Patent lawyer who loves inventing

MARCH 23, 2015 PUBLISHED AT 5:00 AM
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Q: You recently invented a "smart" mosquito trap which is on trial in public areas. It is particularly important since dengue fever is endemic in Singapore and a 53- year-old died from it just last month. Can you tell me about it?

My invention was to provide an electronic system that can turn any available mosquito trap into a 24/7 surveyed trap which sends out alarms even if there is a failure in any component.

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If this happens I can immediately disable the trap and run a maintenance service on it, keeping the labour needed to a minimum.

This also turns the smart ovitrap into a commercially viable and secure product.

Q: You have also come up with many other devices - of which about 10 are patented. What are some of them?

I have been discovering and inventing my whole lifetime: I still remember it like it was yesterday - at the age of three, I discovered electricity by inserting two knitting needles into a wall socket. I have tried out many things. I believe that I was a handful for my parents.

One of the more spectacular inventions was a sensor for the sport of fencing, which I invented about 25 years ago. It makes obsolete the long electric wires attached to the back of the fencers, and the central evaluation unit which indicates which one of the two fencers hits first. It made it much easier for the fencers. Without the cable, you can turn yourself around more easily when fencing, for instance.

The hit sensor was good only for training purposes because it was not reliable enough, so it ultimately did not succeed in the very small market.

I also invented a foldable kitchen balance in 1990, my first potential mass product. I wanted to have a foldable balance to better count calories when I was on a business trip and I wanted a balance that I could fold up and take with me to a restaurant. But then the German balance company Soehnle, which had been keen on my product, was sold and the purchaser Leifheit decided to not market it.

Q.What inspires your inventions?

They always have their roots in problems that I personally become aware of. For example, I used to fence in university and that was what led to the fencing hit sensor.

But inventing is only one side of the coin. The other more important side is to turn the invention into a product that is sold successfully.

What I have recognised early the hard way is that it is easy to invent something new, but it is only sweat, capital and the right marketing that will transform an invention into a successful business.

I often meet inventors who think that their patent alone will make them rich. This is simply not the case.

I believe that a patent is worth nothing without a company that makes and sells the patented product. And it is best if the inventor works for that company.

Q:Have any of your devices been sold in the mass market?

They never made it beyond the prototype, but this is not unusual. What I can tell you from my professional background as a patent lawyer is that, as far as a product is concerned, not even one of hundreds of inventions becomes a profitable product.

Q: So what keeps you going?

I realised it's much more useful for me to help companies take the product from its prototype status to one that is sold in the market, than to become a manufacturer myself.

Before I became a patent lawyer at the age of 29, I asked myself, what do I want to do? Do I want to become a manufacturer? If yes, then what?

Or do I use my knowledge in these technical areas to support companies to transform their ideas into products and get money for that? I believe this is

Today I can sometimes recognise my old inventions in actual products, such as the portable barcode readers used for tracking a security guard's movements. The guards scan each barcode along their route to prove they're making their rounds.

I thought of this solution back in 1988 when mechanical recording clocks were still used. But even if I had filed a patent then, it would now have expired. A patent lasts only 20 years so I am not feeling bitter at all. This is a normal part of an inventor's life.

Inventing is innovating, which is a creative activity, similar to painting a picture, writing a music piece or cooking a dish. Ask an artist, he would answer in the same way.

Of course it is much nicer if the audience is applauding loudly or if the artwork or the final product becomes a success, but this is not the ultimate goal.

After I have solved a problem, I sit down and enjoy the result, already thinking about further improvements to my innovation. That is the main point and the ultimate goal when I set off on solving a specific problem.

Q:You are currently working on an electric bicycle. What do you hope it can be used for?

This project is about having an electric "last-mile taxi" to serve the area around MRT stations and the surrounding neighbourhood.

A few years back, I was an interim director of an electric bike company and during that time I provided a prototype of a modern three-wheeler cargo bicycle with hydraulic disc brakes and a strong battery-driven electric motor with a range of 40km.

My plan is to convert it into a neat one-passenger taxi which is driven by taxi drivers who do not want to incur a high daily vehicle rent, but still want to generate a decent income.

I am aiming at a daily rent of only $30 so that the larger parts of the collected fares go into the cabby's pocket. Talks are currently going on with my alma mater, the Technical University of Munich - which has a campus in Singapore - to put this project into practice here. Q: You were originally from Germany. Why did you decide to move to Singapore and become a Singaporean?

