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DON BROWN'S  
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# A Simple Plan



“EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT sit-ups are, but most people don’t really know how to do them right,” says fitness guru and trainer Don Brown. With his invention, the original Ab Trainer®, now known as the Ab Roller®, anyone can crunch correctly, and Brown’s not at all surprised that people are buying today just as they did when his product first introduced the “Ab craze” nearly a decade ago.

But the path to his success has not been without a few detours, and he shares his inspirational story with



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by Linda Dangelo

tongue in cheek. “If you have a great idea,” he warns, “before you waste any money or time obtaining a patent, make sure your product can be successfully marketed and economically manufactured. I can’t stress enough that over-designing can actually kill a viable product before it even hits the market.”

Brown knows of what he speaks. His first invention, for which he filed a patent in 1983, was Pulse Light, created to help aerobic exercisers track their

pulse rates. “I had no idea what I was doing,” he shares, “but during the fitness craze of the ‘80s I taught aerobic classes and realized that most people didn’t know how to properly check their pulse. My concept was simple. I designed a ‘peace’ shaped sign that could hang on the wall. On it were three colored bulbs, like a streetlight – amber, green, red. Exercisers could find their pulse, look up at the lights and know when to prepare, start and stop counting their heartbeats. It seemed so logical and I was sure every health club would buy into the idea.”

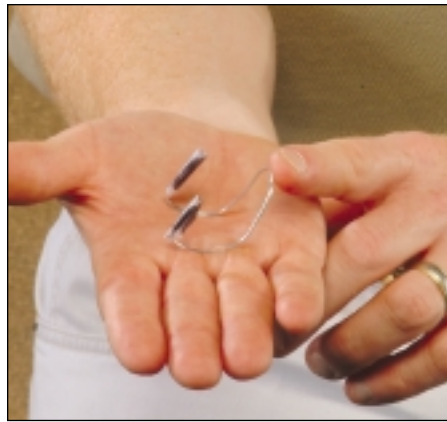
Brown spent substantial money on the design and patent of a quality unit but found that Pulse Lights needed to sell for \$450 apiece in order to make any profit. The problem was, they didn’t sell. It was a costly lesson – nearly \$70,000 – so he and his partners cut their losses, and Brown focused for the

next few years on operating and managing his own fitness club, Xercise, Inc., near his home in Chester, N.J.

In 1990, Brown was looking for new techniques to teach his clients and attended an Arthur Jones Nautilus training seminar. Jones is a well-respected figure in the bodybuilding arena whose powerhouse invention, the Nautilus machine, took the industry by storm in the '70s. The premise of this device was to isolate and work specific muscle groups while exercising. Brown considered this concept four years later, as he sat in his office, trying to determine how to help a club member who was recovering from a car accident and experiencing terrible neck pain while doing sit ups. "When people do abdominal crunches," Brown offers, "they often put their hands behind their head and pull up, thereby putting strain on the neck. I wanted to design something that would isolate the abdominal muscles and help users perform a crunch with perfect form without putting their hands behind their head."

Sitting at his desk, Brown began twisting and bending a paper clip until he created a simple, single-piece "rocking chair" design that he believed would work. He went to Home Depot and bought some electrical conduit, a pipe bending tool, duct tape and foam, and he cut, twisted, taped and formed to his heart's delight – until he had a full sized, functioning prototype, exactly as he had envisioned and had modeled with the paper clip. Then he went back to work, hid his invention under his desk and summoned some select clients, one by one (confidentially, of course), to test it out and give him feedback. Everyone loved it.

An extensive patent search proved that nothing like it was on the market, so Brown quickly got to work; he filed for a patent, located a "pipe bender" and an upholsterer, and made 50 complete "Ab Trainer" products, which could sell for \$100 each.



Brown's paperclip model for his ab training invention

Then, he headed off to a fitness show in October of 1994, with prototype in hand, and the frenzy began. Brown's 10'x10' booth attracted the largest crowds at the show, and he immediately received inquiries and licensing offers from the biggest players in the industry. One major fitness company offered him \$25,000 and a 5 percent royalty. Delighted by the interest – and now certain his product was going to be a huge seller – Brown was alarmed when he hesitated and they threatened to copy his design since they knew his patent had not yet issued. "My attorney immediately went after them," Brown says. "I walked away from the deal. It was a mess." This was the first sign that success would not come without a personal price.

