

Bringing LaundraPak to Life: How I Brought My Product to Market

Over the past four years I have dedicated a significant portion of my time and energy to bringing to market my first product invention--the LaundraPak™ Over-The-Door Laundry Backpack. I developed the LaundraPak from an image in my mind to a patented product manufactured overseas and sold in the USA on QVC, several e-commerce websites, and in 50 college bookstores and the Linens N Things chain.

As I have progressed with my product development, many people have asked me, “How did you do it?” To me, the question is a bit like asking “How do you get from New York to Los Angeles?” You can go by car, by plane, by train. But as with the journey of inventing and bringing a product to market, there are definitely some key success factors that will help you to reach your destination. You will likely need to ask a lot of people for directions and use good judgment to determine whether to trust their advice. It takes a lot of money, patience, moral support, and most of all, persistence.

Below I have broken down the process of bringing an invention to market into eight steps.

Step 1: Identify a Need, Not a Product

Many people start with a product. It does something cool and different and it “could” be useful to firefighters, stamp collectors, or bird watchers. A successful invention concept will originate from an identified need, or a *burning* need as I like to say. There must be a real problem that this product solves, a need it fulfills that you can articulate in one or two sentences. The question on the minds of potential licensees, retail buyers, or investors will be, “Are the dogs going to eat the dog food?” or in other words, “Will people actually buy this?”

One of the most important things for a budding inventor to understand is the distinction between a need and a *perceived* need. People may need it, but do they *know* they need it. If your customers don’t know they need your product, you will need to spend the time and money to educate them about why they need it. Nearly all new items require some element of this type of education, but any product that requires too much education of the consumer may fail.

Step 2: Do Some Market Research

Often, if your concept is truly innovative, it may be difficult for licensees, buyers or investors to know themselves whether your idea is destined to succeed or fail. They may or may not be familiar enough with your unique target market to judge for themselves. So a lot of their decision of whether to invest in your product will depend upon how much they believe that you understand your market.

There are two important types of research to perform: “top down” and “bottom up.” Top down research means asking store managers, manufacturers and industry people what

they think of the idea. For example, “You own a pet store, do you think that pet owners would buy a designer dog raincoat?” A great follow-up “top down” question is, “Is this a good business to be in, why or why not?” An experienced business person will share with you a lot of valuable insights and perspectives that you may never have considered.

Bottom up research means asking your potential customers if they’d buy your item. Here you want to focus on two questions: “Would you buy this?” and “How much would you be willing to pay?” Over the course of my four-year odyssey, I have asked this question of people literally hundreds of times. Actually, most will tell you even if you don’t ask. Just make sure you ask the right people.

Step 3: Concept Refinement

If you’ve done your homework and you’ve spoken with enough people, you have probably received a lot of input about your product’s design. Your product’s size, weight, color and level of quality are critical details that you alone must manage. Consider making changes if they:

- a) make your product less expensive to produce without compromising key benefits;
- b) make your item cheaper and easier to package, ship or merchandise;
- c) add functionality without increasing the price; or
- d) simplify the design or the buying decision for a potential customer.

With LaundraPak, after working with a potential licensee, I significantly modified the way that some of the main zippers were configured so that the bag could be produced more cheaply and easily. In retrospect, this was an essential part of the product’s evolution. Many people counseled me along the way to build a Buick not a Cadillac, which was good advice. As the saying goes: “Serve the masses and you eat with the masses. Serve the masses and you eat with the classes.” More importantly, there are so many costs that you would never think of such as packaging, fulfillment (shipping orders from a warehouse), and freight that require you to make the most of every penny of production cost. If you don’t, your competitors who quickly enter to copy your successful idea will undercut you on price. Also, your resellers will need to make a hefty margin on your item (sometimes up to 75%!) and your sales reps will require a commission (typically at least 15%) to push your item.

Step 4: “Packaging”

Packaging is in quotes because it means more than simply having a pretty box. Proper packaging emphasizes the product’s key features and benefits. You have to grab shoppers’ eyeballs *and* make them “get” your concept within a few seconds.

The way you package your item will depend on what distribution channels you plan to sell through, so you should give some significant thought to packaging as you develop and modify your design. For example, packaging may mean solely a product description if you’re selling through catalogs or on the Internet. LaundraPak’s packaging was almost

more challenging to prototype than the product itself. The product's packaging had several essential requirements: a small footprint on the shelf, a way for shoppers to feel the fabric, high-quality color printing and on and on.

