

Against all odds

Mainer actually made money on his invention

By Victoria Gannon
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Guy Marsden is an exception: The Woolwich, Maine, resident has actually made a profit off his gadget. The inventor of a magnetic levitation kit, he's sold the device on his Web site since October 2003 at a starting price of \$49.99.

Most inventors don't make money. The percentage who are able to turn a good idea into a marketable product is "very low," says Tom Maas, an adviser with the Maine Patent Program.

"A rule of thumb in the industry, that's often quoted, is that out of 100 good ideas, maybe 10 would make it through initial scrutiny," said Maas, a retired chemist who holds 14 U.S. patents. "Out of that, two or three might end up in a product."

Marsden's journey, from his first realization that he needed a levitating device, to his marketing strategies and decision to forgo a patent, highlights the decisions and pitfalls modern-day inventors face.

An artist as well as a self-taught engineer, Marsden had envisioned building a wooden sculpture possessing a free-floating piece. He built the kit to achieve that.

The small device is able to suspend objects, weighing up to one ounce, by electromagnets and rare earth magnets. When used in another installation, the magnets can be concealed, making the object appear to float in the air.

"What was peculiar about the levitation kit is that the motivation was art," said Marsden.



ONE OF THE REASONS Guy Marsden was able to make a profit on his magnetic levitation kit is that he decided to forgo the expensive process of getting a patent.

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Aside from that, he conceived of the kit in the same way most inventors come up with their ideas as a solution to a pre-existing problem.

“What most inventors fail to realize,” said Maas, “is that people do not buy innovation. People buy solutions to present or perceived problems. One of the biggest problems is that people don’t take the time and effort to find out what is already out there that might be a solution to the problem.”

Marsden has learned that another magnetic levitation kit is out there, but his seems to have fared better, either because of its simplicity of engineering or the fact it’s so affordable. Or maybe the way he’s marketed it.

Marketing is the hurdle that most often halts inventors’ progress, said Maas. “Inventors are often-times blinded by innovation. Most don’t understand what goes into converting a piece of technology into a new product.”

After developing the technology for his levitation kit, Marsden effectively publicized its existence to a niche audience, writing articles about his work that were published in magazines read by fellow inventors and engineers.

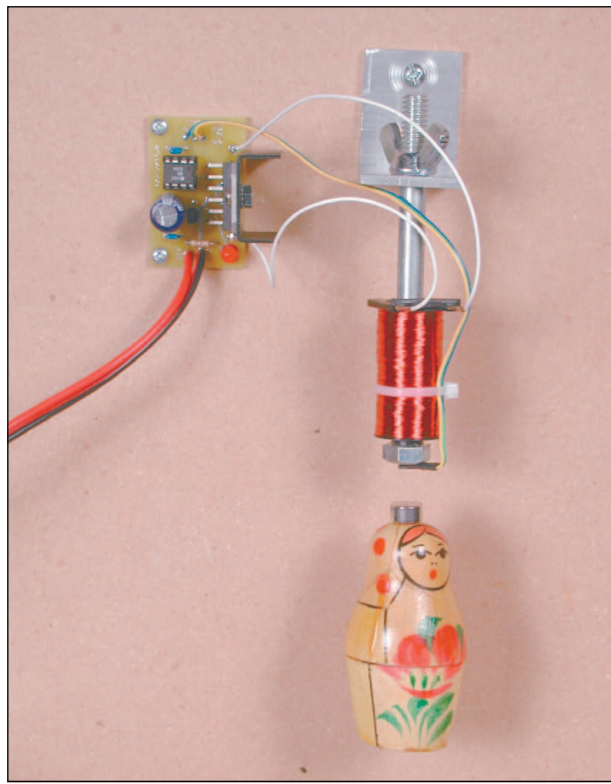
The online versions of the articles, published in “Nuts and Volts” and “Inventor’s Digest,” were linked to Marsden’s Web site, www.arttec.net. After the first article was published, hits to the site doubled, he said.

“It turned into a massive business.” He does all his sales online, shipping packages to major universities and other inventors on a daily basis. He’s grossed \$14,000 in sales so far.

Marsden also makes money building prototypes for other inventors of their designs, working closely with them throughout the process. Some of that experience observing other inventors’ mistakes may have contributed to his decision to not get a patent.

“It’s a chronic problem, people who get patents,” said Marsden. “They say, ‘Wow, I’ve got a patent.’ And they have not a clue what to do with it.”

Getting a patent in the first place can be a costly



A FIGURINE OUTFITTED WITH A MAGNET dangles freely below an assembled version of Guy Marsden’s magnetic levitation kit.

process, said Maas. “Most of the cost comes from using a patent attorney.”

Fees vary depending on how complex the invention is and how long the actual application is, he said. He’s seen applications cost from \$5,000 to \$250,000.

For some inventors, it can take years to recoup that investment, even if it ever sees the light of day.

“From my own personal experience, a patent is not always necessary,” said Marsden. “It depends on the product. If you have something you know you can sell half a million of, then get a patent.”

But, he added self-mockingly, “if you have a dumb idea, you can make money from it right away.”