



MICHAEL/AGE/EVERETT

GADGET GURU: If it's plastic, Kushner will make it

ENTREPRENEURS

King of Kitsch

You wouldn't believe it, but a mammoth amount of manpower goes into making those little plastic absolutely-must-have gadgets that litter our lives. Meet the man who's built a business out of wacky stuff

By Lara Wozniak/DONGGUAN AND SHENZHEN

ROBERT KUSHNER FLIPS a piece of blue plastic over in his hand, scrutinizing it from every angle. The former United States litigator-turned-entrepreneur is in a Dongguan factory checking on the progress of one of his newest gadgets, a \$5 sunglasses holder that clips to a car sun visor.

It took 40 days and about 400 people to get from the first sketch to the computerized rendering to the creation of the mould and then the manufacturing of this piece of plastic. Now, they agonize: Is the shade of blue too light? Too dark? The tint may be just a bit off . . .

"It's not off enough to make me reject the order," Kushner finally says to the audible relief of the factory bosses. Kushner is the managing director of Pacific China Industries, his seven-year-old Hong Kong-based company that pumps out

gadgets that grab the attention of us all and make us ask: "Do we need this?"

Even if you've dismissed as faddish or foolish some of the items that the 35-year-old King of Kitsch makes—from the sunglasses holder to glow-in-the-dark beads and hand-held cappuccino makers that are essentially glorified whisks—you might be surprised by how much work goes into creating and manufacturing them.

First, somebody has to dream this wacky stuff up. In Kushner's case, he sometimes moves in when existing patents expire and mass-markets the goods for a fraction of what they originally sold for. Other times, he rethinks old ideas. He calls this "forward plus one—meaning that you take an existing idea and improve on it." And sometimes he invents his own

new toys and then sells the idea to retailers worldwide before manufacturing it. He says he quit law because he "hated it" but he also clearly uses his legal background to wade his way through patent rules and contractual wranglings.

After all, it's making the idea a reality that is the tough part. It's a process that's riddled with constant headaches, such as negotiating over minutiae like shades of blue. That's why distributors are still reliant on Hong Kong-based entrepreneurs like Kushner to liaise with the ever-burgeoning Chinese factories to make it happen. Take a look at the sunglasses clips to see how it works.

Each week, customers in the U.S. ask for new styles. One of the latest demands is for clips shaped like golf bags with clubs. In early June, when the demand comes in, Kushner runs out during his lunch break and photographs golf bags in a local sports shop. He e-mails these photos to a graphic artist in Hong Kong who immediately sketches them. The next morning Kushner edits the art, taking into account angles that might make production more expensive or timely. By noon, he is satisfied with the renditions and e-mails them to a buyer in the U.S. The following day the buyer chooses one of the half-dozen designs. It then takes a week for a China manufacturer to create a sample, which Kushner inspects at a factory in Dongguan on the day of the "Is it blue enough?" debate.

The mould looks good, but there are still issues to settle: How many can you make a day? How much will you charge? Heads shake, debates rage in Cantonese and English while Kushner simultaneously answers his ever-ringing mobile, handling queries from customers in Australia, Britain and the U.S. An agreement with the factory is finally reached and Kushner says the pieces will be shipped within 55 days of the order. While he won't reveal how much he pays to make an individual product, he says, "If I sell it for \$1, then the consumer can expect to pay \$3 or \$4."

But it's not just about debating over price with factory bosses. Kushner also needs to keep an eye on quality control, make sure the factories appear solvent—plastic feedstock in storage is a good sign—and are likely to manufacture all of his goods on time.

On this trip, to a factory in Shenzhen, there are nearly 70 people working in a fan-cooled open room assembling and packing translucent hand-held fans that will retail for about \$5. In another factory, there are about 20 people spray-painting clips blue, inhaling noxious-smelling fumes that leave a casual visitor with a headache. Next door, women are placing the sunglasses clips on trays, to be readied for the painting process.

In other rooms there are labourers building moulds, wiring electrics and packing finished products. "In the end, 100 factories may have been peripherally involved in making an item that will later sell for anywhere from \$2.99 to \$4.99," explains Kushner. Clearly, the low retail prices are a result of economies of scale, but the massive numbers of worker bees involved help fuel the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone's economy.

And it's all part and parcel of the process that goes into making that little plastic sun-visor clip that you absolutely must have. ■

Innovation

I'LL DRINK TO THAT . . . | By Lara Wozniak

'PULL IT' WORKS AT A PUSH

Unless knock-offs—or more kindly put, reinventions—work, you might as well fork out the money and buy the real thing.

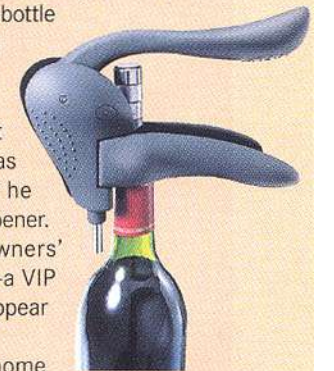
One of entrepreneur Robert Kushner's biggest-selling items is the Pull It, a redesigned take on the upmarket lever-model bottle opener, Screw Pull. When Screw Pull's patent expired in 1999 it opened the market for competition, and Kushner stepped in. The Screw Pull is an elegant black contraption marketed to wine aficionados, and sells for \$150. The Pull It, by comparison, comes in 10 funky colours, is geared to the trendy 30-something market and sells for just \$30.

At a recent office party, we tested the Pull It. With the air of a man who knew what he was doing, *Review* editor Michael Vatikiotis confidently set the bottle between the Pull It's two arms and pressed the lever down to remove the cork.

What could be easier? Um, most things, as it transpired. Vatikiotis was able to open the wine bottle, but he couldn't remove the cork from the opener. He joked we should read the "owners' manual" but we didn't have time—a VIP was in the room and we needed to appear cool, calm and suave.

Later in the week, I tried it at home sans the pressure of needing to impress and only after following the illustrated examples on the instruction manual—who reads these things when there are pictures? My verdict: It worked like a dream.

Others obviously think so, too. "I've never had a customer complaint," says Emma Sebrot, general manager of the Boca wine bar on Hong Kong island, which sells the openers. "My staff have been asked to demonstrate how to use it, though." In just a few months, she's sold 36 openers.



Wei Leng Tay/REVIEW

TOO COSTLY TO BE CUTE

Does the world need more bears with electro luminescent wings and halos? Maybe not. Entrepreneur Robert Kushner designed the Angel Bear, a stuffed toy whose wire-rimmed heavenly accoutrements glowed in the dark. The technology had previously been used for military applications. But for a stuffed bear? It ratcheted up the retail price to \$50, which was too expensive.

He learned a valuable lesson: Make products your dealers can retail.

Lara Wozniak