

From Dental Floss to Guitar Strings

**SUCCESSFUL
GRASSROOTS
PRODUCT
LAUNCHES**



JOHN SPENCER, JR.

Part 1 is a memoir and features the launch stories of leading selling GLIDE® Floss and ELIXIR® Guitar Strings. Part 2 is a fresh look at critical lessons learned in launching products to improve the likelihood of success.

**From Dental Floss To Guitar Strings:
Successful Grassroots Product Launches**

By John Spencer, Jr.

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JOHN SPENCER, JR.

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Introduction

You have an idea for a new product.

Great! Every success story begins with an idea.

Grassroots product launches work.

What should you do now?

I suggest you develop and manufacture a product from your idea that the customer values and execute an inspired grassroots product launch plan. Grassroots is code for (1) not having a massive budget to hire dozens of people or (2) launching your new product with a Super Bowl ad. Grassroots marketing is educating select people about your product's benefits to create buzz and sustainable customer demand. Grassroots marketing sounds easy, but it takes planning, persistence, and trust that you have solved the puzzle of your grassroots product launch.

I can help you.

Reading this book can help you and your team increase your chance of successfully launching a new product with a limited budget.

The consensus is that less than 20% of new products make money, which means at least 80% fail. An experienced gambler wins 45% of the time, and anyone can win 35% of the time by picking the favorite horse at the track. Considering these statistics, launching new products seems riskier than gambling, doesn't it? A professional gambler works hard to

improve the winning percentage by studying the games, understanding the odds, and playing to a plan. You must think along the same lines to improve your odds of successfully launching a new product.

I have lived and breathed the development and successful launch of disruptive and high-value consumer products in a high-technology company. My goal in telling these stories is for you to learn from my firsthand experience and look at the product launch game from a new perspective.

Stop! Are you passionate?

Success requires a passion for your product and a commitment to action. You must also be lucky. But luck is often simply attitude and hard work. Do not let the scoundrels get you down; believe in yourself and your team members. If you begin a project with failure as an option, you will fail. It is confidence, not arrogance, to believe you will win. Finally, balance this passion with objectivity.

What is in this book?

Part 1 is a memoir and features my stories of leading successful consumer product launches featuring grassroots marketing.

The first story is the development and launch of GLIDE Floss, the top-selling dental floss. It is a “David and Goliath” story that begins and ends with the author’s firing. GLIDE Floss demonstrates how a great idea with a brilliant grassroots marketing plan can disrupt a company and the market and result in commercial success.

The GLIDE Floss story may not make sense to many people who have worked for corporations. How did an engineer and manufacturing plant manager with no business experience lead a new and disruptive business launch? Lesson 5, Leadership and Teams, describes W. L. Gore & Associates, Inc., a great company that allows Associates maximum freedom to grow and learn. I am a beneficiary of Gore's unique culture and the inspirational leadership of Ritchie Snyder.

The next story is about ELIXIR Strings, the top-selling acoustic guitar string. ELIXIR Strings was a complex product to develop, and the odds of commercial success were low. ELIXIR Strings is the story of an exceptional team coming together to overcome significant product, pricing, and market obstacles. Grassroots marketing and a disciplined sales strategy won the day.

Part 2 is a fresh look at critical lessons learned in launching new products and how you can improve your chances of achieving grassroots success.

I discuss six lessons in launching new products that will improve your odds of business success. New products are a puzzle, but you must simultaneously work on multiple pieces of the puzzle for success. Unfortunately, many engineers focus solely on product specifications, and they are like the dog who catches the car it has been chasing with no idea what to do once the product works.

Launching new products is exciting, and you will build relationships with people that will last a lifetime. But launches are also challenging, nerve-wracking, and

overwhelming. Big mistakes can be ruinous, but I encourage small mistakes to test and learn. No one remembers small mistakes. I will help you prioritize the many necessary actions for you to have fun and to triumph. There are no guarantees for success, but you can almost guarantee failure if you are not prepared.

Part 2 lessons include framing the product value statement, strategic planning, pricing, grassroots marketing and sales, leadership and teams, and financial planning.

Do you want to succeed?

Of course, you want to succeed, and success always beats failure. I know this from personal experience. Remember, a product is just an idea until you have profitable sales and loyal customers. It is not easy. If it were, anyone could do it. Believe in yourself and think “grassroots.”

Thanks.

John S.

