
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photog.

Got a better idea? Market it!

"There must be a better way!"

Have you, as a professional photographer, ever dreamed up a photographic problem-solver—a new type of camera, innovative studio equipment, or improvements on an existing product or process? Perhaps you aspired—fleetingly—to manufacture your "invention" and market it to the photographic community, but the complexities of doing so discouraged the idea before it could fully surface.

Perhaps you should think again. Many successful photo-industry products had humble beginnings—often a single photographer who "had a better idea," then perfected and sold it. While many photographic products are created by teams of design engineers, "homespun" products are often the most practical, because they fill specific needs of working photographers, that might go unrecognized by product design engineers.

The original Hasselblad camera, for example, was designed by one man—Victor Hasselblad—seeking to create a new modular camera for 120 roll film. The rest of his story is legendary.

Innumerable other products that we take for granted today were created by individual photographers who, in many cases, never intended to invent anything that would go beyond serving their own studio needs. The Curtis Combo Mat Box, for example, was designed by wedding photographer Jack Curtis, Cr.Photog., of Santa Monica, California, who planned to create a product only for his own use. When he did, it worked so well that he decided to manufacture and sell it.

Solving a common photographic problem as well as a personal need, Xenophon Beake, M.Photog.Cr., of Wilbraham, Massachusetts, designed a gel filter holder to mount on the rear lens element of a view camera, since standard 3-inch-square filters wouldn't cover the large-diameter front element. The Xenophon Pro Gel Filter Holder is now distributed by Calumet Photographic, Inc.

Other image-makers have successfully added their ingenuity to established

products. Wedding photographer Jerry Costanzo, CPP, of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, grew frustrated trying to find a place to store his Hasselblad dark slide. He created a camera attachment for this purpose which has now sold in the thousands. Similarly, Brian Lane of Tampa, Florida, invented a variety of specialized products including a Polaroid back for the Mamiya RB67 camera, lens shade, camera handles and other gadgets.

In addition to bringing creative satisfaction, inventive efforts can earn money and launch careers. Orren Lucht, a small-town Minnesota photographer, worked in a color lab and saw a need for several new features on package printers. Although established companies completely controlled the package printing market, he set out to build his "better idea" in the barn—that was 15 years ago. Today, Lucht Engineering grosses \$16 million per year. Orren Lucht recently retired, but he's back in his barn developing new products, and recently cofounded Portraits Now, a high-tech, one-hour portrait studio chain in Canada.

In my own case, innovation arose from my frustration as a photographer who wanted to provide a wide variety of backgrounds for customers without leaving the studio. Using the front-projection process, then in its infancy, to create controllable environments in the studio, I was dissatisfied with the available technology. As a result, I set out to design a better product, and eventually developed the Scene Machine special-effects system, now sold throughout the world. The industry did not immediately embrace this invention—as with any new concept—and the product evolved slowly over several years. What started as a basic studio need became a growing idea, and eventually changed my career.

Many would-be inventors think it's too late to design anything new—after all, hasn't everything of value already been invented? On the contrary, new times and situations create new needs, and an infinite number of photographic prod-

ucts, simple and complex, have yet to be designed. Invention breeds invention.

Creating a new product, of course, is not as simple as saying "Today, I will invent something new and different." Instead, most innovations rise slowly from specific needs. Ask yourself if there is a better way to accomplish a daily task. If you come up with a significant idea, the road to perfection, manufacturing and marketing is certainly long and challenging, but fun and rewarding as well.

Manufacturing and marketing a product can be a formidable and expensive operation. An inventor may benefit from selling an original idea to someone who makes and sells the product but pays a royalty on all sales. Patent protection for the idea is also essential. Your business lawyer can direct you to a patent lawyer.

Innovation is not limited to devising new products. Developing new methods of taking, pricing and presenting photographs is equally valuable. While new ways of taking pictures can't be patented, they can be heavily marketed to customers as unique services. For a time, you can be the only photographer in your area offering a new look. Even after you've been copied, you can always claim to have been the first—signifying to the public that you are creative, ahead of the pack, and continually developing new ideas.

Innovative photographic opportunities are open to those willing to make them happen, and creative possibilities are unlimited. If you develop a new concept that might be valuable, consider marketing it to other photographers or to your clients. You'll be contributing to your profession; what's more, your idea may spark a new business—with its own bottom line. ☐