

# MEET THE INVENT-HERS!



Photo by Creatas/Photodisc



*These Women Are Creating Products That Make Our Lives Easier*

## DID YOU KNOW . . .

**ADELINE WHITNEY** invented alphabet blocks.

**MARIE CURIE** invented the first mobile X-ray machine.

**CHARLOTTE BRIDGWOOD** invented the automatic windshield wiper.

**MARION DONOVAN BUTLER** invented the disposable diaper.

By Allison Acken, Ph.D.

**H**ave you ever had one of those inspired, “ah-ha!”, light-bulb-goes-off-in-a-bubble-over-your-head, “inventor” moments? You know, the kind where you have a vision of a new thing-a-ma-call-it or a widget-gadget that would make your life—and the lives of millions of other mothers—easier? Maybe you went so far as to design a model for your widget-gadget or thing-a-ma-gadget, and then got bogged down in the legal labyrinth of trying to get it patented. Or the costs of manufacturing, marketing, and selling your thing-a-ma-gadget was a hurdle you couldn’t climb over.

Well, dust off that widget-gadget design—or start brainstorming others, because a company called Mom Inventors has come to the rescue with the tools, resources and support to help inventing moms bring their products to market. **MAKING BREAD** spoke with Tamara Monosoff, CEO of Mom Inventors, Inc. ([www.mominventors.com](http://www.mominventors.com)) and creator of the “TP Saver,” to get the lowdown on her company and what turns out to be a powerful trend: Moms finding ways to make good money staying at home.

A former staff member in the Clinton White House, Monosoff happily left that job to start her family, but worried that she would never find another paying job as sat-

isfying. Now she says, unabashedly and with glee in her voice, “I’ve found it! I can’t wait to get up every morning and get to work.” And it all started with a roll of toilet paper.

### TP Saver to the Rescue

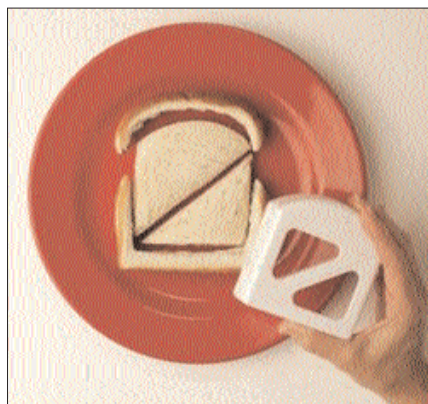
It turns out her toddler’s favorite game was unrolling the toilet paper in the bathroom . . . over and over and over again. “Oh, how cute” soon became annoying, and Monosoff went looking for a product that would prevent her daughter from wasting all those rolls of toilet paper. “I thought, ‘Where’s the thing?’ I just wanted to buy the thing that would stop her,” she says.



“I searched on the Internet, and I asked a lot of other moms if it was a problem for them. The answer was ‘Yes!’” But there was no product out there that provided a solution. Monosoff envisioned something that would lock up the roll, preventing her toddler from unraveling the whole thing at one sitting. When she couldn’t find what she needed, she started thinking about what might work and

Product image graphics courtesy of [www.mominventors.com](http://www.mominventors.com)

**“I had just made too many peanut-butter sandwiches, but I had to cut all that crust off. I thought, ‘There needs to be a utensil that does it in one shot,’” says Jennifer Sarihan.**



began to develop her solution—a stretchy elastic band that wraps around the roll—from scratch. After several prototypes and many meetings with

patent attorneys, manufacturers, and potential customers, TP Saver was born.

But Monosoff didn't stop there. They say necessity is the mother of invention, and she saw a bigger need—the countless other resourceful moms who might have similar great ideas, but lack the knowledge to bring their products to market. Having gone through the long and arduous process of designing, patenting, manufacturing, and bringing her first product to market, she decided to create an online community where she could share her newly acquired knowledge and the resources—everything from how to patent a product to what sort of liability insurance is needed—she'd gathered to help other women produce and sell their inventions. And so the company, Mom Inventors, was formed.

True to her vision, [www.mominventors.com](http://www.mominventors.com) has attracted many moms with clever solutions for everyday problems—as well as its fair share of national press. The company evaluates new inventions submitted for review and contracts to license those thought to have the most

potential for commercial success. The inventor moms get the benefit of Monosoff's experience and counsel, and the company gets a cut of any products sold, if a licensing agreement is reached.

Talking with Monosoff makes you want to invent something. She is so energetic and positive that it's easy to see why her company is a success. “There are 82 million moms in North America, and 72 percent of them work outside the home,” she says. “Of those moms, 64 percent would prefer to be at home.” She's happy to be part of the solution that helps many of them find ways to afford to stay there.

