

Outdoor Adventure: It's in the Cards

San Diego explorer's informative, beautifully designed decks help families discover the best of U.S. cities **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

According to inventor Deanna Megan Ratnikova of San Diego, “I set out to give my family a fun way to spend time together, and the GO Deck was born.”

Ratnikova's line of exploration games provide both this and exercise at the same time. Is that even possible?

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): How did you come up with your invention?

Deanna Megan Ratnikova (DMR): I grew up in east Tennessee, now live in San Diego, and work full time in biotech. When the pandemic hit in 2020, I started to explore San Diego by foot, focusing on the natural attractions within the city. Even though I had lived here for eight years at that point, there were so many gems I'd never truly appreciated or even noticed.

Each time I discovered something new on my urban outings, I'd share it with friends and colleagues. Before long, people started coming to me asking for recommendations and I started to consider how I could easily share with others my favorite outdoor spots in the city.

Around this same time, my significant other gifted me

with an informational card deck to enhance our relationship. The cards—visual, non-sequential, with just enough text to give me the gist—were the perfect medium to match my short attention span, coupled with my daughter's frequent calls for “Mommy!”

In the few minutes I had to delve into the deck without an interruption, I was inspired to try something new, and this is when my idea for The GO Deck city series started to take shape. I toted my daughter along to sites while researching and writing city decks.

On one fateful hike, she exclaimed, “I'm done!” and yet we were over a mile from our car. I distracted her with a word game, and we played the game as we walked back to the car. To my surprise, she asked me to keep playing on the drive home instead of begging for the tablet as soon as we returned to our vehicle.

Leading up to this experience, I had been feeling guilty about the amount of screen time I was giving my daughter, so to see how a simple game could help us balance screen time (and also help us connect) sparked my desire to identify more games we could play anytime, anywhere—no materials needed. This is how “Games to Play on the GO” was born.

Deanna Megan Ratnikova's idea began when her significant other gifted her with an informational card deck to enhance their relationship. She toted her daughter along to sites while researching and writing city decks.



EGT: Do you and your family travel a lot?

DMR: My family lives on the East Coast, and my husband's family lives in Seattle. We try to see them once a year, though sometimes it's more like once every two years. Beyond traveling to see family, my daughter and I rarely leave San Diego. (My spouse, however, is active-duty military, so he travels frequently.)

Though I don't take many long road trips or airplane rides, I'm constantly exploring San Diego County (which is larger than the entire state of Delaware), and these local excursions make me feel like a traveler.

EGT: Tell us about copyrighting and trademarking your products.

DMR: When I was prototyping the first city deck, I started to think about what I would call the product. I enlisted the help of an IP attorney to research names and provide advice on what would likely be accepted by the USPTO.

I've since used this attorney to trademark additional products and even a mascot, and she also helps me file copyright applications. I recognize the privilege I have to be able to utilize an attorney for my IP needs, but it's one aspect where I do not feel confident taking it on myself—nor is it how I want to spend time within the business.

I don't think a business owner can do it all, so figuring out early on what you want to outsource (legal, accounting, marketing, and so on) can help you maintain enthusiasm and energy during the sometimes difficult entrepreneurial journey—because you're then able to focus more on tasks that you do enjoy.

EGT: Have you had any obstacles during product development?

DMR: There have been hiccups along the way, but the biggest obstacle is the voice in my own head. If I can control the dialogue in my head, issues like printing errors, missed deadlines

with contractors, shipping snafus and the like seem minor.

When my mindset is right, I focus on what I can control, how to fix something as quickly and efficiently as possible, and then move on. There are days, however, when I let fear, doubt, anxiety and other negative emotions take over. Running a business is one of the hardest things I've voluntarily taken on, with becoming a parent definitely *the* hardest ... but both are very rewarding.

EGT: Where are you manufacturing?

DMR: I manufacture in China. I explored printing my products in the USA, but the costs were four times the quote from China. I investigated U.S.-based partners again when the tariff war escalated, and even then, it's still less expensive to print in China.

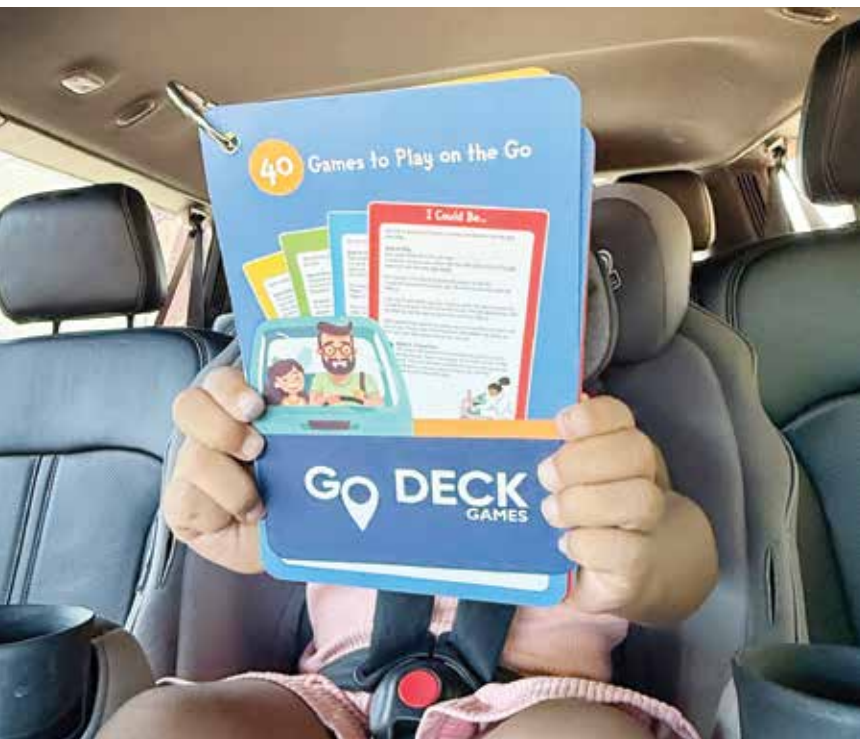
Utilizing a foreign partner allows me to sell my product at a price the majority of the U.S. population can afford, and I want my products to be accessible for all.