Bucktown Grand Slam

Buchanan, Michigan

Part 2:
Six Lessons in Launching New Products

**A fresh look at six lessons learned in launching
new products and how you can improve your
chances of achieving grassroots business
success.**

Lesson 1. The Product

An Easy Lesson

Lesson 1—the product is everything.

Nothing else matters if your customer does not value your offering. Forget business plans, pricing, grassroots marketing, sales, building a team, and financial goals if your product does not perform as promised.

I am old school and believe Dr. W. Edwards Demming had it right. From the beginning, you must engineer quality in your product to create customer loyalty. You must be objective, which can be challenging when the product is not cooperating. As mentioned, the customer, not you, decides if you have a valuable product.

The product is your child, and you have the responsibility to develop this toddler.

The Idea

Every product begins with an idea. I wish I had a dime for every product idea that never became a successful product. I would have lots of dimes. I define a successful new product as making a reasonable profit. Product launches are a marathon, not a sprint. It takes me three to five years to come up with an idea, develop the product, build manufacturing capability, launch, and achieve product success.

I have witnessed product champions discuss a product idea as if it were a commercial product. GLIDE Floss was an idea on a chalkboard in Ritchie Snyder's office, and it had been an

idea for over twenty years. The preferred fiber denier was uncertain, and the best method to improve floss grip was undecided. Fiber width control and fibrillation were a challenge, and a floss dispenser did not exist. Dave Myers had the idea of an improved coated guitar string. Dave and other expert engineers and scientists worked for two years to make the string sound great and confirm long-lasting musical life.

I enjoy brainstorming product ideas and find there is no shortage of new product concepts. It is exhilarating to commit to transforming an idea into a valuable product. All things are possible when your new product is just an idea.

Innovation

Ideas are the beginning of innovation, and most ideas solve a problem. Conventional dental floss shreds and snaps into gums. Traditional guitar strings sound great for a short time before contamination and corrosion progressively destroy the guitar's tone. GLIDE Floss and ELIXIR Strings solved these problems. Innovation can be as simple as affixing a functional key ring or digital-friendly pocket in the design of a jacket.

Innovation requires a culture of disruption, unconventional thinking, and freedom to fail.

A culture of creativity is a tall task, even in an entrepreneurial and technology company like Gore. Everyone likes innovation, but corporate bureaucracy, lousy managers, and personalities destroy new ideas and creativity. Dave Myers is the most creative person I know. I recently discussed idea generation with Dave, and he gave me a good observation of poor managers he has encountered. "Managers have control

when they say no, and there is no power in the word yes.” Managers tend to destroy innovation. Leaders have the responsibility to energize innovation. Celebrate the problem-solver and protect the person from the organization.

Product innovation never ends. ELIXIR Strings is a great product, but there were several times it would have been easy to quit, with words like “We gave it our all.” But the team never stopped innovating. Improvements in film technology and the manufacturing process by talented engineers and scientists resulted in a guitar string with consistent bright sound with extended musical life. I noticed from elixirstrings.com that Gore offers phosphor bronze acoustic strings, 80/20 bronze acoustic strings, and a new electric guitar string featuring OPTIWEB® coating. Wow. Hats off to the current ELIXIR Strings team for continued innovation.

GLIDE Floss was not a piece of cake. Fiber technology had been around for twenty years. Still, no one had developed a fiber specification for a preferred dental floss, a light wax coating for grip, and an innovative dispenser that dental hygienists and consumers would purchase. I am proud of Patent US5518012A—Expanded PTFE floss material and method of making same—that I worked on with two exceptional engineers, John Dolan and Ray Minor. I had settled on an 1150 denier fiber after testing denier preference from 800 to 1250 denier with people who floss. Still, the fiber’s width was controlled by folding before the spooling process. As a result, the width varied, and at times, the fold looked shabby. There was another challenge. The fibers team believed the thin edges of the fiber resulted in fibrillation.

Fibrillation is different than shredding. Dental floss shredding happens when floss breaks off between teeth, whereas fibrillation is the fiber's splitting to form separate continuous fibers. The fiber folding before spooling also increased the floss's thickness, and inconsistencies might impact optimal cleaning. It was rare, but the fiber could unfold during use. The invention resulted in an expanded PTFE dental floss with uniform dimensions. Perfecting the manufacture of fiber for dental floss is innovation, and we did not fall into the trap of "good enough." We launched GLIDE Floss with a folded fiber and transitioned to a superior fiber about one year later.