Brown knew he needed to find the right strategic partner. He made an agreement with a major New York-based fitness company. It was a great match – and an even better deal. They offered \$175,000 and a 50 percent royalty share of the profits, and were willing to invest \$300,000 for manufacturing and infomercial marketing. Working jointly with the company, Brown sold hundreds of units, and within a year the Ab Trainer® was selling to health clubs across the country. But all bets were off when Brown was called into a meeting, right in the middle of attending a trade show a few months later. The board of directors for the fitness company had fired its president and, citing the fact that only one in ten infomercial prod-

ucts makes money, they cancelled the deal, claiming, "We don't think this product will sell on TV."

To make matters worse, several weeks earlier Brown had received a call from someone who congratulated him for selling "his" product – the Ab Roller® – on QVC. Brown quickly turned on his TV and was shocked to see his invention selling like crazy. Unfortunately, the Ab Roller® wasn't his product, and he later learned that the "knock-off" company had not only copied his design, but had actually taken artwork from his brochure and used it on the patent application they filed in China. Brown threatened to sue, but agreed to meet with them for further discussions. They knew his patent had not yet issued, suggested they had a celebrity endorsement and offered him less than a dollar a unit – Brown rebuffed the offer.

In the meanwhile, he settled with the fitness company on a breach of contract claim. The company agreed to give him an interest free, \$300,000 loan. "An interest free loan made good business sense to me," Brown laughs. "I hired Stilson and Stilson, the company that had marketed the popular Health Rider® product, to develop an infomercial for me. While the show was still in production, I got a phone call from my mom. She was so excited because she was watching the filming of an infomercial for 'my' product in a local New Jersey mall. I didn't have the heart to tell her that it wasn't my product – it was another knock-off." Brown knew his product was a hit, but didn't realize that so many companies would blatantly copy his invention.

Knowing he would need a partner to help him compete with the knock-offs, which were quickly appearing in the marketplace, Brown made a 50-50 deal with a California marketing company that paid him \$200,000 in advance for the rights. Soon after, Brown's Ab Trainer® product became a hit infomercial item, with sales exceeding \$200

(Continued on next page)

When I first met Don Brown at the 2003 Yankee Invention Expo in Waterbury, Conn., he came right

## GETTING NUKKLED

up behind and “nukkled” me in the back. “Don’t be alarmed,” he laughed. “This is my newest venture!” Although Brown didn’t invent Nukkles®, when he stumbled upon the simple, plastic hand-held massagers he knew they would sell, acquired the rights from the inventor, and took them to the airwaves. “As far as the infomercial went, it was a big flop,” he offers. “Not all products are meant for TV. Nukkles® touch people, and you can’t feel that on television.”

After recovering from the disappointment, Brown brought Nukkles® to a fitness industry tradeshow and sold \$7,200 worth of product. Re-inspired, he took them to a local mall kiosk, where they flew off the shelves as quickly as they were filled. In August, Bed, Bath & Beyond placed their first order – for 70,000 units. They will sell individual units for \$5.99 each.


million. But he was not alone in his success. After Brown’s patent issued in 1996, a total of 27 companies were knocking off his product, five of whom were running infomercials simultane-

**DON BROWN** Today, Don Brown is president of BodyTime Wellness, a company under which he and his business partner, Sean Gagnon, now sell Nukkles® and other feel-good products. Brown is also working on the completion of a book focused on teaching people how to translate a simple concept into an idea that will sell. In 2003, he founded a new company, InventQuest™, to help inventors through the process of getting their products to market. [www.inventquest.com](http://www.inventquest.com)

ously with his, with the rest selling their knock-offs straight to retail stores.

Brown sued each and every one of them, and won (or successfully settled) each and every suit. But not before he made a number of them – and himself – multimillionaires. “Because my invention was so unique, we were able to obtain very broad patent coverage. Today,” he says, “if its called an Ab Roller®, Ab Sculpter®, Ab Toner®, Ab Trainer®, Ab Revolutionizer®, ProTrainer® or any “Ab”-type product that rocks or rolls ... you can bet my patent covers it.

“I always tell people, when they ask me the secret to my success, that simplicity is key. My product was simple. And it worked. No gimmicks. Excellent quality. Fair price. I knew my market and I knew it would sell.”

It’s good to remember. Success can be achieved with a great idea, tenacity and a prototype as simple as a paper clip. 