### All in the Family

The success of Mom Inventors means that her husband can stay home, too. It's become a family business, with Monosoff's husband, Brad Kofoed, a former software executive, taking on the duties of president and director of sales. Together, they work hard, but they work from home. They have a nanny for their two little girls, ages 3 and 1. Still, every afternoon at 4 o'clock—no matter what—they stop working, the nanny leaves, and the family has what Monosoff calls their “sacred time.” “We take the girls to the park, the bookstore, we play, then we have dinner together. It's totally focused time.” At 8 P.M., after the girls are tucked into bed, Tamara and Brad get back to work.

Is she exhausted? “Yes! Are you kidding? I have never been so sleep-deprived,” she says, laughing. “But it feels really healthy. Brad used to not get home until 7 o'clock. Now one of us gets the kids down for their nap, and we have lunch together.”

How has it been for the relationship? “Great! We always wanted to have a business together, but we didn't know what. I didn't expect this to grow so fast. Brad had 15 years' experience in sales, so it made sense for him to join in. He has put us on a

## NO NEED TO REINVENT THE PRODUCT-DEVELOPMENT WHEEL: Here's How to Get YOUR Big Idea to Market

1. Write down your idea, and note the date.
2. Do your homework. Know the market for your product.
3. Perform a preliminary patent search at [www.uspto.gov](http://www.uspto.gov).
4. Refine the product idea. Use your market knowledge.
5. Develop a prototype and refine a functional design.
6. Research manufacturing options, including costs, materials, and challenges.
7. Test-market the product: Will consumers buy it, and how much will they pay for it?
8. Protect your idea: Apply for a patent.
9. Decide whether to manufacture and sell the product yourself or pursue a licensing strategy.
10. Now the work begins: Sell, sell, sell!

(Reprinted with permission of [www.mominventors.com](http://www.mominventors.com). The full nine-page report, “10 Steps to Inventing: The Mom Inventors Road Map.” is available at [www.mominventors.com](http://www.mominventors.com). Click on the What's New link.)

whole other level.”

Any tips for other couples wanting to do this? “In a family-run business, the roles have to be completely defined. I do product development, building the moms' community, and I am working on a book, “The Mom Inventors Handbook,” to be published by McGraw Hill in the fall. Brad focuses on sales and finance.” He's obviously doing something right, because the products—now in Longs drugstores, Right Start, and other retail outlets—are selling like hot-cakes.

### The ‘Mom Invented’ Stamp of Approval

“It is so gratifying to see your products in the store,” says Monosoff. “The company has evolved. Now we license other mom-invented products under the ‘Mom Invented’ label. I'm thrilled by the response. It's been phenomenal.” Many moms have come to her after seeing the company featured on TV and in newspapers. She reviews hundreds of submissions before selecting the ones that will get the “Mom Invented” seal of approval. To emphasize that these products are made by and for moms, the packaging of each product selected carries a photo and the first name of its Mom Inventor.

What sort of invention qualifies as a Mom-Invented brand? “I'm looking for simple items that provide a solution to a problem,” explains Monosoff. “More complicated ideas are funneled to larger companies” with which Monosoff has developed a relationship—companies that trust her network and her judgment. “I want any mom to be able to do this. Where people often get hung up is paying for the patent, but selling is the hardest part.”

Mom Inventors has three problem-solving items in production now, and “a couple more in the funnel.” Each year in May, they debut their products at the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association. In addition to traditional retail outlets, the products are featured in a Mom-invented eBay store ([www.mominventors.com/ebaystore/ebay\\_store.htm](http://www.mominventors.com/ebaystore/ebay_store.htm)), where mom inventors who already have an inventory of their products are invited to list them for sale.

The inventor who comes to her for advice has choices, too. Monosoff can take a product all the way from concept through design and manufacturing, to packaging, market research, and sales, as she did with Shoe Clues, a set of stickers to help kids figure out which is the left and which is the

right shoe. In this case, the Mom Inventor receives a royalty, or percentage, of the sales. Or, as was the case with another Mom-Invented product, Good Bites—a cookie-cutter-type implement that cuts the sandwich and removes the crust from the bread in one motion—Monosoff only provided marketing support, because the inventor had already developed the product, acquired three patents, and manufactured 4,000 units before she signed up with Mom Inventors. Monosoff's company, as a result, took a much smaller royalty fee.



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### One Too Many Peanut Butter Sandwiches!

