

# Drinking In Success

Julie Austin's wrist water bottle endures through knockoff issues and self-resolved PR challenges **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

**F**ormer *Inventors Digest* contributor Eva Winger wrote a story about Julie Austin's invention, Swiggies, and the knockoff issues she was having in 2009. Because I'm an inventions junkie, I recently (and coincidentally) came upon this product with a unique name.

After some Sherlock Holmes-ing, I met the inventor—who was happy to bring us up to date with her unique saturation device that can be used by the whole family.

**Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Please share a bit about yourself—and why Swiggies?**

**Julie Austin (JA):** I started in the entertainment industry, starring in films, commercials and TV shows for many years. About 15 years ago, I became a motivational speaker on the topic of innovation. My brand is "How to Think Like an Inventor."

I lived in Los Angeles for about half of my life, since it used to be the film and TV capital. Two years ago, I moved to Dallas, Texas, and have continued to travel the world as a speaker while still running my manufacturing business.

In the beginning, the product was called HydroSport, as was my company

name. I changed it to Swiggies when one of my best retail outlets started calling it that. It seemed a better name, since I had the kids' version.

With a new relaunch, I may go back to calling them HydroSport. It doesn't really matter in the promotional market, as they are branded by the client anyway. That's where I sell the majority of them.

**EGT: How long did it take from concept to production?**

**JA:** Since I literally started my business with five dollars and a clay prototype and no money, it took way longer than it should have.

I worked 2-3 jobs for years to save money to get molds made, patents, packaging, PR and warehousing. It took about eight years just to get to the production stage. I was able to quickly ramp it up by driving door to door to retail stores, sporting goods chains, drug store chains and gift shops.

**EGT: You originally appeared in *Inventors Digest* in 2009 and spoke about infringement. Please share this topic with us.**

**JA:** All inventors have to deal with infringement, even the biggest companies. Most of it comes from China.

It started when I checked the internet to see if the keywords "wrist water bottle" came up. I was shocked to see knockoffs of my product and even pictures of me wearing my product! I still have to deal with it every day.

You have to stay on top of it constantly. My product started getting knocked off after a trade show in Hong Kong, where someone grabbed a sample of mine in my booth and ran off. A couple of months later, factories started getting the knockoff product and I had to fight to get it removed from Amazon, eBay and Alibaba.

Swiggies come in adult and children's sizes.



**EGT:** When had you received the original patent? Please address the topic of trade dress.

**JA:** I got the original patent in the mid to late '90s. Patents are only good for 20 years, and I was infringed the whole time.

Through total serendipity, I met the best patent agent ever. His name is Allen Hertz. I told him the story about how I was being infringed, and he told me he thought he could get me a trade dress based on what I had done up to that point.

(*Editor's note:* Trade dress refers to the visual appearance of a product or its packaging—such as its shape, color scheme, overall look and feel—that signifies the source of the product to consumers and therefore serves as intellectual property.)

I had never heard of a trade dress. Most people don't know what it is. And most small inventors don't have it.

Everyone told him he couldn't do it, but he made it a mission to succeed. It took several passes at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and a lot of work, but it was issued—first, in the supplemental register and finally, in the principal register. In other words, extremely valuable IP that never runs out.

With this valuable IP, I am finally ready to license it to a bigger company that has a similar product line. It can be sold in retail and in the promotional market. And I now have a whole product line. Unlike a patent, it never runs out.

And last August, I learned that my patent is in "incontestable status," which means that this is the final phase and it cannot be challenged in court.

**EGT:** Where are you manufacturing? Have you had any difficulties with logistics?

**JA:** Prior to COVID, I was manufacturing in China with a small family factory. It was a great relationship. But since COVID, I was never able to contact them.

Hopefully, they are OK. I am kind of guessing they went out of business or started manufacturing other things.

Because of tariffs and uncertainty, I am looking for a U.S. manufacturer. But I would rather license it to a bigger company and get out of the



**In Hong Kong, “someone grabbed a sample of mine in my booth and ran off. A couple of months later, factories started getting the knockoff product.”**

—**JULIE AUSTIN**

manufacturing business. I'd love to just be a salesperson for the product and take a licensing fee.

To answer your question about logistics, manufacturing in other countries is always a gamble. I set it up in three countries just in case anything happened in one.

**EGT:** Tell us about special recognition your product received.

**JA:** They won The Toy Man® Award of Excellence: This award is given to products that demonstrate significant quality in design, safety and value, and receive a five-star overall rating in The Toy Man Product Guide's evaluations.

**EGT:** Where are you selling? What is the pricing?

**JA:** Swiggies have been sold in 25 countries. They are currently sold mostly in the promotional products industry and online. The retail price for a set is \$16.95.

**EGT:** Tell us about the success of Swiggies as promotional products.

**JA:** The wrist water bottle started out as a retail product until another streak of serendipity happened. I was at trade show that wasn't going well, so I closed up my booth. I noticed another guy was doing the same.

We started talking, and he said my product looked like a promotional product—like imprinted hats, pens, mugs and T-shirts. He gave me a portion of his booth in Vegas to test it out.

