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Wendi Ezgur:

The mother of inventions

by Chuck Green

Wendi Ezgur calls it the "wedding shower circuit." Serious stuff.

"My friends were getting married, and I was in the process of getting married. So I was going to wedding showers every weekend."

And that meant she was stocking up on gifts. And who's ever seen a gift, at least one no larger than a bread basket, without wrapping paper? That was the rub. Ezgur deplores wrapping paper and everything associated with it.

"I always hated wrapping gifts. I thought it was such a pain. And it seems like such a waste at the end. There are garbage bags on top of garbage bags, filled with wasted paper."

Bingo!

But instead of griping about it, prior to attending one shower, Ezgur acted. She purchased a gift, sans paper. But she had something under her sleeve, or at least inside the trunk of her car: a bingo marker. One thing led to another, and Ezgur hatched an idea for an environmentally sound alternative to wrapping paper. Instead of tangling with scissors and Scotch tape, not to mention discarded paper, her idea was to paint the gift box with an array of giant polka-dots or just write on the box, using the sponge tip of the marker as an applicator.

"It was a quick way to cover the box without hassling with or wasting paper."

In fact, she eventually joint ventured with a manufacturer and developed a product called WrapInk. With that, Ezgur had

fulfilled her career ambition: she was an inventor.

"An idea factory is what I suppose you'd call me, although the technical term for it might be product development." Yeah, but why get technical about it?

Her niche

That was about four years ago. Since then, Ezgur has found a niche, largely in children's products; in fact, today she has about 10 on the market, including eraser jewelry and themed sidewalk chalk for a company named Pentech, as well as wacky watches and silly shades, which are part of a line she named Cre8, which was developed for Janlynn, a craft manufacturer.

Ezgur's desire to create new products, which dawned on her while working as an account executive with a downtown Chicago ad agency, was anything but wacky.

"While with the agency, I learned a lot about production, the creative side, and how to present ideas, which is probably the main thing I use in my current business," named Lead Head Inc., located in Chicago.

Starting your own business can be as painful as a root canal, but Ezgur had at least two things on her side: moxie, and, as a keen observer of her environ-

ment, about 1,400 different ideas. They came from everywhere. "I was always looking around to see what was out there."

Not only that, she found herself annoyed from time to time. Which helped.

"If I was sitting there and thinking if I had one place to put all of my remote controls, for instance, so they didn't fall between the seat cushions of the couch, that would spark an idea. I started to look through those concepts from beginning to end in order to really understand the process, which I thought I had to do in order to succeed."

That happened to be about the time her friends began meeting Mr. Right. Her annoyance with wrapping paper happened to play right into her hands. "The idea with the bingo marker gave me the chance to take a concept from start to finish. I was in the mode where I knew I wanted to be: an idea person."

"Low maintenance"

Whatever idea it was she brought to market, she felt, had to be "low maintenance."

"In evaluating all of the ideas I had, I wanted to pick one that was not an electronic item, something that I could sort of get my arms around. That's why I picked WrapInk. I thought it was a simple concept that I could execute fairly well. And given my ad agency background, I could get the packaging accomplished and design the



Ezgur doesn't kid around when it comes to her inventions, like Cre8, developed for Janlynn, a craft manufacturer.

logo and all."

In fact, it turned into a family affair. Ezgur's father, a graphic designer, designed the logo, as well as the product and package design, while her husband performed legal work associated with the business.

The fact Ezgur not only is creative but attuned to the production end as well, she says, helps.

Creative nature

"Most of the time, I think, you'll find that the creative nature of a person sometimes leads them to being more reclusive and not necessarily familiar with how to market themselves or how to execute the business side of a venture. That's why you see all these fly-by-night companies popping up, that take

advantage of the limitations of inventors by telling them that they can market and sell their ideas. Consequently, an inventor might pay thousands of dollars to a company that never does anything for them.

"It's unfortunate that most people who come up with ideas certainly don't know how to go about making money from them, or how to market themselves correctly. The fact that I can do both is one reason I've been able to make my business work."

One thing Ezgur realized was that in order to make her business work, she could not be a one-product flash in the pan. "I did not want to become known as the wrapping paper lady. It's difficult for one person with one product to get into a K-Mart or Wal-Mart, or any of the big guys. So that's when I switched

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direction and decided I would sell the Wrapink to an existing manufacturer."

Her ability to do that has attracted the interest of other companies. "When they find out I developed that product from start to finish, they wonder if I can do the same thing for them."