Jennifer Sarihan, inventor of Good Bites, says she is “very happy” with Mom Inventors. Calling herself “a mom from a small town in Ohio,” Sarihan shyly talks about the evolution of her product. “I had just made too many peanut butter sandwiches. I have three children, and they eat lots of sandwiches, but I had to cut all that crust off. I thought, ‘There needs to be a utensil that does it in one shot.’ My husband, a dentist, backed me; the first prototype was made from dental molding.” Having done the initial manufacturing herself, she had the product “sitting in the garage for nine months. I tried the eBay thing, but it just wasn’t moving. I tried contacting retail stores, but I was stuck.”

After seeing Monosoff on *The View*, Sarihan e-mailed her. “She’s on the ball,

aggressive, eager to get going,” she says of Monosoff. The initial e-mail to final transaction took a total of two months. Product that was languishing in her garage is now moving out of the stores. Recently, Sarihan flew to California for a television appearance with Monosoff. “I’m from Ohio. It was my first time in California. I took a girlfriend with me. NBC was great!” this neophyte inventor bumbles.

### Two More Mothers of Invention

Amy Bergin, inventor of the Couponizer, a product that helps busy moms maximize their coupon savings, was a corporate training analyst for Coca Cola in Georgia before she became a Mom Inventor—almost by necessity. “I married later,” she says. “I had always had, and spent, my own money. And I was good at it! I really didn’t think through what it would be like having a child, being at home, with only one provider. I was still spending money, really motivated to buy diapers and outfits. But my husband was really stressed. I was worried that the financial battle would break up our marriage.” Bergin decided to put her corporate organizational skills to good use, managing the household budget.

“I started looking at coupons,” she says. “I had always thought coupons were more trouble than they were worth, but I got really good at it. I made it fun. I was spending much less and was much more disciplined. I became really good at grocery shopping.” Existing products for managing the reams and reams of coupons she was collecting were, in her opinion, “cheap and tended to fall apart, so I used my background in training courses to develop my own set of materials.” The first Couponizer was a photo album, which she made and gave as a gift. Since then, it’s evolved into a much more sophisticated tool to keep the household saver on track.



As with Monosoff’s, Bergin’s business, too, soon became a family affair. “My husband had finished his MBA in finance, and my heart was really in the Mom crowd. So we said ‘Let’s make a go of it! We can at least say we tried.’ He is an engineer, so we worked from his left brain and my right brain, leveraging each other’s strengths on the same team.” They came up with the name, got the patent, the trademark, created a Web site ([www.couponizer.com](http://www.couponizer.com)), and then joined the Mom Invented eBay store. Today, Bergin produces a newsletter called “The Dotted Line,” where she shares more tools and advice to make saving a science. She is in the final stages of QVC’s rigorous training program and will present the Couponizer for sale on the cable channel later this year. And soon she plans to launch the Couponizer Club to keep subscribers aware of the newest and best savings out there.

Her advice to other wannabe Mom Inventors: “Nothing is impossible,” she says. “First, you need a good idea, but it’s impossible to sustain unless you are passionate about it. It has to be an extension of you. If it were all to end tomorrow, it’s been a great ride. It can’t be just about the money. It has to be so much bigger. Above all, have the confidence to keep going.”

### The Winning Formula: An Entrepreneur Who Invents Her Own Product

As you can see, Monosoff’s enthusiasm is catching. What’s next for Mom Inventors? With all that positive energy, expect more

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great and useful products to hit the market, bearing the Mom-Invented imprimatur, but that’s not all. On a mission to empower other moms, Monosoff’s newest idea is a series of virtual teleseminars, in the testing stages right now. Here’s how it will work: For a \$35 charge, an inventing mom can dial into a bridge line on a Saturday morning and hear a 20-minute lecture on topics related to inventing and then have “lots of time” for questions and answers. Calls will be limited to 20 participants, so that individual questions can be answered. Says Monosoff, “I even have a patent attorney who speaks English! He communicates clearly and effectively.”

Is she a born inventor? “No,” she says, “but it’s funny you should ask me that. As a kid, I lived three blocks from the beach, and people had to walk up this steep hill to get back to their cars. When I was 9 years old, I told my mom that I wanted to sell brownies and lemonade. I made so much money that a policeman kicked me off the corner. He walked up and asked how I was doing, so I showed him my box of money. He probably thought it would have a few dollars in it, but I had made \$300. ‘You can’t do this,’ he told me. ‘You need a license for that kind of money.’ So, no, I wasn’t an inventor, but I was always an entrepreneur.”

And an inventive one at that. □

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