When I was mobbed in the aisle at the show, I realized that was my market. I've sold hundreds of thousands of them around the world, mostly to marathons.

**EGT: Can they be filled with alcohol?**

**JA:** Yes! I also sell about 20 percent in the alcohol industry now at festivals, pub crawls and Hash House Harriers.

**EGT: How did you make your PR connections?**

**JA:** In the beginning, I hired a big PR firm to handle the product. After four months of spending an insane amount of money, I had gotten one magazine mention and a short mention in the *Los Angeles Times*.

I decided to become my own publicist. I literally went to the library and sat down with reference books to find contact names for TV shows and magazines. And I cold-called.

I've gotten PR around the world almost every month for years. I was on the "Today" show

twice, ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX News, along with dozens of magazines, newspapers and radio stations.

Once my friends found out how successful I was at getting my own PR, they recommended me for regular corporate PR jobs. I started working with independent inventors and celebrities at Abbott & Klein.

**EGT: You recently partnered with SenseIP (senseip.ai). Please tell us about that.**

**JA:** When I got my first patent, it took a long time and was very expensive. I had to submit it through the patent office twice. So, when I found this company that did the work for less money in less time, I had to connect with them.

SenseIP makes it fast and easy to protect great ideas. Traditionally, patenting an idea meant hiring attorneys, spending months going back and forth, and paying tens of thousands of dollars like I did. With SenseIP, you can type in your idea, even if it's just a sentence, and their AI helps break it down, check if it's unique, and draft a ready-to-file patent application. ☀

*Details: swiggies.com*



Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 ([edietolchin.com/portfolio](http://edietolchin.com/portfolio)). She is the author of several books, including "Secrets of Successful Women Inventors" (<https://a.co/d/fAGlvZJ>) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing" (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).

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Whether your concern is how to get started, what to do next, sources for services, or whom to trust, I will guide you. I have helped thousands of inventors with my written advice, including more than nineteen years as a columnist for *Inventors Digest* magazine. And now I will work directly with you by phone, e-mail, or regular mail. No big up-front fees. My signed confidentiality agreement is a standard part of our working relationship. For details, see my web page:

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*Best wishes, Jack Lander*

# 1-2-3

## Common Invention Questions Answered

BY BEN GREENBERG, FOUNDER OF INVENTIONS UNLIMITED (INVENTIONUNLIMITED.COM):

### 1 What's the most dangerous trap inventors fall into during manufacturing?

Designing for function instead of for manufacturing. A prototype doesn't care about cost, assembly time, tooling or yield rates. Factories do. A surprising number of products work perfectly in ones and twos but collapse financially at scale due to material choices, excessive part counts or complex assemblies. If you don't think about manufacturing while you're designing, manufacturing will certainly think for you—and you won't like the answer.

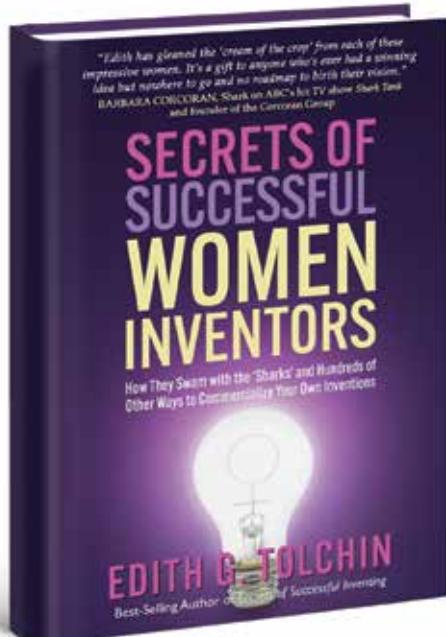
### 2 Funding stops more inventors than bad ideas. What should inventors do when stuck at that stage?

First, recognize your stage. You don't raise growth capital without demand, and you don't validate demand with investor money. Crowdfunding is a good alternative for validation plus funding; bootstrapping is for early proof. Licensing is for inventors who don't want manufacturing risk at all. The biggest funding mistake I see for inventors is chasing money instead of building leverage. Validation creates leverage; traction creates leverage; money follows leverage.

### 3 What mindset do successful inventors consistently share?

They treat invention as a process, not a moment. The ones who succeed don't fall in love with Version 1. They expect iteration. They expect friction. They expect setbacks. Most important, they measure progress by learning—not by hype, likes or praise. Persistence beats brilliance every time in this industry.

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**Edith G. Tolchin**  
(photo by Amy Goldstein Photography)

### Edith G. Tolchin knows inventors!

Edie has interviewed over 100 inventors for her longtime column in *Inventors Digest* ([www.edietolchin.com/portfolio](http://www.edietolchin.com/portfolio)). She has held a prestigious U.S. customs broker license since 2002. She has written five books, including the best-selling *Secrets of Successful Inventing* (2015), and *Fanny on Fire*, a recent finalist in the Foreword Reviews INDIE Book Awards.

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