
Looking To Reps To Sell Ideas

Russ Williams admits that it takes a few minutes for him to describe why his company is so interested in working with independent reps. In every conversation he's had, there invariably comes a moment when the rep says, "OK, I get it!" And, that's the moment Williams is waiting for.

The reason it takes a little time is that Williams doesn't necessarily sell products. What he and his company, Jacob Enterprises, Inc. (dba: Invention Home), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, are after are ideas.

Let's explain, and hopefully we'll reach that same "OK, I get it" moment.

MANA associate member Invention Home was founded by a family of inventors who developed a single idea into a multimillion dollar product line consisting of more than 60 product SKUs, which they continue to develop and grow. Today, they are helping other inventors develop and market new product ideas. According to Williams, his company has developed an innovative approach for developing and marketing new product ideas which combines web and virtual technology along with other key aspects into a streamlined system for working with new product ideas. The system makes it easy to work directly with manufacturers' reps and companies in a way not previously done. He believes that his company's approach is smart and efficient and will ultimately lead to redefining how many other companies in the industry operate. As a result, his company has filed for utility patent protection on their marketing method. He goes on to say that working with manufacturers' reps is an important aspect of his strategy. His company has the ongoing stream of new product ideas and the technology platform to work with the ideas, while the reps bring a distribution/relationship network to the table.

Leveraging Relationships

It's the relationship-based marketing area that is of greatest interest to independent manufacturers' representatives, especially MANA members, and Williams is betting on the strength and breadth of these relationships to make his system work.

Here's how the company's method operates. "In the course of their normal business representing manufacturers, reps call on any number of customers," notes Williams. "That opens the door for reps to spot opportunities in the form of customers exhibiting a need that can be met by a manufacturer. The key to the strategy is not for a rep to pitch new product ideas directly to their retail accounts; instead, it is for them to leverage their years of relationship building and contacts with manufacturers who might have an interest in expanding product lines by licensing new products."

Williams believes that it is the ultimate win-win scenario; the manufacturer gains access to new product ideas, the rep can earn money with little incremental effort, the inventor ends up with a licensing agreement, and Williams ends up with a solid marketing system.

Right about now is where the "OK, I get it" part comes in.

If the rep has established a relationship with Invention Home, they can either check the password-

accessible online catalog of products the company has available, or Invention Home will e-mail them new ideas when they match the reps' product interests that they previously communicated to Invention Home.

How Reps Benefit

Here's the benefit to reps, according to Williams. "The rep can not only earn added income, he adds value to his relationship with both customers and manufacturers by turning both on to a potential new product line. If the potential product leads to a new product line for the manufacturer, that obviously leads to increased commission sales for the rep." There's more than just the income that can be derived by increased commissions, however. Russell explains that independent reps who sign on with Invention Home receive a 10 percent royalty commission for three years on products they have a hand in getting licensed.

To facilitate the relationship with reps, a rep agreement spells out for them what each side will do in the relationship. He explains that the program was developed with simplicity in mind. There are no costs, obligations or commitments on behalf of the rep, and the program was designed to keep the reps' efforts to a minimum. In his view, the program is a "no-brainer," which was the feedback given by numerous reps. He adds that once a rep forges a relationship with Invention Home, a number of benefits accrue, including:

- The company will regularly send them new product inventions that would be of interest to them.
- Or, armed with a password, reps can attend an "E" trade show referred to as the iShowOnline, where they can browse a virtual catalog of products.

According to Williams, part of Invention Home's reasoning for setting up the business this way is, "Our industry is riddled with invention companies that prey on the hopes and dreams of individual inventors. For years, these companies have lured unsuspecting inventors into working with them by telling them they have a great idea or that they really like the idea. These companies charge \$700–\$800 to begin the process, which usually includes basic industry statistics of little value and a basic patent search. Once complete, they ask the inven-



From Left to Right: Colleen Kelly, director of product marketing; Russell Williams, president; and Eric Zalevsky, VP, product development.

tor for up-front marketing fees ranging anywhere from \$7,000–\$12,000. Sadly, this large sum of money buys the inventor little more than a half-hearted attempt at sending brochures to random manufacturers. With our method and by working with reps, there is none of that," says Williams. "The reps we're looking for are those who already have solid manufacturer-customer relationships in place, and this is an ideal opportunity for them to maximize their contacts."

Overall, Invention Home specializes in the development and marketing of new product ideas and inventions, which includes a range of services from:

- invention marketing and licensing services,
- patent and trademark searching,
- provisions patent application assistance,
- utility and design patent attorney referrals,
- invention marketing tools,
- virtual prototyping and design, and
- working prototypes. □

Reps interested in learning more about Invention Home and their sales rep program can e-mail Colleen Kelly at ckelly@inventionhome.com or visit www.inventionhome.com.

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One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973
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