



BUSINESS

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Crowdsourcing: Inventing the question to fit your answer

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"Invention, my dear friends, is 93% perspiration, 6% electricity, 4% evaporation, and 2% butterscotch ripple."

So says Gene Wilder's Willy Wonka, in the 1971 film of Roald Dahl's classic children's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate factory*.

Unfortunately, few of us are lucky enough to have a chocolate factory full of non-union Oompa Loompas (Wonka seems to play fast and loose with anti-human trafficking laws) to help you get your idea to market.

But, what you do have that dubious employers like Mr Wonka don't is the power of the internet. And fewer trips to the dentist.

Electrifying idea

Jake Zien is a 24-year-old designer from Milwaukee who now lives in New York, where he works for a tech start-up.

He is also a successful inventor. His product, the Pivot Power, is a strip plug that bends. He had help from over 700 other people - many of whom were strangers - who all get some share in the profits.

Mr Zien [has made over \\$350,000](#) so far.

He is just one of a community of people who are part of Quirky - a platform where people collaborate to produce new products that the company manufactures and sells.

"I joined Quirky back in 2010 after a family friend told me he'd read about the company in an in-flight magazine," says Mr Zien.

"The friend, an intellectual property lawyer, had been consulting with me for some time about developing my idea for a flexible power strip.

"He mentioned that Quirky purported to do exactly what I needed - to be the missing piece that's needed to turn a nascent idea into a commercially available product. I joined the site and submitted my idea a week later."

He believes being able to work on his idea with others made it a commercial success.

"It was Quirky that did the overwhelming majority of the work, and I see the product's success as a "perfect storm" combination of factors, such as my timing in submitting the idea, rather than a complete testament to the quality of the submission."

The company has been operating for four years, and now has a community of around 400,000 people.

"We can get anything from bar napkin sketches to patented and prototyped ideas," says Quirky's Bret Kovacs.

The community gives feedback on the idea, then every Thursday the Quirky team have a meeting which is streamed live, where they decide on which ideas to take forward.

The community and the company then work together to make the products a reality.

The inventor and those who have influenced development get a share of 30% of sales from the Quirky website, or 10% from items sold elsewhere.

But the company has bigger ambitions.

They are in the process of launching a new partnership with US mega-corporation GE, which they hope will change the way patents are used.

GE is giving the Quirky community access to patents and technologies with the express purpose of letting people tinker with them and find innovative new uses.

"Just for too long, patents have been misused and really misunderstood, the only places you really hear about patents today are in the court of law," says Mr Kovacs

"Our goal with partnering with GE on this front is really to bring patents back to their original intended use. Certainly they are meant to protect the inventor, but what's really important about patents is they are meant to inspire."

Patently necessary

Quirky is not alone in wanting to bring patents full circle. They were originally intended not only to stop ideas being stolen - [they were supposed to foster innovation](#) and help others improve on existing technology.

The patent process was a sort of quid pro quo - to get protection for your idea you had to be transparent about the details.

Those following the latest [Apple/Samsung court battle](#) - or the infamous [patent trolls](#) that have sprung up in recent years, could be forgiven for thinking it was about stifling innovation instead.

Marblar is a new UK start-up founded by three PhD students busy dusting off unused patents held by universities and other institutions and finding new uses for them - finding problems that fit solutions that already exist.

Rather than Quirky's consumer focus, this is about hard science.

"As scientists we saw that a huge amount of science never gets commercialised," says chief executive Daniel Perez.

"Often this is because the application might not be obvious. Imagine if you're in the Oxford physics department, and you develop a cool new laser, and your intention was to use it in satellites, but when you're done the gold standard happens to be much better?"

"The technology's already patented, it's been published, but you know other people aren't incentivised to take a look at this laser and to think of new ways it could be used," he says.

Building a crowdsourcing platform seemed an obvious way to find new ideas, according to Mr Perez.

The team take an existing patent and break it down.

"We don't just post the patents because certainly a life science researcher couldn't understand laser physics (for example) anyway. We ask people from a variety of different backgrounds very simple questions - what would you do with this technology?"

Each project is run as a competition. About two-thirds of the way through a short-list of finalists is drawn up. At the end there is a winner, chosen by the patent-holder, as well as a winner chosen by the crowd.

Prizes ranging from \$1,000 up to \$25,000 are awarded as well as community points, called marbles.

A recent project took a small laser - or spectrophotometer - designed to be used on a Mars rover - [and found a new use for it as a breathe analyser](#) that could diagnose and track people with liver disease based on levels of ammonia found in their breathe.

So is cash enough of an incentive?

"What we've found is that the prize money isn't the biggest motivator for people," says Mr Perez.

"They're in it because they want to chew on interesting technology and they want to see something get realised."

Nevertheless, although the company is less than a year old, they have plans to make participation worth potentially much more.

"We're actually going to be putting seed rounds [funding] round some of the concepts that are moving through Marblar," he says.

This would be good news for the competition winner as well as Marblar - they will both have an equity stake in the new company, says Mr Perez.

"Without having put any money in, from having an idea about how to use someone else's technology, it's a quick way to own a piece of the next big thing."

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