# specialty retail

Fall 2002

REPORT

THE MAGAZINE FOR  
RETAIL ENTREPRENEURS

## Stroke of Brilliance

Don Brown, president  
of BodyTime Wellness



12 Great Gift Shows  
Stationery: Paper plus  
Candles: Still hot?  
Baby Gifts: Bigger than ever



*Sean Gagnon, vice president; Don Brown, president*

# The Golden Touch

Nothing beats an infomercial for selling something new and unique, right? Not quite. Don Brown watched his latest product tank on TV, but now Nukkles is back in the black, thanks to specialty retail.

NANCY TANKER

In the news: *Infomercial sets \$250 million record sales . . . QVC rings up \$8.5 million in sales during Southwestern jewelry special . . .* Headlines like these make some cart and kiosk retailers dream of hitting it big—or despair of missing the boat: “If I could just get my product on TV, I could sell millions of units—that’s the best way to reach millions of consumers.” Many a retail entrepreneur has mulled the profit potential that shopping channels and infomercials might generate for a new, unique product. Don Brown was one of them.

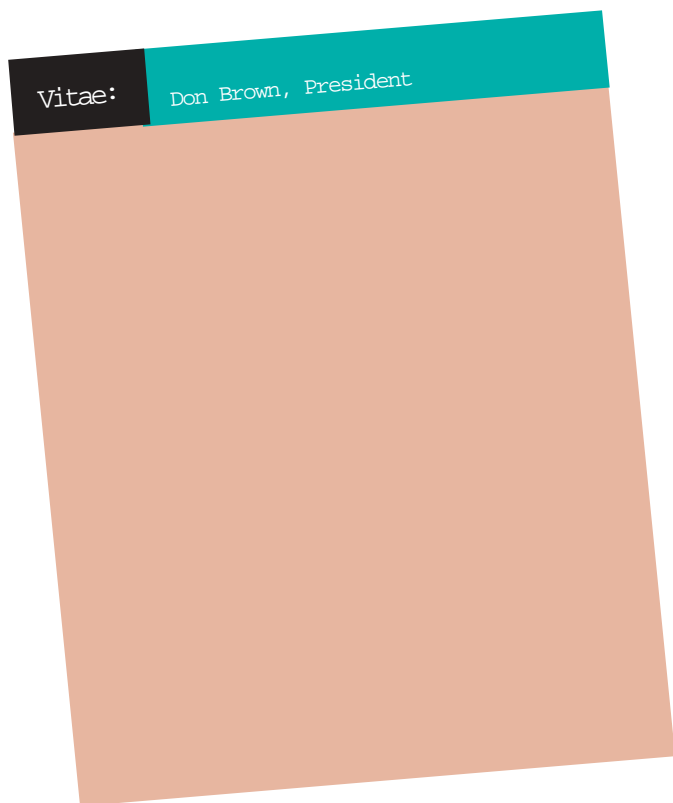
Inventor, physical fitness devotee and infomercial guru, Brown has had tremendous success with TV: more than nine million units of his Ab Roller invention were sold that way, generating more than \$1 billion in sales. (“And it still sells today!” he says.) But now he’s seeing things differently. For his latest product, Nukkles, a hand-held massager, he’ll take mall carts over TV in one quick stroke.

Nukkles, a pair of molded, flexible plastic pieces that simulate the feel of a massager’s fingers, was invented and patented by Myra Per-Lee to help her recover from an auto accident. When Brown first saw and experienced the product, he was amazed at how good it made his back and neck feel. Naturally, his first thought was to “put this on TV like we did the Ab Roller! We’ll sell millions!” He takes a beat: “And it didn’t work.” The TV spot generated all of about \$3,000. “We lost a lot of money, and we realized that the way to sell these things was to touch people.” Literally.

Brown is president of BodyTime Wellness, the company under which he and Sean Gagnon, his partner and company VP, sell Nukkles. They concluded that people had to *feel* the Nukkles effect in order to be convinced to buy (at \$19.95 a pair). Having heard about a distributor in Hawaii who sold \$78,000 worth from a mall cart the previous holiday season, Brown and Gagnon decided to try selling Nukkles from a cart themselves. They went to the nearest mall, Rockaway (NJ) Towne Square, and set up a four-day test cart in mid-August (2001), an off-peak time for most

mall. While they didn’t expect to draw crowds, they expected to cover their \$200 rent. Which they did—and then some. At the end of the four-day test, they had \$2,400 in the till, and confidence in what was, for them, a new way to reach consumers: specialty retail.

