patent – on the strength of which we made a huge manufacturing investment.

I did not know then that, if you go to court to fight an infringer, your patent is re-examined – and can be revoked, even if no additional prior art is cited. If the patent is revoked then it cannot be infringed – so you lose the case and have to pay both sides legal costs. There is no recourse to the Patent Examiner for supplying a faulty product.

In a typical short case the losing side will be faced with a bill for around £1m. Although patents are revoked in over half of such cases, the judge pronounced my own patent both valid and infringed. Against all the odds, I'd stood up to the bullies and won – or so I thought.

A devastating error

Then a large multi-national objected to my European patents, alleging a technical error in my patent filing. They had no concrete evidence to support this allegation,

but the burden of proof was on me to prove otherwise. The only proof was in the UK Patent Office file. It should have been a simple task to retrieve that file and quash the objection – but the Patent Office had destroyed it. As a result I lost the case and my priority date.

My European patent must now be submitted to the court of first instance, where new prior art has to be considered – an expensive procedure which has taken five years to date.

A slow and risky business.

Someone once told me that 'patents are not for the little guy', and I agree. I believe it is irresponsible to encourage inventors to patent their ideas and start their own businesses without proper support – a patent can be a passport to financial ruin.

Nor should the Government rely on the number of patent applications made being a measure of the nation's success in innovation, since many business start-ups fail because they cannot enforce the rights upon which their market position relies.

The system needs to be radically altered. We need a process of enforcement which is accessible and fair to all, but not one in which the quality of justice is compromised. The 'validity gap' between Patent Office and judicial decision needs to be reduced by more rigorous patent examination. The Patent Office's proposed 'pre-trial validity assessment' might help avoid court proceedings altogether.

Inventors are currently wasting time, money and creative energy on litigation instead of new ideas. This is not the way to nurture innovation and it is not good for the economy. There has to be a better way. ■

● Mandy Haberman is inventor of the *Anywayup*® Cup.

www.mandyhaberman.com

USING TRIZ PRINCIPLES

SO FAR, I HAVE presented 14 of the 40 TRIZ Principles. You may already be thinking there are some neat ideas among them – ideas you have come across from time to time and used here and there, but better defined and presented. But how would you use the Principles on a real project?

Well, you can use TRIZ Principles simply as idea prompts, or for idea analysis.

Prompts for Idea Generation

Take any feature of your design, then ask yourself, “What if I...” and apply each of the TRIZ Principles (go through the list really quickly or it will take forever). Note any ideas you like, and don’t reject the idea just because it might cause another problem (you might be able to solve the new problem in another way).

Having quickly gone through the Principles, extrapolate a few that you think might easily add value to your design and which you can use to solve problems, and work on the ideas some more.

But also, take a couple that are really going nowhere and see if you can make a leap into a totally new solution. The bigger the leap the more you may come up with something that no-one has thought of! (This kind of ‘leap’ thinking also stretches your mind, helping you to practise being more open to ideas, however crazy they may appear to be.)

Don’t forget that if applying one of the TRIZ Principles seems to make the idea worse, you can go the other way, to remove or lessen an effect. So if the idea to ‘nest’ two components makes things worse, for instance, see what you can do to ‘un-nest’ two components.

Some idea won’t make any sense at all – so try to *make* them make sense. (This is the creative ideas part of the session, so allow silly things from time to time.)



GRAHAM RAWLINSON CONTINUES HIS SERIES ON HOW TO INVENT (ALMOST) ANYTHING

TRIZ (pronounced ‘trees’), is an acronym from the four Russian words ‘Teoriya Resheniya Izobretatelskikh Zadatch’, which stands for the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving – a theory developed by Russian patent officer, Genrich Altshuller, who noticed similarities in invented solutions from different fields.

In analysing over 200,000 patents, Altshuller discovered that most patented ideas use a number of objective principles and are based on a finite number of physical, chemical and geometric effects, so he developed 40 TRIZ Principles as being common to many inventions. Using one or more of these Principles as tools can help solve any inventive problem.

Idea Analysis

This is potentially the most productive part of a TRIZ ideas session, but is hard work if you do it properly.

You approach the idea in the same manner as for the ‘Prompts’ part of the session but each time you think through the ‘What if ...?’ you also ask yourself, “so why would it give that result?”

Put simply, you are using the ‘What ifs’ to ask detailed questions about each feature of your design in a structured way. If you do this thoroughly, you will understand

every aspect of your design, which may in turn give you a better understanding of what you’ve got – to seek a wider patent, or create better marketing material, for instance. It might even give you ideas for new markets that neither you nor anyone else had thought of before.

