

# Expanding the boundaries of an information service

The British Library's meetings with inventors

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*'commercializing and protecting an invention is a complicated process and it is very easy for first timers to get overwhelmed'*

## Abstract

The range of interesting jobs, and accompanying job titles, in the information world has increased dramatically. In this issue's column we hear from the British Library's first Inventor in Residence about the work he does to encourage innovation.

**Keywords:** commercialization, ideas, innovation, inventors, patents, patent search, production

The British Library's Business and IP Centre aims to help its customers start, run and grow their businesses. A core role is to support inventors as they seek to protect and take forward their inventions. In his role as the first ever Inventor in Residence at The British Library, Mark is available to meet with inventors to offer impartial advice. The experience of meeting literally hundreds of inventors individually has enabled Mark to develop an approach to inventor support that works. Some of his good practice is highly relevant to other information service operations as highlighted in the following interview. To date Mark has met with nearly 250 inventors.

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## Building trust with the inventor

During these free one-to-one confidential hour-long meetings (known as 'Ask the Expert') I make a big effort to be consistent in my approach and advice. Right at the beginning of the meeting I make it clear that I am not here to be judgemental. As an inventor I have had experience of instant judgements and

know how upsetting it can be. I see my role as a nurturing one, helping them to benefit from my hard won experiences, both good and bad. I also assure them that I am not worried by the standard they are currently at. In fact the earlier they come to me with their idea, the more I can help point them in the right direction. There is currently very little support for early stage inventors elsewhere, that is why I do it.

Commercializing and protecting an invention is a complicated process, and it is very easy for first timers to get overwhelmed. Understandably, many of the people I meet have a 'media-induced paranoia' about having their idea stolen. So the opportunity to talk freely about their idea in a safe environment is very important. It is all confidential, but I am always prepared to sign a confidentiality agreement to reinforce their sense of security. I also make sure not to make notes during the meeting.

## Avoiding sharks

Many early stage inventors (when at their most vulnerable and naive) fall in with the wrong kind of people or organizations who promise to help, but fleece them and cause untold damage. The UK Intellectual Property Office (UKIPO) specifically warns people about falling into the hands of unscrupulous Patent Promotion Agents, but it still happens all too often.

In contrast to this exploitative relationship, I aim for a supportive one where I look to see how I can add value to their invention. I look at the idea first, because if that is not sound it does not matter how well they do everything else, it will fail.

## Reality testing: What are the chances of success?

I get my visitors to think hard about how good their idea actually is. Is it really the best solution to the problem they have identified? Have they had a professional patent search carried out, checked the trade press and more widely on the internet? Have they kept looking for new developments since their original searches? I remind them of the hard truth that 98+ per cent of ideas have already been thought of, but not necessarily turned into commercial products.

Even if the idea is new and effective is it commercial? How many are they realistically likely to sell? How much more than the cost of making the product can they realistically sell it for? Will it make a profit?

Quite often I need to calm down my visitors who have been scarred by previous experiences. I give them an opportunity to let go and offload their worries. I then try to re-motivate them onto the next steps.

## Tact and diplomacy essential

I think it is important to express a view on the likely success of the inventions I am presented with, and in particular their viability for production, based on many years of manufacturing experience. However, I make sure I always express these opinions in a positive and sensitive way, for example 'I like it, but'. Even non-great ideas provide learning opportunities, which mean the inventor will be in a much stronger position when they come up with a brilliant one.

Many inventors have no intention of seeing their idea through to production, instead they want to license it, or sell outright, in the expectation of a large fee. I have to explain that this is extremely unlikely and almost never happens in reality. Instead the inventor has to take their idea as close to production (or into production) as they can before it becomes saleable. I sometimes suggest they bring in trusted business partners who can help take the idea to the market. I also explain some of my tips and tricks to help strengthen their hand when they do come to negotiate licensing deals. Inventors can be poor when dealing with business people, so I help them become more professional in their approach. I also warn them about the timescales involved, and how it usually takes three to four years (if not much longer) to make money from an invention.

## Understand the customer

As an inventor myself I understand how these ideas are like babies to inventors. They really do feel that passionately about them, enough to keep them awake at night. However, as with most new parents these inventors can have a severe case of rose-tinted-glasses and cannot see just how ugly their 'baby' is (obviously

not all babies). I suppose if they were able to be completely objective about their idea they might not have the necessary drive to overcome the many obstacles they will find in their way.

## **Network with others**

Finally, I recommend they go to inventors clubs as a safe haven and a place to get ongoing practical advice

and support from likeminded inventors. We inventors 'need to get out more'!

### **References**

UK IPO UK intellectual Property Office, <http://www.ipo.gov.uk>

British Library. [www.bl.uk/bipc](http://www.bl.uk/bipc)