“What’s hilarious about it,” Brown says with a laugh, “is that in the TV spot we did, we showed people in the mall getting massages!” The irony, of course, is that “we ended up going back to the mall to sell them.” For Christmas 2001,





BodyTime opened a cart in three New Jersey malls and took in an estimated \$200,000 in sales, a far cry from the \$3,000 from the infomercial.

#### Vanity fair

Why didn't an infomercial work for Nukkles when the same medium sold millions of Ab Rollers? Because the products do two different things, create two different effects. The Ab Roller, designed to create visible results, appeals to people's sense of self-esteem or, as Brown puts it, vanity. But unlike the Ab Roller, Nukkles doesn't produce a result like a "little mini-waistline anyone would want." That's why abdominal exercise products are one of the biggest sellers, strictly for that reason, says Brown. Instead, Nukkles creates a *feeling*—the oohs and aahs of the actual massage, and then the positive results a massage creates. It's "very difficult to sell a *feeling* . . . People don't see vanity from a feeling," Brown says: when you're selling a feeling, you need a different approach.

He couldn't be happier with the one he and Gagnon turned to. By retailing from carts, "you have a great opportunity to do a 'live infomercial' in a mall for much less than [TV] costs," he says. "For me to test a mall cart concept is a couple of thousand

dollars. To do an infomercial is around a half million dollars; to test a two-minute [TV] spot, you're out fifty to a hundred thousand dollars." But he quickly adds that the benefit of cart retailing isn't the money saved: it's the opportunities gained. When you sell from a cart vs. an in-line store, "everyone who [is] in the mall is in your store," he says. "[Customers] have to travel into the Gap to get their clothes, [but] they're in my store right there when I have a cart. And there are a lot of people," he adds. "You have a way to attract them by demonstration" from a cart.

Brown is a firm believer in the value of active, well choreographed, effective demonstration. "What I see

in the cart business is people who aren't marketers," he says. "What we were taught to produce in an infomercial . . . to attract people, get their attention and entertain them [is what] about 80 percent of cart operators don't do. They sit there and wait. True demonstrators, like TASK Management, The Comfort Zone, Bungee Ball—people who really go to lengths to demonstrate a product—do phenomenal [business]."

#### Teamwork

That's one reason Brown and Gagnon recently teamed with Alberto Cabilan, former president of TASK Management and promoter of tried-and-true demonstration products such as Rainbow Magic Colors markers for children, and the TASK food chopper. Cabilan, who now runs Quantum, a specialty retail company in Los Angeles, met with Brown and Gagnon at the ICSC Temporary Tenant Conference this past February. At that meeting, the three decided to run another mall test. With Cabilan heading a small team, they set up a cart in the Bridgewater (NJ) Commons Mall in mid-May, another off-peak time. "We got [the team] a cart in a bad location [in the mall], where we had done about \$57,000 in four weeks" in December, Brown says. They raised the price from \$15 to \$19.99, and took in

\$6,000 in three days. "[They] said this is the next home run for the holiday season. They totally convinced me it was all in the way they presented it."

BodyTime and Quantum have teamed on another aspect of the business: training. Independent owner-operators who want their own Nukkles carts or kiosks (inventory start-up: \$3,000) participate in a three-day seminar that teaches them exactly how to demonstrate and sell the product for maximum sales. "We hired Alberto to pilot and perfect the complete training program for us," Brown says. "As we set up and sign up new malls, we send [the owner-operators] to Alberto's group" to learn verbatim the pitch Quantum developed.

Brown says retailers' response has been great. "As of today, we're in 70 carts. Some are complete Nukkles carts, and some are add-ons." For example, "all the Aqua Massage people sell our product to [customers] waiting for a massage," he says. "In fact, a lot of the Aqua Massage people are getting separate carts for the holiday season just for the Nukkles concept." By the time this Christmas season rolls around, Brown expects to add 30 locations, bringing the total to 100 or more for 2002.

#### Other products, other opportunities

"Because Nukkles are so unique, everyone loves it in every area," Brown says. "People use it for fund-raisers. It sells everywhere. We had a hair salon that sold 200 pairs in four days right here in Chester [NJ]."

