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Entrepreneurs

Crazy Twists On Ancient Technology

Matt Woolsey 10.26.06, 6:00 PM ET

Inventors are always trying to build a better mousetrap. No, really, they are.

Take the Rat Zapper Ultra, courtesy of attorney-cum-tinker Bob Noe. Fond of horses and open spaces, Noe long tried to rid his ranch of gophers. But when his beloved Labrador retriever died from ingesting a neighbor's rodenticide, the idea for an environmentally safe gopher trap clicked in his mind. Released in 2005, the Rat Zapper Ultra does away with pests by delivering a fatal, battery-powered shock--quick and bloodless.

"Most rodent-control technology is dangerous or inhumane," says Noe. "I thought I could bring it into the 21st century. If you can have a sexy rat trap, the Ultra is the one."

While scads of innovative entrepreneurs would love to hit upon the next high-tech wonder and ride it to riches (or at least sell it to Google, others are out to put refreshing and often loony zip into an array of age-old concepts. We're not talking about the occasional high-five machine or Santa-Claus detector, but everyday devices like brassieres and bagpipes.

In Pictures: Nine New Twists On Ancient Technologies

While exact numbers are elusive, a cut at the U.S. Patent Office database reveals that multiple patents for new mousetrap designs are awarded every year. (Presumably, there were an even greater number of applications.) Noe's Ultra will have to compete with other modern artillery--including a trap that catapults vermin into a pool of water to drown them.

Most ideas are not as novel, but rather involve smaller adjustments to an earlier design. This year Duncan Watson submitted a patent application for a trap that shuts its entry apertures after the rodent is trapped and killed. While other traps have similar closing mechanisms, Watson claims his design is unique because rival traps "are not self-sealing after trapping, and therefore the homeowner is still exposed to the dead mouse" during disposal.

Even the most irretrievably antiquated ideas--say, the abacus--are getting face lifts. Invented by the Babylonians around 1000 B.C., the ancient calculator consisted of sliding beads on rods held within a wood frame; with a little skill, users can do basic computations like adding numbers and finding square roots. Digital calculators notwithstanding, some abaci can still be found in a grade school classroom or two. Hence Tenny Ho's modern rendition: an abacus with an electronic pick-up that tracks the movements of the beads so teachers can monitor their students' technique.

Then there's the hammer, born awhile ago in the Paleolithic era, but still begging for a bit of refurbishment. So far in 2006, the U.S. Patent Office has issued 65 hammer patents. The new designs--some battery or diesel powered--come with everything from ergonomic handles to built-in screwdrivers. The list of designs awaiting approval is even longer, with ideas for reducing vibration or placing a nail claw on the hammer's front end (despite what appear to be obvious mechanical limitations).

Of course, putting a twist on an old idea is a long way from landing a patent--let along building a business. After all, how many people really want an electronic abacus? Or a talking toilet? Or even a trebuchet-style mousetrap?

"You have no idea how much time, effort and money goes into the process," says Noe. His biggest word of advice: "Get investors".