Step 5: "Why Don't You Make One?"

Very early on in my project I scheduled a free meeting with a business counselor from SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives (www.score.org.) I showed him my drawings, explained my concept and he asked me, "Why don't you make one?" "Where would I find someone to assemble a backpack for me?" I asked him. The only place I had considered trying previously was a luggage repair shop. "Why not a seamstress?" he asked.

I found a seamstress through a local fabric store and we worked together in her basement for months on several prototypes that became the first LaundraPak. It was an affordable and practical way for me to develop and refine the product. In addition to contacting a SCORE counselor, I also recommend locating your local Small Business Development Center (www.sbdc.gov) office. They are usually located at state and county colleges. There also may be a microenterprise development organization nearby. Visit www.microenterpriseworks.org for more information about these great agencies.

Note: While my product could be inexpensively sewn together, some products require plastic or metal molds, and others must be produced in quantity. You can save yourself a lot of time and money by finding a talented graphic designer who can develop three-dimensional (3D) "renderings" of your product. For patent purposes, you will need two-dimensional professional schematic drawings. Very often someone with these skills can also create three-dimensional drawings on the computer that look as good as photographs. Photos of a product that doesn't yet exist provide a great way to solicit feedback and secure buy-in from customers.

Step 6: Shop the Idea – "You've Got a Concept!"

OK, so now you've got a presentable prototype, drawing, or 3D rendering. Next, try to identify some influential people who might be able to introduce you to someone who can help get your product licensed to a manufacturer/distributor or help you reach a manufacturing contact to make an initial production run on your own. This is a tough step. Depending on your level of experience, you may want to enlist help from someone experienced in business and marketing to accompany you to meetings you set up.

At this stage, real fear sets in and many inventors become paranoid about sharing their ideas with others. Inventors who are afraid to take their great ideas out of the basement are guaranteed to end up with a basement full of great ideas. You should consult a patent agent or attorney and consider using a one-page Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) to protect both parties. In my experience, however, I rarely used an NDA, because it became quickly apparent that asking someone to sign one a) communicated that you were paranoid and inexperienced as a business person, and b) had the effect of stopping any

potential progress dead in its tracks. NDA or not, you've still got to shop your idea around and get feedback.

I will never forget a meeting I had with the CEO of a medium-sized athletic equipment and apparel manufacturer. I had previously licensed an invention to his company, which they designed and marketed poorly. The product quickly flopped, but I remembered that someone said this CEO was a former JanSport executive. I drove four hours to meet with him for a 2pm meeting. I hung my LaundraPak prototype on the door and gave him the quick two-minute demo. By the time I finished, he was practically jumping out of his seat pointing his finger at the product and saying "You've got a concept! That is a concept." I must confess that I was absolutely lit up by his validation of my product. He then told me to contact a colleague of his at JanSport and tell him "This is something he should definitely take a look at."

This meeting occurred at the two-year point in the project and I thought I was home free. It was the quickest four-hour drive home ever. I basically floated on air out of the company's headquarters with visions of licensing my product to JanSport. Long story short: After sending a letter overnight to the JanSport executive requesting a meeting, we exchanged emails, he pawned me off on some Product Manager, who in turn bounced me to someone in the legal department who shot me a terse email saying they don't except unsolicited ideas. This was one of the events that led me to consider producing the idea on my own.

Step 7: The Big Show

A friend then referred me to someone in my hometown who had grown up in a family handbag business. He was experienced in sourcing products overseas and traveled to China often. He was presently working as a Vice President of Product Development for a company that supplied purses, leather folios, wallets, and luggage to many large retailers and college bookstores. The \$20 million company also owned all the licenses to the major college logos and seemed like a fitting partner and potential licensee. I pitched to a group of VPs and the CEO, who was so impressed that he told me he would produce 1,000 units in five colors and that I should draw up a licensing agreement. Again, I thought I was home free.

We ended up working together closely for several months to prepare for a big tradeshow they had coming up. Working with their overseas manufacturer, we produced several rounds of prototypes and ultimately created five color samples. They then invited me to exhibit in their booth at the show. Over three days I received tons of positive feedback and actually took the first-ever orders from two enthusiastic college bookstores. I was ecstatic.

After the tradeshow, communication with executives at the company became more difficult. Ultimately I discovered that they were not as thrilled with the results of the show as I was (they had hoped for hundreds of orders.) Even worse, they cancelled my two flagship orders and never bothered to tell me or my two customers! Though this

potential licensee and the VP of Product Development had been instrumental in the development of the product, this was another low point. Once again I became convinced that to make LaundraPak a market reality I would need to produce it on my own.

