

Got a cool invention idea? Quirky takes your concept and turns it into a real product -- and pays you too

March 31 2011, By Eric Gwinn

What are you going to do with that can't-miss gadget idea you've had in your head all these years?

You can continue to let it sit till someone else makes it, or you can go through the hassle and expense of designing the thing, making a prototype, trying to get someone to manufacture it and bugging some retailer to buy a bunch and put them on the shelves.

Or you can pay \$10 and suggest your [idea](#) to Quirky, which just might build it and get it into stores - and hand you some cash for your troubles.

That's how Brian Shy, 29, of Chicago made about \$3,000 over the past 18 months - "not bad for not really doing anything."

Quirky accepts ideas from anyone with \$10 to spend, and members vote on their favorites. Every week, Quirky looks at the ideas with the highest feedback and potential to succeed, and holds a wild Friday afternoon staff meeting where Quirky's 40 workers plead, cajole and vote for their favorites. Two are picked and analyzed for their potential success, then the product design team makes a mockup.

Products usually must sell for \$150 or less - the higher the value of the idea, the more complexity, and the more cost in getting it made.

The item then goes on presale, when anyone on quirky.com can commit to ordering it. If the item gets enough presales, it goes into production, the money comes in and Quirky shares it with the inventor and any other Quirky visitors who suggested how to make it better, so-called influencers.

Sometimes, before the presale concludes, Quirky finds a retailer - such as Fry's Electronics; Bed, Bath and Beyond; Amazon; OfficeMax; Home Shopping Network and others - who'll order the product at wholesale and sell it at retail. Again, Quirky shares income with inventors and influencers.

Quirky is a community of everyday people who like inventing everyday problem-solvers. If you're not feeling inventive, you can earn influence by commenting on others' ideas and proposing ways to improve the product. The more you contribute, the more you'll get out of it.

That's how Shy made his money, in what he described as a series of highs and lows. He pitched Quirky the idea of Digits, little stubs for the fingertips of your gloves, so you can easily use your iPhone or other portable gadget in the Chicago's frigid winters.

"I submitted idea year and a half ago," he said, "and got a lot of positive feedback but lost at first" - even good ideas can be outvoted. "Losing it's a humbling experience."

He resubmitted and had his idea picked - "an awesome surprise" - then Digits sat in presale for a year because preorders lagged - "That sucks." Just when Shy thought his project would never receive enough preorders to be made, "Quirky, working behind the scenes, announced retail partners had picked it up and it would be in my hands in a month. Very cool."

But the highs and lows didn't stop there. Next came the roller coaster of seeing his invention, his baby, in real life:

"I can't explain it. It was amazing. I got the box - looks cool. When I was opening it, I was hoping that it's awesome but worried that it's crappy. Then I started testing them on different phones, trying to find flaws, but it was really responsive, better than using my fingertips. I was happy with outcome and felt great. A bunch of friends and family bought them."

Quirky is the invention of Ben Kaufman, a social-network-savvy inventor who wanted to help others by coming up with a process "that's not left up to luck or pedigree, but whether or not it was a good idea."

"I don't have to think of products anymore," he says. "I get more of a kick helping people become inventors than being an inventor myself."

Knowing what inventors go through, he offers generous revenue-sharing with [inventors](#) and those who help an idea come to life.

"We want to be fair businesspeople," he says, adding that the revenue sharing "is 10 times better than if you did it on your own. And we still make money."

A win-win? Check it out for yourself at quirky.com.

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