

He and His **Shadows**

N.J. inventor's cardboard, printed, ecofriendly templates showcase collectibles and life moments **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

My daughter, Dori Lewandowski, recently attended the Newburgh (New York) Toy and Collector Show with my 5-year-old grandson, Josh.

Because Dori's mom has been writing about inventors for most of Dori's life, my babe can spot a product that would make for a good story—and maybe even pick up a treasure for Josh at the same time.

Here is another Josh: Josh Piezas, the Cranford, New Jersey inventor of ShadowPop displays.



ShadowPop displays come in two main formats: a traditional shadowbox frame that slots a comic book-sized item as a background (above), and a shelf version (opposite page).

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Please share your background. Did it help or hinder the creation of your inventions?

Josh Piezas (JP): I studied business at Emory University but have been a creative tinkerer and idea guy my entire life. I look at products through a marketing (“pitching”) lens.

Formative jobs have included: selling and licensing “B” movies

around the world; relaunching the BeDazzler (a home appliance used to attach rhinestones, studs and other decorative elements to clothing and accessories); starting an animation company; working for Martha Stewart launching her craft company; and working for NECA (the National Entertainment Collectibles Association).

EGT: What is a ShadowPop display?

JP: A ShadowPop display is an affordable, printed cardboard template that consumers assemble into various types of shadowboxes to showcase collectibles, memorabilia and life's treasures. ShadowPop is about using a modest amount of creativity to customize a display that glorifies and augments the presentation of your favorite items.

EGT: And they are ecologically advantageous. Please elaborate.

JP: Since a ShadowPop display is made from recycled fiberboard and uses water-based inks, it is an environmentally friendly way to showcase our treasures.

ShadowPop displays are recyclable and will not take up space in a landfill. Our fiberboard is Forest Services Certified (FSC), meaning it's tracked during processing and verified to originate from sustainable tree farms.

EGT: How many different products do you feature on your website?

JP: We have two main formats: a traditional shadowbox frame that slots a comic book-sized item as a background, and a shelf version. These are printed in various designs to help collectors showcase their treasures appropriately.

We also offer a variety of inexpensive accessories that help collectors attain their vision for what is displayed.

EGT: Any problems with creating prototypes?

JP: Solving problems that inevitably arise is the fun part. Initial prototypes consisted of cut-up, sturdy cardboard (from FedEx boxes) to determine if what I had in mind could

be realized with a quality consumers could accept as home decor.

In the R&D balancing act, we knew the design would require unavoidable front-facing gaps. It was critical to figure out how to eliminate those seams. We turned that potential negative into a desirable feature, as these minor but visible gaps are critical to securing a protective museum plate to the shadow box.

EGT: Where are you manufacturing? Any supply chain issues?

JP: ShadowPop is 100 percent made in the USA, and 100 percent made in New Jersey! We hope to remain a “Made in the USA” product, keeping the overhead low and logistics simple.

As long as we can offer consumers a meaningful value proposition, our goal is to use the resources available in the States.

EGT: Is there an age range (for use of the product by children)? Safety issues?

JP: ShadowPop was started as a way to display collectibles, memorabilia and life’s treasures. Therefore, we initially had a more mature consumer in mind. However, the product has been wildly popular with youngsters, too!

The fully assembled cardboard product is very safe, and we often pitch ShadowPop as an amazing option for kids’ rooms and/or college dorm room décor. Still, there are some small cardboard pieces that pop out during assembly,

“Initial prototypes consisted of cut-up, sturdy cardboard (from FedEx boxes) to determine if what I had in mind could be realized with a quality consumers could accept as home decor.” —JOSH PIEZAS



and for this reason we do not promote the DIY item for young children to use.

The material is very safe, as our factory prints with water-based inks.

EGT: Have you had any difficulties with patenting your designs?

JP: We used an experienced patent firm to help with the design and utility patents: M&B IP. Ryan McCormick made the process smooth and understandable.

Throughout my career, I've been very involved in patenting products, so prior to bringing on M&B IP, I handled the provisional patent applications for the designs. This entailed generating the language around what the invention is and the illustrations and schematics that describe the invention.

The biggest challenge in a patent process is assessing the financial risk/reward profile for the business of monetizing the invention.

EGT: What's up next? Will you be increasing your product line?

JP: Our product line is expanding to include specialty accessories that enhance the many ways a ShadowPop (display) is used. For instance, we offer acrylic ledges and shelves that increase the 3D-ness of items in the comic ShadowPop frame.

We have category-specific accessories to support big markets. For wrestling fans, we have a kit that turns the ShadowPop into a ring. We just launched the Flight Path System, an accessory that makes items, particularly action figures, look like they're flying or floating.

