

GADGET NATION

**A Journey Through the
Eccentric World of Invention**

STEVE GREENBERG
"The Innovation Insider"



Every effort has been made to provide in these pages straightforward and accurate information regarding new and existing gadgets and products. The author and publisher cannot be held liable for any misuse or damages stemming from the content of this book.

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*To my Dad, Lazarus,
who taught me to
respect ingenuity—
and to my Mom, Dorothy,
who taught me the joy
of listening to and learning
from everyone's life stories.*

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where medical miracles and high-tech marvels are almost commonplace. New cure-all prescription drugs fill our pharmacies daily, and last year's electronic products are this year's dinosaurs; as smaller, stronger, and smarter versions are launched each week. Most of us look at these innovations as something we could never invent. We're lucky if we even can figure out how to use them.

Every year, however, a number of inventions show up in the marketplace that make us say, "Why didn't I think of that?" I'm sure any one of us could have invented the paper clip. We just didn't do it.

Now, before I go any further, I want you to know that I'm an inventor groupie. I have nothing but respect and admiration for all inventors. I think it's part of my DNA. My Dad, Lazarus Greenberg, and his brother, Marvin, were always coming up with clever gadget solutions.

When my brothers and I couldn't reach the doorknob on the back door, my Dad added a lever and chain to the knob. We pulled on the chain and the door would open. Simple, but it worked. We pulled on the chain and the door would open. Simple, but it worked. My Dad and Uncle also came up with springs for eyeglasses long before they showed up on fancy designer frames. Here are a few actual sketches showing their improvised solutions to the problems of washing-machine lint, vent pipes, and clogged gutters.

Sadly, I wasn't raised on royalties from inventions. I don't even know if they ever filed for a patent. But despite their lack of monetary success in that field, or maybe because of it, I became hooked on invention, ingenuity, and innovative products. Like I said, I guess it's just in the DNA.

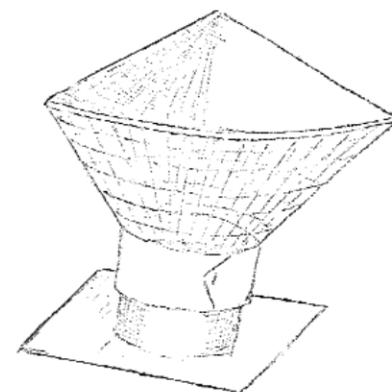
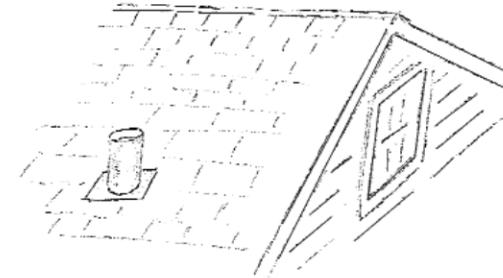
These days, I earn part of my living as the "Innovation Insider." I travel around the country showcasing some of America's smartest new products. In my

mind, there's nothing more American than that entrepreneurial spirit that all inventors share. In this country, if you hit the right idea, your life and the lives of your children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren will never be the same.

Approximately 60,000 patents are filed each year by private Americans. That's a lot of people grabbing at that brass ring. When I talk to inventors, many working out of their garages, I'm always impressed with their passion and persistence. They truly believe they have the next must-have product. Friends and family may tell them they're nuts, but they push forward. And almost all of the inventors I have spoken to have said they want their products to be a success, but not only because of the money. They genuinely want to change the world. There's an indescribable joy in seeing your invention sitting on a store shelf. It's like having a bit of

