



When necessity truly is the mother of invention

Having an insider's understanding of a product's viability can give entrepreneurs the edge in terms of design and development



Olive Keogh

The idea for a new business can be sparked by any number of things, but one of the most powerful triggers is finding a gap in the market through personal experience. Those driven to starting a business in these circumstances generally do so with a sense of urgency and considerable insight into how the gap needs to be filled.

It was the experience of being rushed to hospital in a diabetic coma that convinced John Hughes that there had to be a better way of keeping tabs on his insulin injections than the traditional method of recording each jab in a notebook.

"I need insulin several times a day, and sometimes you forget to record it and you inject again. That's potentially very dangerous and something diabetics live in constant fear of," he says. "I've spent my working life in IT and it seemed logical that there should be an IT solution to this problem."

Hughes collaborated with colleague William Cirillo and diabetic consultant Dr Brendan Kinsley of Dublin's Mater hospital to develop InsulCheck, a small timer device that attaches to the pen used to inject insulin.

"The key was that it had to be automatic, otherwise it wouldn't be any better than manual recording," Hughes says. "With our device, the timer automatically starts when the injection is finished. It provides safety and certainty, and the feedback

from the diabetic community has been phenomenal, even though the product has only been available for a few months.

"We are constantly getting emails from people telling us how much having this product means to them – it's a huge weight off their minds.

"What helped us hit the spot from the outset is that I came to the project with an insider's knowledge of diabetes and, with the help of Dr Kinsley, we were able to decide what sort of functionality the pen needed and to offer that immediately.

"What makes InsulCheck different to the other business start-ups I've been involved with is that, this time, I feel I'm a flag carrier in terms of trying to make life easier for those with diabetes."

Having inside knowledge can be a big advantage as it allows entrepreneurs cut to the chase in terms of product design and development. However, it can also pile on the pressure to succeed.

Stroke at 50

When Aviva Cohen's husband had a stroke at the age of 50, his ability to communicate was badly affected. Determined to help him, Cohen began researching what self-help tools were available. She quickly discovered they were limited, expensive and mainly aimed at children. The only option was to develop her own.

Cohen set up Neuro Hero in 2011 and is developing speech-rehabilitation programmes that will help not only those with a stroke, but also acquired brain injury, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.

One of the more difficult commercial challenges she faces is balancing the development of a viable business with a desire to keep the cost of her products down. She says money is often very tight in families caring for someone with a long-term health problem.

"I feel enormous pressure to succeed because every day, my husband Steve asks when am I going to 'fix' him. This makes

me want to move as fast as possible.

"My desire to help Steve, and people like him, is definitely the motivation. Reason is what gets the work done. They are two separate processes and you have to be as objective about the business as you can. This is where having a team is important. They help bring clarity."

Reading difficulties

A desire to help her young son overcome his reading difficulties made former animation and children's TV executive Linda O'Sullivan stray far beyond her comfort zone to set up Reading Bridges – a game-based reading system aimed at children struggling with reading fluency.

"Having a personal reason for starting a business makes things easier and harder – easier because you have a clear idea of what you want to do and why, harder because you feel a weight of responsibility to produce the perfect product.

"Starting a business is a difficult journey for anyone and it has its peaks and troughs. I suppose having my son's needs uppermost has helped me through the troughs."

Space-saving furniture

It was the birth of her son that spurred interior designer Emma Webb to develop Stackajack, a space-saving furniture and storage system for small kids.

Webb was living in an apartment at the time and suddenly found a lot of the available floor space being taken over by "baby stuff".

"When you add up the space it takes to store a high chair, a changing table, an activity centre, a booster seat etc, it's over two metres. In small houses or apartments, that's a lot," Webb says.

"Having lived through something, you know exactly what the problems are and, having gone over and over solutions in your mind, you end up with a pretty clear idea of what needs to be done."

Webb's solution was to design a neat, reasonably priced stacking system that

starts with the sleeping needs of a newborn and transforms, with an easily operated click-and-fix system, into what a growing child needs such as a high chair and a booster seat.

"The drive and passion to do it has certainly come from my son and, because it's personal, you end up thinking about it all the time," she says. "As a young mum, I know what a hassle it is to be carrying a tonne of stuff everywhere. Coming up with a solution that makes life so much easier is a powerful motivator."

Having a personal reason for starting a business makes things easier and harder – easier because you have a clear idea of what you want to do and why, harder because you feel a weight of responsibility to produce the perfect product





■ Clockwise from above: Linda O'Sullivan of Footbridge; John Hughes and William Cirillo of InsulCheck and Aviva Cohen and Catherine Sweeney of Neuro Hero. Below: the InsulCheck device (left) and Stackajack (right) invented by Emma Webb