EGT: Do you plan to add to your product line, such as new location games for exploration?

DMR: With all my products, I hope to make getting out and about easier and more inviting



Each GO Deck card has trail details, dog friendliness and nearby extra options for added exploration.



Games to Play on the Go is designed to enhance learning while reducing screen time.

to the average person. Customer feedback on the city decks is that they'd like a simple way to quickly input the address or coordinates of a location once they've selected where to go.

To answer that need, I'm working on a free digital tool that would enable users to tap a location on The GO Deck map and use their smartphones to navigate to the site.

I've also heard from customers that they sometimes want a "done-for-you" plan when visiting a particular location, so I've been testing family-friendly scavenger hunts that help people discover the top attractions at a site.

It's taken me a while to come around to the idea of a digital product, because I don't want to create anything that increases our time on tech devices. I appreciate, however, that technology can make getting out and about easier, so I'm being mindful as I develop these digital products to ensure it's something I can be proud of adding to my business offerings.

I want to stay true to my mission of helping people connect with the natural world, each other, and with their communities.

EGT: If any of your products are intended for children under 12, please share your experience with third-party lab testing (for children's products) to comply with the many government regulations.

DMR: "Games to Play on the GO" is targeted to parents and caregivers of elementary school-age children. I created it to help me connect with my daughter while we were on the go, and sans screen. So, I consider these products more as tools for adults to more easily connect with children versus children's toys—plus, most kids are unlikely able to play the games without the support of an adult.

I hope these products help other parents and caregivers connect with their children and discover that quality time together is still possible in this digital age.

EGT: Any advice for inventors seeking to develop similar games?

DMR: Now that I'm in the thick of running a business, developing the product seems like the easy part! I had no idea how many different hats I'd have to wear once the product was finished. I also didn't realize the expenses would just keep adding up even after the product arrived: web design, public relations, marketing, accounting, shipping/receiving, and more.

It's a rollercoaster ride, full of ups and downs.

One way I've overcome the negative dialogue in my head is to consider how I would feel if I didn't pursue this effort. I believe that the regret of not going for it is far worse than trying and failing, and that helps me keep moving.

So, my advice to others is to focus on your mindset and find a way to remind yourself why you started this journey in the first place. 🍷

Details: thegodeck.com



Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 (edietolchin.com/portfolio). She is the author of several books, including "Secrets of Successful Women Inventors" (<https://a.co/d/fAGivZJ>) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing" (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).

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Common Invention Questions Answered

BY BEN GREENBERG, FOUNDER OF INVENTIONS UNLIMITED

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1 What should inventors focus on once they get their first sales?

Systems, not just sales. Your first orders prove demand. Your next challenge is fulfillment, quality control and cash flow. Many inventors fail at this stage by growing too fast without reliable manufacturing or logistics. Growth only works when repeatable processes support it. Otherwise, success becomes chaos.

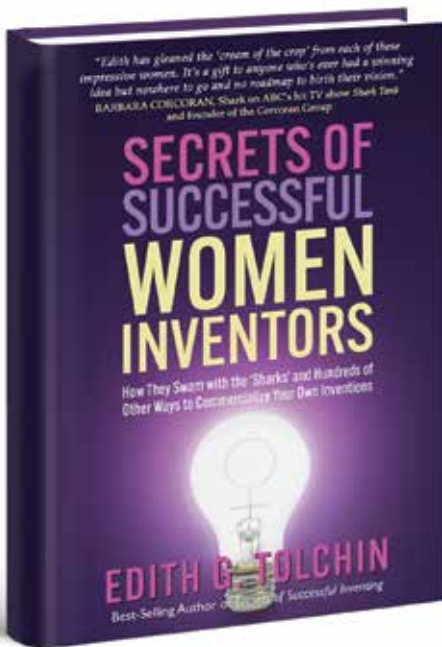
2 Why do so many good products fail after launch?

Because execution breaks under pressure, early buyers forgive minor flaws—but the market won't. If quality slips, shipping delays grow, or customer service falls apart, momentum dies. Launching is exciting, but sustaining requires discipline. Products rarely fail from a lack of innovation alone; they fail because operations weren't strong enough to support growth.

3 What mindset should inventors adopt once they're "in the market"?

They need to transition from inventor to business owner. Once customers are paying, your job is no longer just improving the product, it's protecting trust. That means consistency, communication and reliability. The inventors who win in the long term treat their brand like a promise, not just a product.

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Edith G. Tolchin
(photo by Amy Goldstein Photography)

Edith G. Tolchin knows inventors!

Edie has interviewed over 100 inventors for her longtime column in *Inventors Digest* (www.edietolchin.com/portfolio). She has held a prestigious U.S. customs broker license since 2002. She has written five books, including the best-selling *Secrets of Successful Inventing* (2015), and *Fanny on Fire*, a recent finalist in the Foreword Reviews INDIE Book Awards.



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