And there's more to the Nukkles line than just Nukkles. The company also has Nuzzles, a version of Nukkles for pets. They're made of ultra-flexible nylon, so pet owners can rub the dog or cat's sensitive areas like ears without applying too much pressure. In addition, Brown and Gagnon have been working hard on developing and bringing out other products. New are the Nukkles BackStrap (a self-massage back strap "to work out those aches and pains yourself!"), Nukkles Massage Oil, and the Nukkles Fleece Carry Bag ("to keep your Nukkles from getting scratched" while in transit).

They'll be coming out with a unique T-shirt imprinted with "basically all the pressure points and all the meridian lines, so a person knows exactly where to rub on a person's body for all of the different trigger points," Brown says. "It will look like kind of an anatomical chart or road map to

correct massage placement. It's a complete, self-instructed massage shirt." In a similar vein, the company is introducing socks with "all of the reflexology points imprinted on them, so you can sit there and rub somebody's feet in all the right spots," says Brown. "We also have a little infant massager that we're doing with the same type of thing as the T-shirt that shows how to massage the baby." They will also be introducing music CDs for relaxation, and instructional videos that show new users "how to Nukkle."

#### Nukkle, Nukking

*Nukkle* (n. and v.t.): New word for a new technique that lets anyone give and receive all forms of massage, from relaxation to shiatsu to reflexology, by using a pair of Nukkles; to perform the technique. "

[It's] a new form of touch therapy that anybody can do to any person and even their pet, their dog or cat," Brown says. "Our whole concept is to introduce the world to the art of Nukking. A lot of people are looking for alternative methods to get comfort, relax, de-stress, to heal, and with all the medications and the side effects—we have testimonials all the time from people about getting rid of a migraine headache by just rubbing Nukkles on their head; or [relieving] low-back pain, menstrual cramps . . . people calling and thanking us for this product." But "more than anything," he says, "is that it allows you to give a great back rub, a great massage, without your hands ever getting tired."

Brown says the idea is to tie the entire concept together with the right products, attractive packaging and the right pitch, and sell it in the center of foot traffic at hundreds of mall carts across the US. Specialty retail on carts is "a neat little niche," he says. "You can hold the margins up because this product really doesn't sell itself on a shelf." Not only that, the products in the Nukkles line aren't limited to seasonal sales. "There's no reason it can't be a year-round program everywhere," says Brown. "About 60 percent [of holiday owner-operators] will have the know-how" to operate year-round. "It works. It's working now; it's working next month."

What's more, Nukkles owner-operators can go beyond the mall's walls to sell the product. "The neat thing is, we allow all of our owner-operators to wholesale to chiropractors, massage therapists, hair salons. And we drop-ship for them," he says. "They can

build a wholesale business that works year-round." BodyTime will also private-label their products. "Purina just bought 60,000 [Nuzzles] to put in their bags of dog food. Avon bought 55,000 Nukkles to put in their catalog." Private-labeling is an opportunity that's available to every Nukkles distributor. "If they have a customer who wants to private-label [Nukkles], we can work it out so we can commission them and . . . they can just bring us the orders."

#### Striking gold

"My whole excitement on this industry, this specialty retail, is that it's a whole new industry for me," says Brown. "Being involved in the TV business, I see a lot of products that don't work on TV [but] would make excellent demonstration products [on carts]."

Nonetheless, Brown adds that down the road, the company will be testing Nukkles on QVC, "where we're going to have more time, probably eight to 12 to 15 minutes to demonstrate it with a [massage] therapist." If Nukkles gets "an incredible response there, I may do a 30-minute television show." The half-hour format would allow time to explain how and why the product works, plus testimonials from people who used it and found relief from headaches or other pain. Doing a show like this will help drive customers to the cart operators.

Still, he says "mall carts are the way to go because of the excitement" retailers can generate in the middle of a mall. "After really studying the industry and looking at the opportunities, I decided I want to develop cart concepts: pilot them, perfect them, and make them available to all owner-operators . . . I've got two other products right behind this one, once this [concept] is completed, which I believe will be by the end of the next Christmas [2003] season. We should be in several hundred malls by then . . . we'll be in over 100 malls by this Christmas. The packaging, the whole cart concept is now complete."

With "a whole slew of products" behind the brand, Brown says Nukkles is his "first launch into what I'm looking at now as a gold mine of opportunity." And the first strike of that gold is on a cart at the mall. SRR

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