In other words, wrapping paper, indirectly, helped give Ezgur credibility. Sounds like another adventure of the Twilight Zone.

"Once you start building products that sell and have a track record, it helps give you entree," said Ezgur, who now is in the process of creating a line of children's arts and crafts activity kits for a company out east.

Ezгур's propensity for prowling the market led to her idea for sidewalk chalk and helped her circumvent a crowded field of potential competitors. "Everyone out there is manufacturing sticks of sidewalk chalk and no one's making money because the Wal-Marts and K-Marts of the world can pit one company against another and shoot the price way down. So we needed to make something unique about our chalk."

Chalk one up

The answer was chalk-shaped like tic-tac-toe and ice cream cones. But arriving at that concept was not as easy as tic-tac-toe.

"I probably ran 15 different chalk ideas by the company I was developing the idea for."

That proved to be a valuable lesson. "Over time, I've learned that just because I like certain ideas, it's not always what the companies like best. I wouldn't even necessarily think that tic-tac-toe or ice cream cone designs were the best ones I presented, but it all depends on what the manufacturer is look-

ing for. Will it be cost effective for them to produce?

How much work will go into the manufacture of the product? So I learned that you throw all the ideas out there, no matter how stupid you think they might be," she laughed.

Stupid? Hey, you're talking about a woman who constantly "feeds her brain," as she describes it. Not a day passes that Ezgur doesn't see to it that it gets plenty of mental nourishment. "It's not like I wake up in the morning and say 'okay, it's Wednesday, now I spend 9-11 a.m. thinking.' You feed the brain. Creativity is like a muscle: the more you exercise it, the better you are at it."

Adding to that feeding frenzy, Ezgur leafs through about 15 different catalogues, and constantly explores stores and attends trade shows. "Trade shows are a good source, because you see where the trends are going and what other kinds of products are out there."

Ezгур also is a big believer in mergers. "I like to pull from one industry to another. For instance, I was at a garden show when I was trying to think of back-to-school products. So I came up with the idea of a flower pen. You put dirt in the barrel of the pen and plant a seed. A flower will grow out of the top. A lot of times, I extrapolate by taking ideas from one industry and merging them into another."

Tough racket

Mergers aside, Ezgur acknowledges she's in a tough racket. "People think that just because you come up with an idea, you can go out and sell it. If I get two or three ideas out in

"Once you start building products that sell and have a track record, it helps give you entree."

— Wendi Ezgur

a year,

which I

do, and

that's a

great

average."

That's out

of close to

50 presenta-

tions a

year. "It's

very difficult to market ideas."

Today, Ezgur generates most leads when companies contact her to work with them on a project they want to develop. But before she had her track record, the primary tracks she made were the ones that led her into her own little world, conjuring up ideas. "When I got one, I'd thoroughly research the industry. I found out who made similar types of products, where those companies were located, and how they manufactured the products. Then I contacted those companies and explained that I had a concept which they might be interested in seeing. I'd say that occupied 85 percent of my time, just researching an industry and trying to get my

foot in the door.

"Once you get a track record, companies call you and the process starts to work backwards. By that I mean that the company will tell me what it is looking for, then I try to think of ideas for them. That's really the ideal method, because it represents a more qualified need. I don't have to spend as much time just getting my foot in the door. They're already looking for an idea and I can ask them specific questions."

Still, there tends to be a dimension to the process that, like wrapping paper, drives Ezgur absolutely batty. "A lot of times, when I'm selling a concept to a company, they take an attitude of thanks for the idea and they will pay me the royalties when the idea is out there. I have no input on packaging or product design. That's unfortunate, because I have the total concept in my mind and think I can lend good ideas to the process. But they want to use their in-house people."

Despite the sweat involved,

Ezgur said anyone can think of an idea. The trick is what you do with it from there. "It's a question of who can bring focus to a product, mold it into something that makes sense for a company and conveys a clear message. You have about one and a half seconds to get the attention of shoppers walking down a store aisle. I think I bring focus to the table."

And, occasionally, she has to focus on holding her tongue when a finished product does not resemble her original concept.

"Sometimes I don't see a product until it's finished and then I just cringe because I can't believe what they've done to my idea. They've killed it!" she said, her voice rising. "They've changed it so much that it becomes something different. I know that's done sometimes to keep costs down, but it kills me, because I've put so much effort in an idea and it turns into something that I didn't intend."

Well, then, how about coming up with some sort of zap gun?

No doubt she's working on it.

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