Step 8: Get a Little Lucky

Months later I ended up contacting their manufacturer again to continue refining the product for a potential first order of a few hundred bags for marketing and sales. During this process I attended a QVC Product Search event in Atlanta, Georgia. It was an open call for inventors with innovative products. Hundreds of people showed up, including a guy with a small coffee table with about six surge protectors attached to it. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. The QVC Buyer spent about two minutes talking to me and examining my sample and marketing materials.

A couple of weeks later I got the call. I had won a coveted six-minute slot on a special QVC show called the QVC Product Search Showcase. I had the opportunity to present my product on national television along with 14 other inventors whose products were selected from a nationwide search. While QVC was not an overwhelming sales success (I only ended up selling 200 of the 1,200 bags that they had ordered), it enabled me to get some great media coverage, which in turn led to some great marketing contacts. Not to mention, I got to be on TV and relish my entire 15 minutes of fame.

Now I know why they say that behind every great success is a lot of perseverance and a little bit of luck. LaundraPak is now available in 50 college bookstores and I recently received a milestone order from Linens N Things for a back-to-school test. Even so, I still feel like it's a long way away from becoming a mass market success. So here are some final points that I have found to be key success factors for me in this project.

One Step at a Time. Inventing a product and bringing it to market takes a long time and is a very gradual process. Along the way I have often felt as though I were taking one step forward and two steps back. Another key point to recognize is that progress is built one step at a time. And there's no way to predict how you'll get to Step 7 (or sometimes even what Step 7 is) until you reach Step 6 and take a good look around and consider alternatives. With my product, it has felt like climbing a ladder to the sky with each rung separated by millimeters.

Set Goals and Deadlines. At every stage I asked myself what I needed to do next. I would think of a time frame and a deadline and then pursue the completion of that step by that deadline. This helped me maintain my focus and not get distracted. Many inventors and entrepreneurs get distracted and their ideas end up similarly scattered. To be successful, you must focus.

Support. Make sure you have a supportive family. If you don't, doing something like this can quickly make your life hell. Fortunately for me, my spouse grew up in a family

business and understood what it takes. There is simply no way I could have gotten anywhere without her patience, moral support, and her frequent business advice. It's also important to have friends and business associates who believe in your idea and want to see you succeed. My project started off when I was laid off as a dotcom refugee and I had a conversation with an entrepreneur friend. When I told him I was considering pursuing LaundraPak he said, "That's a winner." And that's what gave me the confidence to start—just those three words.

The Business Stuff. I've actually been a small business advisor myself in the past, and I've seen firsthand how frazzled entrepreneurs get by the business stuff: incorporation, business licenses, bar codes, bank accounts. It can all be very confusing and distressing. Remember that these activities are part of the cost of doing business and don't let them distract from your product development efforts. Many people lose focus because they think that incorporating is starting a business. My advice is to not let the legal and administrative aspects of your project become too burdensome. On that front, what I've learned from the later stages of the administrative aspects of a product business (importing, logistics, warehousing, bookkeeping, invoicing, shipping orders) is that I'd be a lot better off if I had been able to find an existing company to do all this for me. Then I could stick to just inventing new products.

The Patent Stuff. This can also be a major distraction from the important functions of product development, marketing, and sales. There's a lot to learn and know and it takes a lot of time and money to pursue intellectual property protection for your ideas. Again, don't get distracted from your core activities of prototyping, market research, marketing and sales. Also, be careful not to try to patent something before the design has been finalized. This is challenging because invariably once you begin to market and perform research you may change your design. Don't get obsessed with the patent stuff because a patent alone won't get you squat. Don't be one of those inventors who wants to have a million patents. Be an inventor who wants to point to successful products that have been introduced into the marketplace.

“What Ya Gotta Do Is...” Lastly, along the way, you are sure to encounter what I like to call the “what ya gotta do is” people. Everyone's an expert. They are very quick to tell you how to conduct your project because they saw one guy on Oprah or because they once heard about a guy who produced something in China, or saw an episode of Dateline. Don't be fooled! They'll be very certain and confident and passionate about their opinions. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they really don't know anything. When you're listening to people's advice or recommendations, always consider the source. Remember that you are the owner of your product and your project and you call the shots. That's what makes it fun! Good luck and don't give up. 💡