I worked on a failed project I call "The Barn Coat" that is all about innovation, with the ultimate challenge to (1) create an active lifestyle technology apparel collection and (2) reinvent an established outerwear value chain. Our first task was to create a small lifestyle apparel collection, and we had several terrific designs. The GORE-TEX Classic Jacket for men and women was relatively simple and weighed just a little more than an apple, with an adjustable hood. I liked the versatile GORE-TEX Sierra Jacket design for women. Design features included five pockets, side gussets for a comfortable fit, a gusset key pocket, underarm zippers, and a foldaway adjustable hood. It was great for day hiking, walking, cycling, or work for \$199. A less expensive alternative was the Women's GORE-TEX Santa Fe jacket featuring an asymmetric front zipper and "digital friendly" inside pockets for \$149. It was our first collection, and we did have a couple of misses. For example, people like the idea of a 3-in-1 jacket, but not the reality. A 3-in-1 jacket is (1) a GORE-TEX shell jacket with a fleece lining for cold weather, (2) a removable

liner leaving just a shell jacket, and (3) the liner as a fleece jacket. Sounds good, but not a winner. It was just too much trouble to unzip and zip liners. Always dream with your eyes wide open.

It is difficult to predict success when an innovator comes up with an idea. Leadership would have laughed at me if I had forecasted actual sales of GLIDE Floss. Dave Myers did not know if ELIXIR Strings would be a success when he first had the idea of a better guitar string. I had high hopes for a GORE-TEX and WINDSTOPPER lifestyle apparel collection. This project failed, and I think about this lost opportunity nearly every day. If you are in a launch team, be optimistic and work hard every day to achieve success. Attitude is critical in the launch of a new product.

One lesson carved in stone is never innovate with a customer. Never! You ask for trouble because no one will remember who came up with a good idea. If you and your customer co-own the intellectual property, you will likely have difficulty expanding the use beyond the single customer co-owner. What if the customer sells their rights to the IP? Talk with customers about their problems and preferences, and then return to your offices, labs, and shops to work on solutions.

I like a robust product development funnel. There was no shortage of consumer product ideas at Gore, and I listed every concept as they happened. Many ideas did not proceed far in product development because the technology was outside Gore's experience, or the idea was not superior to alternatives. Some ideas deserved to have been developed into successful

products but did not have leadership support. There is never enough money to do everything, and new project investments must be prioritized. Sometimes the answer is, “No.”

Passion for your new idea is required unless it negatively impacts your judgment. Personal bias can happen when you are the customer of your product. There is a tendency to set specifications to suit your personal preferences. I do not like GLIDE Floss, and I did not play guitar when I worked on ELIXIR Strings. I listened more closely to hygienists and musicians during the development of floss and guitar strings. I love GORE-TEX and WINDSTOPPER apparel, and it is a superior technology. It is tough to admit, but my personal preferences biased garment styles, colors, and even sizing in “The Barn Coat” story. A person is more likely to innovate when they have an open mind. The apparel collection might have been different and better if I were not such a fan of GORE-TEX and WINDSTOPPER fabric technology.

Innovation must go far beyond new products in a launch. I contributed to and witnessed exceptional advances in manufacturing efficiencies over the years. Marketing offers limitless opportunities to experiment with new ideas and assess the impact on sales. My most innovative idea was my proposal for Gore to sell GLIDE Floss, a branded consumer product, in drugstores, grocery stores, and to mass merchants with a grassroots marketing and sales model. The conventional model at Gore was to sell a component fiber product to a consumer products company. Five years later, Gore leadership had no concern about launching a branded guitar string in retail.

One challenge in a new launch is job security and recognition for the early innovators of the new product. How many startup team members who develop and launch a product are with the business five years later? I have never seen a study, but my opinion is not many. Managers arrive when they see a profitable new business and take over. Removing the innovators from a successful team after three to five years of uncertainty and hard work must be accomplished with sensitivity and proper reward for the startup's success. Jeannie Guthrie and I had moved on from ELIXIR Strings to work in the Fabrics Division. Leadership showed up and announced a move of ELIXIR Strings manufacturing from Flagstaff to the east coast, and the team that created the business was assigned new jobs. It seemed to me that management was satisfied that startup team members did not lose their jobs. Were the new jobs enjoyable, fulfilling, and with the same responsibility? It is just my opinion, but the assigned jobs were not as exciting. I believe moving the guitar strings product manufacturing was the correct business decision. Still, leaders were not sensitive to the people who had given their heart and soul to build ELIXIR Strings, and the change was demoralizing to the innovators.

