But Wait, There's More!
The strange characters who descended on Washington to pitch the "Infomercial King," and how they fit into Obama's innovation narrative.

By Elizabeth Weingarten

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When President Obama praised America's genius for innovation in his State of the Union address last month, he was probably not talking about the Frankformer, a plastic mold that transforms a regular hot dog into a smiling hot dog man. But according to A. J. Khubani, the CEO of infomercial juggernaut TeleBrands and creator of the "As Seen on TV" logo, the Frankformer is precisely the kind of thing that makes America great, if not prosperous.

Khubani presided over a "pitch-a-thon" at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Friday, featuring 22 novice inventors who traveled from across the country to pitch their patented products. Khubani, who founded the company in 1983, described the event as a cross between American Idol and The Apprentice. Luckily, no one sang as they appealed to the judges in the club's Edward R. Murrow room.

One blond woman in a satin magenta shirt and stilettos presented seven inventions, most involving gift-wrapping. An older man demonstrated his creation: a light you can clip onto a watch (alas, the Flashlight Wristwatch already exists). And then there was the Frankformer, created by John Twerdok and Daniel Brodland, who met seven years ago at a youth camp in Pennsylvania and dreamed up their invention at a barbecue one day.

On Friday, Brodland, Twerdok, and the other 20 inventors had five minutes to pitch Khubani; Manish Israni, the vice president of market research; and Tommy Zarzecki, the company's official blogger. "We see some great, amazing stuff, and we see some convoluted, wacked-out stuff, too," said Zarzecki, who also said they've had several dozen pitch-a-thons since 2008. One inventor, he recalls, refused to leave even after the panel gave her invention—a hook for women's purses, intended to keep them attached to clothing—a thumbs down. "She cried..."
her eyes out in the conference room," Zarzecki recalled.

That didn't happen Friday. Brodland and Twerdok began their pitch with some impressive statistics ($1.6 billion was spent in 2010 on hot dogs in the United States; 818 are consumed each minute). Then they placed a hot dog in their colorful plastic mold, pressed it, and put it in the microwave. "As you're cooking it, the arms and legs slowly spread open, the eyes widen, and a big smile comes over his face," Twerdok said.

It's unlikely inventions like these can lead the American economy out of its post-recessionary malaise. The problem is that not all inventions are innovative—and an innovation isn't always an invention.

Of course, the Frankformer qualifies as an invention. It has a patent, and it's technically "new." Whether it's innovative will be determined by the market. According to Joshua Schuler, the executive director of the Lemelson-MIT Program for inventors, an invention becomes an innovation when it thrives in the marketplace. "As Seen on TV" broadcasts inventions to the public so they can become innovations. Unlike an invention, an innovation can also involve the improvement or alteration of an existing product, instead of something novel.

Whatever you call them, the products pitched on Friday share one characteristic: the unbridled enthusiasm of their inventors. Actually, enthusiasm may be an understatement. Passion? Devotion? Obsession?

Take Richard Rosenberg, who approached me in the hallway outside the conference room. "We're going to blow your mind," Rosenberg told me. Along with Kenny Weinstein, he was pitching an eco-friendly spray to eliminate bed bugs. He pulled out an orange tube with little bugs inside.

"Bed bugs," Rosenberg confirmed. "They're alive and well with eggs and larvae." I took a few steps back. "They're secure, I promise."

Weinstein, a real estate owner and...
developer in New Jersey, began researching bed bug extermination to wipe out an infestation in his properties. He sprayed the bottle next to me.

"Smell it!" he said.

Tentatively, I sniffed. They assured me it is 100 percent nontoxic—except to bed bugs. When Weinstein and Rosenberg pitched, the panelists were intrigued but skeptical, wanting to see more research.

Which raises the question: How does one determine the viability of an invention before it is released into the market?

Jacob Goldenberg, a professor of marketing at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a visiting professor at Columbia University, has coded a kind of DNA for successful inventions. After studying a year's worth of new product launches, Goldenberg developed a classification system to predict the potential success of a new product. He found the same five patterns embedded in every watershed invention. A marketable product will adhere to at least one of these patterns. Drew Boyd, an innovation expert and assistant marketing professor at the University of Cincinnati, is working on a book with Goldenberg about the patterns. He told me how each one works.

The first is subtraction—the removal of part of a previous invention. For example, an ATM is a successful invention because it subtracts the bank teller. Multiplication is the second pattern, and it describes an invention with a component copied to serve some alternate purpose. Example: the digital camera's additional flash to prevent "red-eye." A TV remote exemplifies the third pattern: division. It's a product that has been physically divided, or separated, from the original; the remote was "divided" off of the TV. The fourth pattern, task unification, involves saddling a product with an additional job unrelated to its original function. The iPhone is the quintessential task unifier. Finally, Boyd explained why one of the greatest inventions of all—the happy hour—is successful. It uses the fifth pattern: attribute dependency, which is an invention with correlating or dependent characteristics. During happy


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hour, the price of drinks is dependent on what time of day it is.

"At the end of the day, if you look at the product on the merits of whether it follows one of these five patterns, that should be how you predict success of whether it will endure the market," Boyd said.

At the end of the pitch-a-thon, I asked Rosenberg whether he had watched the State of the Union address. He hadn't. But the need to innovate, to him, seemed like a pretty obvious point to make. "That's what keeps us going, isn't it?" he said.

As for Khubani, he didn't give anyone a "yes" on Friday—meaning that TeleBrands would produce and market the product—though he did give a lot of "nos." He planned to give the inventors a definitive answer this week. And for him, the question of how to use Americans' creativity to improve the economy is not merely theoretical. Submissions to the TeleBrands Web site have spiked since 2008, he said—showing that Americans remain inventive, even if the economy is not as innovative as the Washington policymakers would like.

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