

Class and style on wheels



BEST FOOT FORWARD: Brisbane-based Caroline Horner shows off her Skboot bag, the first product in a range of ski accessories, for which she has had offers from UK and European distributors.

How to do it

- 1 Have a great idea
- 2 Do your research and see if your idea already exists
- 3 Think of a name
- 4 Find a designer and finalise a design
- 5 Build prototype after prototype until perfected
- 6 Find a factory in China to manufacture your product, or better yet, find a company that will find one for you
- 7 Register your business
- 8 Talk to a lawyer and get as much protection as possible for your ideas
- 9 Launch a website
- 10 Generate online hype and find distributors for your product
- 11 Launch the product
- 12 Move on to the next idea, and begin the process again

Joanna Cooney

FOR an idea to go places, it really needs legs.

Or, in Caroline Horner's case, wheels – for ski boots.

Ms Horner knew exactly what she wanted when it came to a way to transport her ski boots, so when she couldn't find a bag on wheels that could hold everything she needed, she decided to make one.

The Brisbane-based Ms Horner, came up with the Skboot bag – a bag on wheels designed to appeal to women – in April 2008.

"I wanted something that was really classy and stylish, but I could only seem to find the kind of thing that a

19-year-old boy would like," Ms Horner said, who hated skiing when she first tried it in her 20s.

The Skboot – pronounced as one word, "like in skedaddle" – business didn't sprout immediately. Ms Horner became discouraged by the apparent cost of the venture, and sat on the idea for five months before deciding she was on to something good.

"I had the design, I had the name, and I couldn't find anything else like it out there, so that's when I contacted the designer again and I said, 'Let's do this!'" said Ms Horner, 50.

She hired a global sourcing agent to find and liaise with a factory in China, which Ms Horner said greatly eased her work burden.

Having a high-quality design to work from also made the initial manufacturing phase easier, she said, adding that next time she would have a prototype perfected in Australia before taking it to China.

"Looking back, it saves time. It's probably more expensive, but the Chinese are really good at copying things so it needs to be as perfect as possible."

The Skboot bag was launched this January at a trade show in Denver, although the first batch of the finished product only hit Australian shores in June.

Ms Horner has had some offers from UK and European distributors, and plans to branch into the lucrative

US market when she moves there at the end of this year to get married.

She has grand plans for Skboot, with the bag on wheels the first of many ski luggage products.

She is releasing another item – which she said will be her silver bullet – later this year, and has three other ideas in the pipeline.

"We want to come up with a line of ski-related products that no one else has thought about before, and that's why I'm spending a lot of money on patents and design fees," she said.

Setting up the business with no major financial backing was one of the biggest challenges for Ms Horner, who mortgaged her house twice to fund the venture.

She sold the corporate support services business she founded 10 years ago last year to concentrate solely on Skboot.

"The hardest part was going into an industry I knew nothing about. I ski, but I didn't know about selling to retailers and manufacturing – to me it's all new, but I'm learning as I go.

"I think the trick is to surround yourself with people who know more than you and who know what they're doing," she said, but warned any aspiring inventors to be on their guard against idea thieves.

Apart from the online store, the Skboot bag, which retails for \$189 (small) and \$199 (large), is only available in Australian stores at this stage.

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"With Dart we are operating in countries like China and India, where the size of the gas market is almost limitless in terms of demand, and gas prices are three to four times what the prices were here when we were starting off with Arrow.

"With that in mind there is hope Dart can achieve Arrow's success in half the time.

"Where Arrow was a 10-year story, hopefully we can grow Dart to a similar size, I'd like to think, within five years," Mr Bizzell said.

As Arrow spells the end of another locally owned miner, Mr Bizzell said there was some regret.

"It's been exciting to be a part of the birth of the CSG industry in this state," he said.

"So there's some sadness in getting off the ride now, when there is some potential to play a significant part in the development of a new industry.

"Hopefully through my ongoing involvement with Bow Energy I will still be a part of that."

Mitch Gaynor writes for The Sunday Mail.

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