The following is my Top 10 list that limits innovation in a company:

1. **Managers versus Leaders.** Managers prefer to manage, not lead, and my experience is that managers are the #1 reason for low morale and lack of innovation in an organization. The worst managers believe they are the most intelligent person in the room, and the organization needs

their brilliance to make the tough calls. Incremental change is standard and then positioned as creative thinking. Managers have power, and they will not likely receive substantive feedback that they are destroying innovation. Inspirational leaders embrace innovation and protect the innovators from corporate bureaucracy and the challenges of the status quo.

2. Organizational Resistance. Most people do not like change, and innovation can disrupt the status quo in a business. Status quo is a particular challenge in (1) existing businesses and (2) shortly after a new product achieves success. The innovator is perceived as too disruptive and positioned as a poor team player. Have you heard the line, “This is the way we do things”? The way we do things is organizational resistance.

3. Protecting Existing Business. Most managers and team members are more worried about protecting existing sales and business models than growing new sales, which can be true even when sales are declining. A dying business not committed to change demonstrates absolute loyalty to the status quo. I have attended thousands of monthly business reviews over the years. It frustrates me that a monthly discussion of inventory receives much more attention than new products and ideas. If innovation is not a consistent agenda item in ongoing business reviews, it is not a priority. Leadership can be more loyal to the existing business.

4. Embracing Process Over Results. I am a fan of project tools that help you focus and go faster. Unfortunately, some project tools or business reviews can be barriers to progress by requiring absurd activity to proceed to the next “gate” or

“horizon event.” The process begins to wag the tail, rather than product development and testing, manufacturing, and building a grassroots marketing and sales plan. Years ago, I was required to use a new project tool that required answering questions about whether a product was “real” before making enough prototypes to understand challenges. It took almost eighteen months to make ELIXIR Strings “real,” and this fantastic product may not have proceeded beyond an alpha test using this lousy project tool. The tool also required early calculations of whether the new product was “worth it.” In the first weeks of a project, estimates of volume, pricing, distribution, and margins are wild guesses. This tool encouraged gaming financial assumptions to get permission to go to the next phase of the project. My experience is lousy managers embrace ineffective project tools.

5. Punishing Risk-Taking. Innovation and new ideas are risky and may fail. The key to failure is objectivity and learning to improve the odds of success in the next venture. Was the product flawed, pricing too high, grassroots marketing plan ineffective, or the business model just too disruptive for the organization? I failed in selling an overly disruptive business model in an established business after eighteen months of hard work. The result was being humiliated in front of my peers and my manager’s broad communication that I would never lead another product startup in the company. My big mistake or failure was communicating but not “connecting” with the leadership on the level of disruption. Eventually, I moved on to innovate in another company. How many people will take a risk in this environment?

6. Lack of Recognition of Innovators. Innovators may not receive the credit or positive attention they deserve. My experience is the better path in a corporate career, especially salary growth, is to manage an existing business than leading a new product launch. Even worse, managers of existing businesses show up like vultures to take over a new business once it is profitable and the innovator is left looking for work. Being an innovator can be a challenging career. I was labeled “a startup guy” and “Mr. Product Introduction.” It sounds like a compliment but being a startup guy means you never enjoy your new business’s success and ensure that it continues to innovate.

7. Fear of Failure or Making a Mistake. Not everyone enjoys ambiguity and the unknown of launching a new product and business. Launching an innovative product sounds fun but can quickly be overwhelming. For example, committing to your first sales forecast of a product and placing orders for materials and manufacturing equipment can be highly stressful. What if I make a mistake? I have watched projects take years to fail by slow-walking activity to be sure there are no mistakes. Then, of course, the project fails due to the error in slow-walking an action plan. Innovators must be willing to go fast and make small mistakes and learn from them.

8. Poor Execution. An excellent strategy for a new product will fail if you are not good at project execution. Most people do not want to admit poor execution, so the product, customer, or market are blamed. Some innovators are not good at managing details in launching a new product but

consistently develop new product ideas. The solution is to team up these innovators with process-focused people.

9. Low Morale and No Time to Innovate. If you are in a hostile work environment, innovation will suffer. Many team members will feel that nobody cares. Have you ever been in a job where daily responsibilities take more than 100% of your time? I have, and innovation stops in this environment. The goal becomes daily survival.

