

Eureka! Here's what you do next

If you've had a brilliant idea and now want to take it to market Sandra O'Connell explains how

ANNE BUTTERLY didn't get mad when her flatmates left wet towels on the bathroom floor. She got entrepreneurial.

"I was sharing a house with six girls so there was always someone applying fake tan or dyeing their hair and destroying the towels," said Butterly, 37. "One day, someone put one in the laundry basket and ruined my clothes. I just thought there had to be a better way."

She started searching online for a good-quality disposable towel. She discovered such a product did not exist, so she invented one.

"Once I realised I had spotted a gap in the market, I continued researching whether there really was a market in the gap — and there was," she said.

Working with engineers at her parents' stone factory, she created a wood-fibre-based disposable towel, Easydry, which was launched in 2005. Today Butterly has a range of 15 Easydry products that she sells to salons, gyms and hotels around the world.

The business, which employs 10 people in Dundalk, Co Louth, and 100 in a production company in Asia, has been profitable from its first year.

Although she will not reveal figures, she says turnover has doubled every year, a feat she is on track to repeat this year with the help of recently opened sales offices in Australia and New Zealand.

Niall English, the owner of Futura Design, a product design and development company, believes the

number of people keen to invent products is on the rise.

"We have seen a huge increase in the number of people asking us to develop prototypes," said English. "Because of the downturn there are a lot of people out there, some of whom have redundancy money, who are prepared to invest in an idea they might have had for years."

An initial consultation with the company costs €250. The aim of this is to thrash out the idea and offer finance and marketing advice. At

the end, you will have an estimate of the cost of producing your item.

Developing a prototype can cost from €5,000 to €50,000, depending on complexity and materials.

Another option is to approach a company making a similar or complementary product, with a view to splitting the development costs. In this case, the inventor must protect his or her intellectual property.

"First, draw up a non-disclosure agreement," said Mary Gillick of Enterprise Ireland.

This is important because a patent — a monopoly granted by a state to an inventor in return for full disclosure of the invention — can be granted only if the invention is not already in the public domain.

A patent must be filed in every country in which you wish to protect your rights. In Ireland the fee to file a 20-year patent is €125.

When you include the fees of a patent agent, an attorney who specialises in patents, the real cost of an initial Irish application will typi-

cally be between €2,000 and €5,000.

To ensure that you do not waste money, first check that a similar patent has not been filed. Just because a product does not exist does not mean it has not been patented.

The easiest way is through Google, which has a search facility at google.com/patents.

You can also search via the Irish Patents Office (www.patents-office.ie), which has links to the websites of European and American patent authorities as well as

the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

Enterprise Ireland (enterpriseireland.com) provides patenting advice, as well as financial support towards the costs.

A badly written patent is worse than no patent at all, particularly if it is open to so much interpretation that it can be got around by a rival. Securing the services of a patent agent is vital. He or she will also have access to more specialised databases through

which to search for existing patents.

"You want to ensure you are not infringing someone else's rights," said Hazel Tunney, an attorney at patent agent FR Kelly.

Equally, your product name should be protected by a trademark.

"Inventors often think that because they have registered a company name or an online domain name that they are protected, but they aren't," said Tunney. "You need a trademark for that."

The trademark is also important when the patent of a commercially



successful invention runs out and rival versions are permitted. It will differentiate your product in the marketplace.

Martina Delaney, the founder of Clevamama, a baby brand based in Coolock, Dublin, began her career by chance. Standing over a bath eight years ago trying to hold a wet baby in one hand and a towel in the other, she also felt there had to be a better way. Having launched a specially designed baby-towel, she has since patented nine products, including a scoop that keeps track of formula in baby bottles.

“They’re all responses to issues I came up against as a mother,” said Delaney, 39, who employs six people. For her, inventing is something of a numbers game.

“If you have an idea for a product, first figure out if there’s a market for it and, if so, what price that market will support,” she said.

“From there work backwards, taking off the retailers’ margin, the distributors’ margin, your own margin and what it will cost you to get that item from the factory. You have to factor in marketing costs too, or the cost of educating the market if it’s something really new.

“If after all that, it seems commercially viable, find yourself a product designer.”

The Patents Office is running a series of seminars called Building a Business on Your Ideas. Admission is free, but you must pre-register with your county enterprise board (enterpriseboards.ie) to attend.





BRYAN MEADE

Butterly was inspired by her untidy flatmates to develop disposable wood-fibre-based towels for use in gyms and salons. She employs 10 people in Ireland and 100 in Asia

