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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

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. 