Expectations of Inventors and Manufacturers Often Don't Mix:

It's a common story. Inventors wonder why manufacturers do not take more interest in them. Experienced manufacturers tend to keep inventors at a distance. The plain truth may be hard to swallow but it needs to be understood. . . by both sides of the equation.

Inventors are a suspicious lot. They are worried about someone stealing their idea or their money. Independent inventors typically work off very tight budgets and try to accomplish as much as they can on their own. Just navigating the treacherous reefs of invention scams en route to intellectual property protection sends up flags of caution and resistance. Horror stories abound about sacrifices in time, money and even family relationships. Dark clouds appear ever present on the horizon. Unrealistic or undefined expectations eventually turn into mythological sirens luring the innovative navigator to shipwreck on the perilous jagged edged reef of product development.

Time is money and no one appreciates this more than a manufacturer. Inventors eat up time. In their minds, their idea is the next best thing to apple pie and the American dream of achieving riches. Inventors think everyone should feel the same way about their idea. Manufacturers know from the school of hard knocks it takes a whole lot more than a good idea to generate a great product. Doing business means making profits. Realistic expectations and novice inventor expectations tend to follow different paths.

If a good relationship is going to develop between the two parties, it is imperative that each party is up front and crystal clear on all the issues before proceeding. A 'start to finish' plan . . . a map, if you will, of what each party can expect in the process of developing and manufacturing the product will serve well. This includes a timeline of what will done within a reasonable time frame, expectations of expenses and when payments are due, the possibilities of setbacks and how they can be addressed, the fact that developing new ideas into products often entails breaking new ground or calling upon ingenuity to overcome obstacles. It is after all a process requiring research and development.

Inventors expect the best possible duplication or representation of their idea in the ultimate product. Manufacturers expect to earn profits for employing their business, time, effort, and years of sweat equity in creating production molds and working with a ever changing selection of materials. Years of doing business should enable the manufacturer to earn a fair profit while still offering the inventor competitive pricing. Does this mean the inventor is being gouged when the manufacturer is able to benefit from lower prices on raw materials and does not reduce an agreed upon competitive cost per unit production price? Is the manufacturer expected to pass on any of these savings to the inventor?

Spell it out ahead of time. Know what to expect. Generate the means of resolving any differences before they arise. Include a mutually agreeable statement allowing for either party to register dissatisfaction or concerns about unexpected events affecting the bottom line or the timeline.

It is imperative for the inventor to research different tooling methods before settling on any one kind. Expect a manufacturer to encourage what they are experienced with. Inventors are so anxious to get the wheels turning that costly mistakes can

lead to major delays or worse yet, failure. The final okay to begin tooling of molds should begin when one is secure with the design and function of the product. Tooling is an art that relies on the clarity of the inventor and the skill of the manufacturer, both being subject to human error. Being able to make necessary adjustments before committing to a major expense is good business.

It may be wise to consult a third party such as a professional engineer with expertise in the specific field of the invention. Carefully consider the benefits of CAD generated rapid prototyping or stereo lithography. The benefits of seeing, touching, and testing the 'finished' product before investing in expensive molds far out weighs the costs of this process. Get it right then tool up. Yes, this may result in the manufacturer potentially giving away some business but think of the benefits of getting it right with the first tooling.

Inventors must remember manufacturers have nothing to gain by offering anything less than their best. They are expecting to benefit from their efforts by eventually adding another product to their line. A manufacturer who makes a genuine effort in researching and developing the essential design and process for production will be understandably upset by a demanding, unrealistic inventor who takes his or her business elsewhere in midstream.

On the other hand, manufacturers who take on inventors' projects are obligated to provide reasonable expectations in fulfilling the key ingredients. In summary fashion this includes selecting the method of tooling and production, the efficiency of design, the economy of the process, the anticipated start up volume and the capability to gear up to higher production levels. A manufacturer willing to spell out all of these steps for the inventor ahead of time will save frustrations and conflicts between parties.