

What Inventors Need to Know About the Pet Industry

Five takeaways from the president of Ethical Products, an open innovation pet products company that has been in business for 65 years.



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Jonathan Zelinger is the president of [Ethical Products](#), a family-owned company that has been in the pet industry for 65 years. The business was started by Zelinger's late father; Zelinger's son now works for him at the company as well. In a recent phone interview, he described the pet industry as highly fragmented and that due to its size, long-standing, and award-

winning products, his company is a recognizable and respected name. The company stocks and sells approximately 1,000 SKUs.

I reached out because a number of their products have come from both professional outside inventors as well as what they call hobbyists inventors - pet enthusiasts, typically owners who have ideas but are not necessarily professional inventors. In fact, Ethical Products regularly meets with professional pet product inventors in person at its company headquarters in Bloomfield, New Jersey and at trade shows. During these meetings, it is not uncommon for these inventors to pitch between 20 and 30 ideas in a clip. Zelinger delivers feedback right away.

"We tell them pretty quickly what we like and what we don't like. One thing we tell inventors is, 'If you're going to be in this business, you have to have a thick skin and you're going to get some rejection. Don't take it personally.' There could be a multitude of reasons why we're rejecting it. It could be that the price point won't work for us, it could be that it's too difficult to manufacture. It could be that it's a duplicate of something else that's out there... we can make that decision pretty quickly based upon the number of years we've been in the business. It's fair to them, it's fair to us. Neither side is being held up."

That way, the inventor knows right then and there which ideas Ethical Products wants to take more time to digest, and which the inventor is now free to take elsewhere.

Recently, the company scored a hit with its [Push-N-Pop treat dispenser for dogs and cats](#), which they licensed from [prolific pet inventor Amanda Hutton](#). Hutton is a fulltime, professional inventor who has licensed more than 50 of her ideas for products. So far, the Push-N-Pop has won three best new product awards from three different pet associations and pet retailers. Its current retailing on Amazon and Chewy and in Pet Valu, Pet Supermarket, and other pet stores nationwide.

"If you're familiar with the children's toy industry, it's not too different from some of the products that were on the market or still are on the market," Zelinger explained. "It works off the same concept: When the dog or cat nudges it with their paw or with their nose, the treats pop out at random. No batteries required."

Here are the most important takeaways from our conversation.

1. Do your homework. Zelinger wants the inventors he meets with in person to be prepared. His first piece of advice for inventors is, "Know the market." He recommends becoming familiar with the industry by going into pet retail stores, including big box retailers like Petco and PetSmart. He also recommends browsing online at Chewy.com and other online purveyors like Amazon.com.

"See what's out there. See what's selling, what's hot, what's popular, what's trending. That way, when you come in to make your presentation to a company like ours, you have knowledge, the facts -- you're educated," Zelinger explained. "Inventors should take the time to look at our website, see the types of products that we're manufacturing, and understand what our price points are. We deal in a very specific niche. I would call it mid-tier priced pet products. If you come in and present the next new GPS tracker for dogs that's retail for \$500, that's not what we do. The inventor should know that before they come in so that they don't waste their time or our time."

I agree with Zelinger: You can do a lot of research online these days! There's no excuse. If you're well-educated in advance, your meetings will be much more meaningful.

2. The time and expense required to walk the trade shows are worth it, because seeing what's out there is the easiest way for inventors to do their homework.

"Not only does it help eliminate duplication, it also gives them inspiration for fresh, new ideas and to pick up on trends. So, we think it's very valuable," he told me. "The professional inventors who we have worked with who have been the most successful have been the ones who took the time and made the effort to go to shows and really get a feel for what's happening in the pet industry."

He encourages inventors to attend [Super Zoo](#) in Las Vegas and the [Global Pet Expo](#) in Orlando, Florida every year.

"They have to know what's on the market. I think the last thing you want to do is sit down with a new product inventor and he or she will show you a product and you have to turn to them and say, "You know what? This product has been on the market already for three years."

To be clear, Zelinger (nor I) is advocating that you purchase a booth to [display your invention at a trade show](#). There are [significant risks in publicly disclosing](#) your invention before the timing is right and little to no benefits.

3. The best way to capture his attention is quickly, preferably with video.

The more an inventor can do to convey the attributes of the product to them in a minimal amount of time, the better.

"A video is great. At a very basic level, we need a drawing. It doesn't have to be a very fancy drawing; it could be a sketch. We don't need blueprints or CAD drawings at the early stage. A lot of inventors now are providing us with homemade videos showing their product in action with a pet, which is very helpful as well. A working prototype is bliss!" he added.

That's right -- in this industry, a prototype is not needed at the get go. If you believe you have to build a prototyping for every invention idea you have, you will not become successful.

4. From the get go, cost is an important factor and an early consideration when testing potential new products.

When the new product development team likes a product, they meet internally with marketing and sales to talk about it. Next, images are sent overseas to obtain a price quote from their factory to see if the product is going to be feasible.

If it passes the price and the costing test, then the company either goes to the inventor and asks them for CAD drawings or, in some cases, their factories overseas is able to provide them. Then, sometimes a prototype is ordered, typically using 3D printing, which Zelinger pointed out is being used worldwide now.

"3D printing is a very inexpensive way for us to get a prototype into our hands," Zelinger said. "There are a lot of great new products that have been brought to us over the years, but the cost to produce them is simply too expensive."

5. Intellectual property is not a requirement.

Zelinger said, "It's not super important. It's nice to have. In most cases a patent can command a slightly higher royalty rate. But it's not, you know, totally necessary. If we have a product that we feel we can manufacture and be first to market, we'll move forward and we'll work on a royalty agreement even in the absence of a patent."

I'm not surprised. Today, customer service and having a unique product is much more important than patent protection.

Take Zelinger's words to heart. You're going to get rejected! That's why coming up with lots of ideas significantly increases your likelihood of success. Don't just throw your ideas out there, though! Instead, take the time to identify the companies you want to invent for and very closely study their business. This is the only way to truly become a professional inventor.

I caution you against spending too much money on any single idea before you get some type of feedback. And the best way to get honest feedback is by befriending companies like Ethical Products -- companies that depend on the efforts of independent inventors. It speaks volumes that Zelinger is so involved with the evaluation process; there's no [middleman](#) here.

The pet industry is an excellent one to get started in as an independent inventor.