We offer a modified shelf display that includes mounts, so it functions as a building block mini-figure showcase. This same display is also used as an action figure display when turned on the side and acrylic shelves are added.



ShadowPops is a perfect display opportunity for 5-year-old Josh Lewandowski, Edie Tolchin's grandson.

There is a lot of variation on our base products—and more is coming.

EGT: What has been your biggest obstacle in product development?

JP: Because most of what we sell is sourced in the USA, our challenge in product development is being creative in finding ways to accomplish a design goal using off-the-shelf parts.

When working in China, often “specific use” pieces can be made at relatively low quantities, whereas in the USA, everything made that is custom has significant tooling charges. Having worked with China for decades now, it's easy to forget how extreme the cost structures can be for something as simple as a plastic vacuum blister.

In the USA, we require tremendous volume to amortize the cost of some very basic tools. So, creativity with off-the-shelf components is highly valued.

EGT: Any advice for new inventors?

JP: Embrace research—what it is you think is the invention. Start out by Googling the concept to see if it's already out there. Then use the patent search tools of the USPTO.

Be creative in describing your invention during the search: Some things are linguistically hidden, but it's there.

If you are a serial inventor, familiarize yourself with the provisional patent application process. It's an economical way to enlist partners and prove out the value of your invention before embarking on the long and expensive utility patent journey.

Also, don't get too attached to the invention. Inventions are a way of solving a problem. Then we pass along the magic to you!

Details: shadowpopdisplays.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>).

1-2-3 Common Invention Questions Answered

BY BEN GREENBERG, FOUNDER OF INVENTIONS UNLIMITED
InventionUnlimited.com • Ben@InventionUnlimited.com

1 When should inventors start thinking about branding?

Much earlier than most realize. Branding isn't a logo; it's how people understand your product. The moment you start validating, you should also be learning how customers describe their problem. Those words become your brand. Strong brands are built from customer language, not marketing buzzwords. If people can't quickly "get it," they won't buy

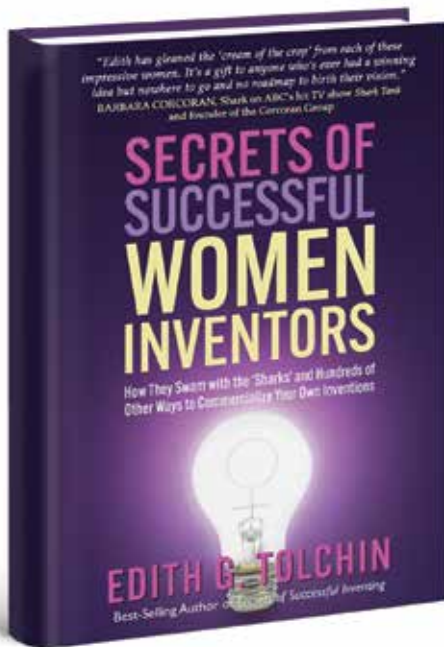
2 What's the most common crowdfunding mistake inventors make?

Using crowdfunding as a funding tool instead of a validation tool. Successful campaigns are built before launch through email lists, testing ads and audience building. If you wait until launch day to see if people care, you're already too late. Crowdfunding doesn't create demand. It reveals demand that exists.

3 How do inventors know if they should license or build a company?

It comes down to risk tolerance. Licensing trades upside for safety; you let an established company handle manufacturing, sales and distribution in exchange for royalties. Building a company offers bigger rewards but requires more capital and execution. There's no correct answer—only the one that matches how much control, risk and responsibility you're willing to take.

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Available for purchase at Amazon (<https://tinyurl.com/334ntc3w>), Barnes & Noble, and edietolchin.com.



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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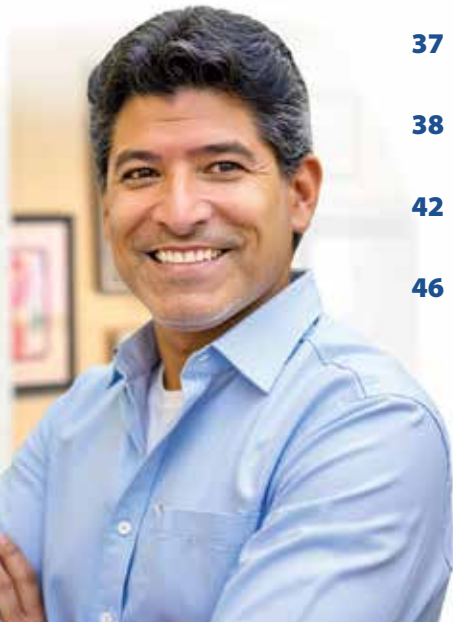
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