

May the Best Service Provider Win

Eight Pointers for Novice Inventors **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**



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As an inventor, sooner or later you'll need to hire an industry service provider. Depending on which phase of product development you've reached, you may need help with packaging design, engineering, patents, licensing, refining of a prototype, customs information, import duties classification or even creating a catchy slogan.

Most service providers are experts at a particular skill. As an inventor, engaging a service provider or consultant may ultimately be your key to success and happiness. Following are eight pointers for novice inventors that should prove helpful in selecting a reputable and conscientious service provider as you venture into entrepreneurship. Be proactive and hire wisely.

1 Make sure your service provider has a policy that clearly spells out information requests and response time (24 hours, two days, one week). If, for example, the service provider is relying on the client to approve photos from an overseas factory, the client must know that he cannot be remiss in response. If a factory is going to close for a holiday, the project could be delayed. This important stipulation in a contract can mean the difference between a timely project launch and a delay of up to a year for a season-specific launch.

2 Ask for references; then check them.

Your prospective service provider may list brilliant, effusive testimonials on a website, but how do you know they are true? Ask for several recent references, and call or email them. Ask about their inventions and the degree to which the service provider helped develop them. Was the provider prompt? Did he communicate clearly? Did the job come in over budget? You'll have an advantage if the prospective consultant gives you references that have inventions in the same or similar category as yours, which can be a clear indication he has the experience to get the job done.

3 Your consultant should prescreen subcontractors.

More than likely your consultant will have to work with someone else on your job. I sometimes coordinate three subcontractors at the same time when developing new products. I may be working with a Consumer Product Safety Commission's accredited laboratory to assess product safety issues—always *before* it's manufactured—while a logo is being designed by one firm and packaging by another.

Let's say, for example, that your consultant hears from his trade association that Joe Smith would be the best legal professional to help you protect your new product. Fortunately, there is a two-week delay while you are gathering information. Next, your consultant hears that Joe Smith has been arrested for absconding with client escrow funds. You—and your service provider—were, in this case, fortunate for the delay, but next time do not settle for subcontractor referrals. See No. 2 and check references thoroughly. The grapevine can get tangled.

4 Make sure your service provider's fees are clear.

The more information supplied in a service contract, the better. Determine the following: Is there a retainer charge? What is the hourly rate once the retainer is exhausted? Is there a quotation for services? Who is responsible for unanticipated expenses such as postage or supplies? One of the worst things that can happen to a service provider is to have to engage a collection agency when a client won't pay because, "You didn't tell me I'd have to pay shipping charges."

5 Don't work with the copy cats; look for the unique.

Although imitation may be the sheerest form of flattery, shop all competitors. Attend monthly meetings of inventor groups in your state. Walk the floor at inventor- and industry-specific

trade shows. Network and ask for recommendations. Many service providers, who have spent good money for a booth, will try to woo you. Take time to speak with them, and look for intelligence and creativity. There are thousands of licensing agents and patent attorneys. What makes someone stand out?

6 Bigger isn't always better. You see her face all over the Internet: Facebook, Twitter, "free" webinars, e-advertisements of appearances at inventor fairs. That only proves the service provider knows how to promote herself. Make a list of questions to ask before you hire; consultants do not come cheaply. Sometimes the dark horse is the best person for the job. As the old saying goes: "The proof is in the pudding." Again, see No. 2 and check references.

7 Honesty is the best policy. Always insist your prospective service provider schedule an initial consultation with you to discuss expectations. Does he charge for this consultation, or will he provide it free of charge? I used to provide complimentary

consultations of up to one hour, which I considered to be adequate time to understand a new project. It got out of hand when I thought I had landed the job and the prospective client continued to email endless questions. During the initial consultation, make sure the service provider is willing to appease apprehensions and doesn't promise what he is not sure he can deliver.

8 Humanity and common decency go a long way. Even consultants hire consultants. Though she is busy, my attorney is concise, but she is also courteous. My web designer says "please" and "thank you" in all his emails. In today's electronic communications, etiquette still prevails. ☺

Edie Tolchin has contributed to *Inventors Digest* since 2000. She is the author of *Secrets of Successful Inventing* and owner of EGT Global Trading, which for more than 25 years has helped inventors with product safety issues, sourcing and China manufacturing. Contact Edie at egt@egtglobaltrading.com.



2 Critical Steps to getting your NEW PRODUCT "out there"

1 GET IT MADE

Contact Edie Tolchin – "The Sourcing Lady" (SM) for sourcing, China manufacturing, product safety issues, packaging assistance, quality control, production testing, final shipment inspections, freight arrangements, import services and delivery to your door!

2 GET A WEBSITE!

Contact Ken Robinson – While your order is being manufactured, you need to start working on your WEB PRESENCE! Get people talking about your product on Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+), get good search engine placement (SEO)!

www.EGTglobaltrading.com

EGT@egtglobaltrading.com

P.O. Box 5660 - Hillsborough, NJ 08844

845-321-2362

www.widgetsontheweb.com

kenrbnsn@widgetsontheweb.com

614 Van Liew Court - Hillsborough, NJ 08844

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NOVEMBER 2015 Volume 31 Issue 11

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