The combination of use of Prompts for Idea Generation and Idea Analysis is what makes the whole toolkit of TRIZ so powerful. If you just ‘brainstorm’ you arrive at some ideas (some pretty good ones and others that are... well, not much use, really), but unless you do some work on the ideas they are just that: ideas and nothing more.

With the TRIZ toolkit, 40 Principles, Trends of Evolution of Design, Functionality Analysis, Resource Analysis and ‘Ideality’ for idea selection you can systematically work through ideas to produce a thorough and deep understanding of all the features of your initial design invention.

Next month: Principle 15 etc. ■
triz@dagr.demon.co.uk www.triz.org

● Innovation consultant Dr Graham Rawlinson is co-author with David Straker of *How to Invent (Almost) Anything*, ISBN 1 904298 87 7

HUMORESQUE

from Dave Challice dchallie@bournemouth.ac.uk

- Why, when someone tells you there are over a billion stars in the universe, you believe them – but if they tell you there is wet paint somewhere, you have to touch it to make sure?
- Why do toasters always have a setting that burns the toast to a horrible crisp no one could eat?
- Why does mineral water that ‘seeped through mountains for centuries’ have a ‘use by’ date?
- Why are they called stairs inside but steps outside?
- Why is a person that handles your money called a ‘Broker’?
- What do people in China call their best plates?

Inventique

"Imagination is more important than knowledge." – Albert Einstein

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE SEHEA

Realising your business potential

HAVANT A FRIEND IN THE WORLD OF INVENTION

THE SOUTH EAST Hampshire Enterprise Agencies (SEHEA), based in Havant, provide a range of services of interest to local entrepreneurial inventors. These services include:

- Wessex Innovation Service.
- Business advice and information.
- Training, seminars and workshops.
- Premises and accomodation.

Wessex Innovation Service

provides a confidential advisory service for businesses and individuals seeking to commercialise their innovative ideas.

If you have created a new or improved product or process, we can help you evaluate and realise its potential. A small charge will be made to clients not in receipt of benefits as a contribution towards the costs of providing this service.

You will be offered advice and guidance across a broad range of topics, including:

- Planning a course of action
- Market assessment and research
- Will it work?

- Prototyping
- Production
- Economics
- Sources of finance
- Intellectual property.

Innovention 2004

Wessex Innovation Service organises an annual innovation competition and exhibition designed to provide a shop window for innovative ideas and to link innovators with those able to assist with the commercialisation of those ideas. The event is held at the INTECH Centre near Winchester (see *Inventique*, June 2003)

To add your name to the list for information regarding *Innovention 2004*, please e-mail your contact details to christined@sehea.co.uk ■

● **Contact: SEHEA**
 (South East Hampshire Enterprise Agencies)
 The Regional Business Centre
 Harts Farm Way
 Havant PO9 1HR
 Tel: 023 9244 9449 Fax: 023 9244 9555
www.sehea.co.uk sehea@sehea.co.uk

WRTI requires a Membership Secretary to maintain member lists and to assist with recruitment. Contact John Gibbs (02380 789707) johnrobertgibbs@aol.com

MEMBER SERVICES

CONCEPT TO MANUFACTURE. Help with presentation, prototyping, technical & manufacturing issues. Contact: Innovate Product Design, 01722 410 295

EDITOR/DESIGNER/JOURNALIST 30 years book, magazine and partwork experience. Contact: Frank Landamore, 01273 475 184 franklandamore@hotmail.com

ELECTRONICS CONSULTANT with 30 years experience, specialising in wireless and positioning technologies. Contact: Mike Overy, 01420 562378 mike.overy@zen.co.uk

ELECTRONICS ENGINEER Concept to proof of principle. Ex scientific civil servant. Own lab. Contact: Mike Wright, 01428 722833 mike@fwright21.freeserve.co.uk

INNOVATION CONSULTANT and trainer specialising in TRIZ, author of *How to Invent (Almost) Anything*. Contact: Graham Rawlinson 01403 871321 Graham@dagr.demon.co.uk

Entries in this column are free to WRTI Members, who should mail their details to the Editor at the addresses below.

Wessex Round Table of Inventors meet at 6pm on the second Wednesday of each month at Southampton Institute, East Park Terrace SO14 0RP

CHAIRMAN David Nicholas MBE David.Nicholas@businesslinkwessex.co.uk

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN Richard Little rlittle@jenton.co.uk MEMBERSHIP/SECRETARY John Gibbs johnrobertgibbs@aol.com

TREASURER Mike Overy mike.overy@zen.co.uk DEVELOPMENT OFFICER Les McCall l.b.mccall@btinternet.com

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Editorial contributions: Mail to Inventique@hotmail.com or The Editor, *Inventique*, 42 South Way, Lewes BN7 1LY