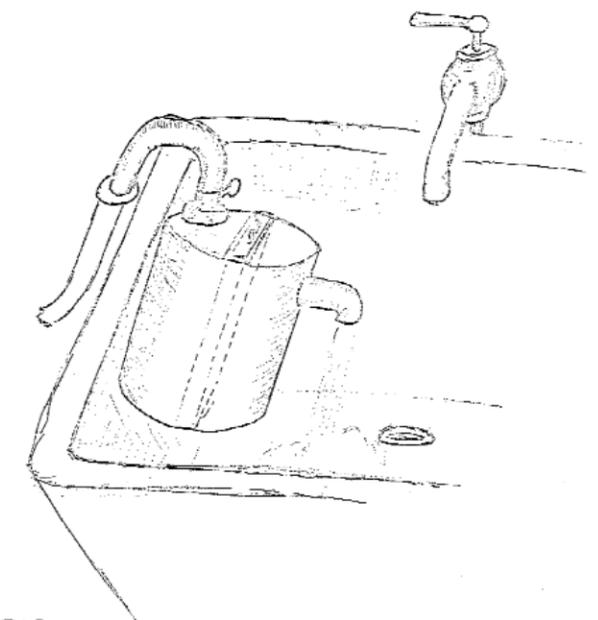
Some of Dad's sketches

PREVENT BIRDS AND LEAVES FROM CLOGGING EXHAUST



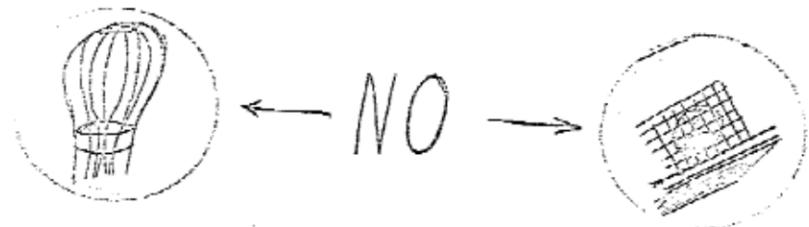
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PREVENTS CLOGGED DRAINS

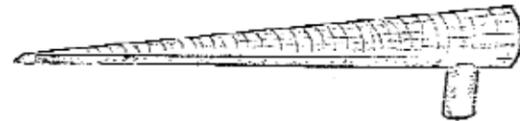


PLASTIC WASHING MACHINE LINT CATCHER WITH DISPOSABLE FILTER

TO AVOID CLOGGED GUTTERS



DOWNSPOUT SCREEN PREVENTS
LEAVES FROM BLOCKING FLOW
OF WATER.



consumer immortality. All inventors believe their problem-solving products will make the world a better place.

That said, not all new products are destined to make the world a better place. Some inventions are just plain . . .

bizarre. Others are clever in some strange way. And that's what this book is all about. It's a collection of some of the off-beat products out there. And when I say "out there," I mean "out there." I've rounded up some of

America's less conventional gadgets and talked to the inventors behind them. You'll meet men and women who had an inspiration and are now turning that idea into something we can all buy. You'll find out why some of your neighbors have put their passion, their energy and often a great deal of their own money into these unusual gadgets.

I could never tell, by just hearing about a product, if that product was going to be a financial success or not. It was only after talking with each of these inventors that I discovered which products are actually making it and which ones are not. Some products, which I might have categorized as lame, are making money. Other products, which I thought were very clever, have tanked. That was part of the fun of writing this book. The backstories are all surprises. Talking to garage inventors is a wonderful way to tap into modern-day Americana. They are the grassroots of

this country's ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit. Whether the product is a great idea or a dud, you'll find that spirit is strong.

Some of these inventions, however, are examples of innovation gone terribly wrong—good people/bad gadgets. After reading about some of these painful experiences, you may find yourself breathing a sigh of relief, saying "Boy, am I glad I didn't think of that!"

But it's in these less-than-great gadgets, and the stories behind their creation, that you'll find ample illustration of the indomitable passion that feeds the spirit of invention. At the same time, they provide a funhouse mirror of some uniquely American attributes: our obsession with convenience, the fascination with gimmickry, and the eternal dream of getting rich quickly. Have the Chia Pet, The Clapper, Ab Twister, or The Miracle Mop made the world a better place? They have certainly made their

inventors a great deal of money and become part of our consumer pop culture. That's the dream of the garage inventors profiled in this book: Leave their mark in the marketplace and make a fortune doing it.

