

Levelling out

Liette Tousignant,

founder and vice-president, new product development, Under the Roof Decorating Inc.

Budding inventors often think the biggest hurdle to success is coming up with a great idea for a time-saving product. Entrepreneur Liette Tousignant came up with such an idea — but she found the real challenge was the decade she spent getting her product on store shelves.

In the 1990s, the Calgary interior decorator, 45, found she was spending tons of time getting pictures to hang straight. After a fruitless search for a tool that would help speed the process, she and her husband, Kelly Krake, now president of Under the Roof Decorating Inc., went to the drawing board.

Their solution was the Hang & Level. It works by temporarily holding up artwork while it's being lined-up and levelled, then makes a mark on the wall to show where to nail. Although Tousignant built the device just to save herself time, the reaction from people who saw the product made her realize its potential. "[Clients] wanted to buy it from me. Friends wanted to buy it."

What followed was a decade of development, starting with the first prototype in 1999, and a number of setbacks along the way. In 2001, the product was almost ready to launch when the distribution company Tousignant partnered with was bought out and cancelled the deal. "I felt it was like the death of a child because it had taken us so long to get to that step," she says.

Tousignant then decided to take more control over production. "That way, if I fail, then I know it's my fault," she says. She went to China and sought out manufacturers herself, and decided to handle the distribution in house through her company, Under the Roof Decorating Inc. Tousignant and Krake raised almost \$1 million from friends and family in 2005 to go this route. The final product went to market in May 2006. The Hang & Level is now available in more than 400 stores across Canada, including Home Depot and Home Outfitters.

Tousignant is now developing a line of products based on the Hang & Level, which she's not willing to talk about until patents are secured. "Launching your first product, it's difficult because you have to establish all your contacts," she says. "Once all those are in place, you're fine. You just develop your second product."

— Reagen Sulewski

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TOUSIGNANT'S INNOVATION TIPS

Be passionate about your product. "I've been at it for 10 years and people who meet me say, 'I can't believe you're still at it. How come you're not there yet?' People don't realize that things take time."

Search outside your company for expertise. "You have to surround yourself with people who have the knowledge that is compatible to yours, who can bring the skills that you don't have."

Take as much control of the project as you can. "If I had it to do over again, I would have skipped the step of hiring a distribution company and moved more into managing the project myself. That would have saved me a few years."