I moved to Singapore in 2001. It was Sept 12, 2001, and 9/11 struck just a few hours before I boarded the flight in Munich.

In the first few years, my family and I flew back and forth until we decided in March 2005 to give up our house in Germany.

I realised in 1999 that the euro would be forced into place, abolishing the Deutsche mark. One could already tell that this experiment would ultimately be a failure, which has been proven correct because you can see what is currently going on in the euro zone.

So I travelled to about 30 countries to find an appropriate place to establish my law firm.

Four locations were left in the end, with Singapore and Hong Kong sharing top places on my list.

I left the final decision to my wife, who went for Singapore, and I have been very happy with her choice.

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This article was first published on March 22, 2015.
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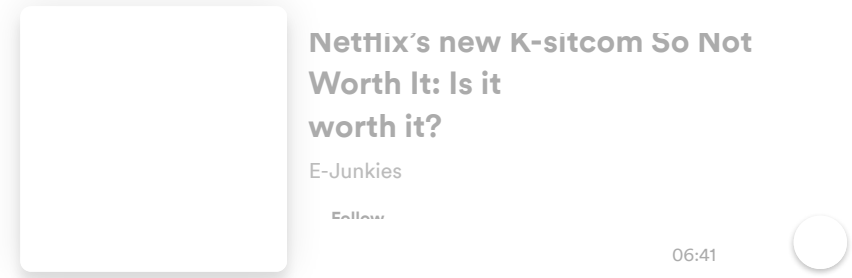

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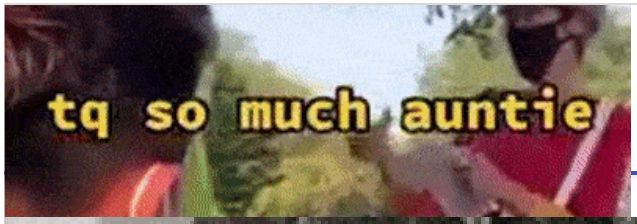

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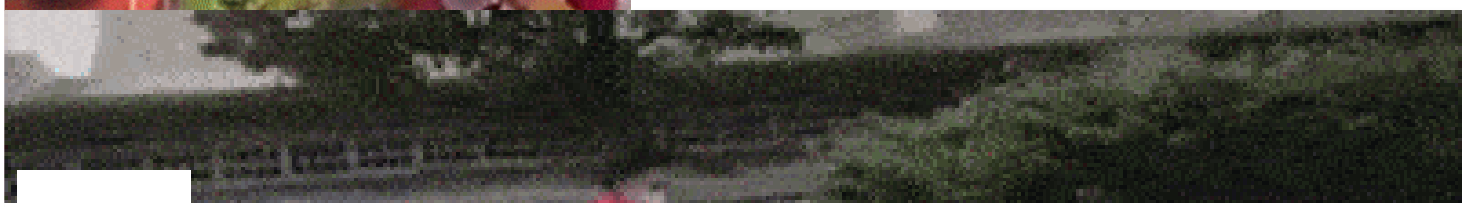

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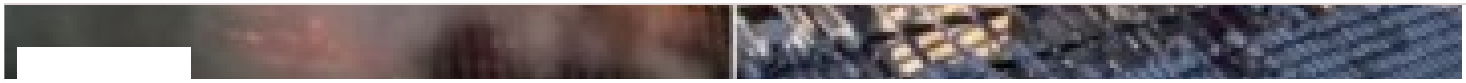

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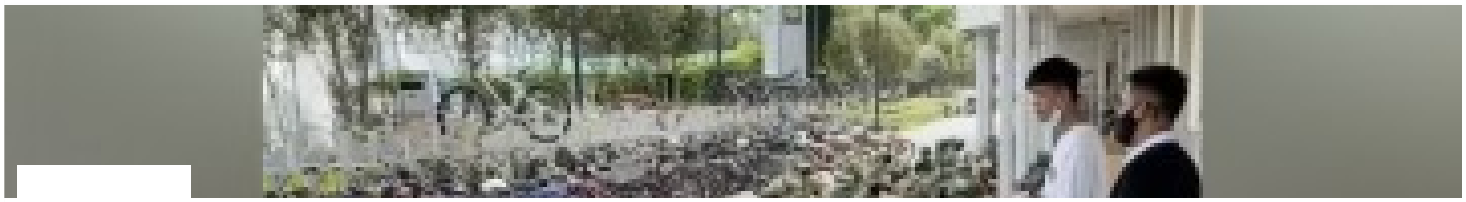

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