10. Innovators Are Not Trained to Sell Ideas. Successful innovators must sell their ideas internally and consistently reinforce the sales message for continued support by leadership. Innovators wrongly assume smart people will embrace new ideas and disruption. Many innovators are naïve and wrongly assume managers will be there to back them up. Training innovators on how to sell internal projects is a worthy investment.

Honorable mentions for innovation killers include micromanagement, suggestion boxes, limiting technology options, narrow business and technology models, too many experts who know better, fear of the unknown, and low operational agility.

It is much easier to kill innovation than to inspire innovation.

The solution to these ten challenges is inspirational leadership described in Lesson 5 – Leadership and Teams.

Product Value Statements

Bob Gore, the Gore company Chairman and CEO, was the master of clear, crisp product value statements.¹ Bob was customer-focused, and he wanted product descriptions to emphasize customer benefits. I think this obsession with the product, as championed by Bob, explains much of the Gore company's success.

It is not easy to write a product value statement early in a project. Gore is a technology company and focused on selling unique products. To establish "unique," Associates were encouraged to use the word "the only." I overthink this word because any new product competes with alternatives and copycats within a year or two. It is incredible how quickly people can copy an idea and develop a creative workaround for a patent.

I think the most compelling product value statements are under ten words, and you might have a page of footnotes to describe what a word means. So, for me, marketing positioning statements with footnote details make convincing product value statements.

I have made up the following product value statements for GLIDE Floss and ELIXIR Strings as examples.

¹ Gore refers to product concept statements. I struggled with the word concept since the concept should advance to an actual product as soon as possible. David Johns coined the phrase, "Product Value Statement," and I have borrowed this phrase with his permission.

Example 1: GLIDE Floss Product Value Statement. Easy to use¹ and clinically proven² dental floss that slides easily³ between teeth without shredding⁴.

¹ An application of light beeswax or microcrystalline wax coating to the fiber improves grip. The use of GLIDE Floss is the same as conventional dental floss, and the dispenser lens shows the quantity of floss in the dispenser.

² Clinical study completed by the State University of New York Dental School; earned the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance.

³ 1150 denier expanded PTFE fiber. The expansion process produces a microporous fibrous structure which gives the product its unique mechanical properties.

⁴ A monofilament fiber that does not shred like multifilament fiber.

An engineer might write:

“A dental floss comprising a porous PTFE fiber having a density of less than about 0.7 g/cc. The inventive floss is abrasion-resistant, grippable, and has a soft feel to the hands and a rough feel in the mouth. The floss is made by an extrusion process with non-contact heating during subsequent expansion with amorphous locking.”

I copied this text from a Gore dental floss patent claim, proving that patent applications may not be that helpful as a product value statement.

Example 2: ELIXIR Strings Product Value Statement. A coated¹ musical instrument² string³ available at leading music retailers⁴ delivering sound quality⁵ that lasts⁶.

¹ POLYWEB continuous coating serves as a protective barrier against tone-killing dirt and debris that builds up between the windings of a string and reduces wound string corrosion.

² Musical instruments include acoustic 6-string and 12-string guitars, electric guitar, electric bass guitar, mandolin, and banjo.

³ Strings are made by winding round metal wire around a round metal core wire, polishing, grinding (if ground wound), or pressing the exterior part of the winding (if it is a flat wound). Wound wire for acoustic guitar strings is 80/20 bronze metal which is 80% copper and 20% zinc. The wound wire for electric guitar strings is nickel.

⁴ Available from local music retailers (~4,000 total), leading chain music retailers, and Internet resellers.

⁵ Coated 80/20 acoustic string and electric strings sound like a new conventional guitar string after being played for three hours.

⁶ The continuous proprietary coating maintains consistent tone by preventing tone-killing dirt and debris from building up between the windings of a string and reduces wound string corrosion. See US Patent 5801319A.

Nearly every word of an efficient product value statement has a footnote to offer details and explanation. Continue to add details as manufacturing processes take shape, patents are filed and issued, and grassroots sales and marketing campaigns are created.

If regularly updated, the product value statement will help keep the team focused on the customer and the product features that deliver sustainable benefits.

An ongoing challenge is a product that has multiple customer benefits. Pick the most compelling advantage to the customer and focus on this message in your grassroots marketing plan. I had this challenge with ELIXIR Strings. ELIXIR Strings deliver great sound, but they also reduce unwanted fretboard noise, are comfortable, and seem to stay in tune better than conventional guitar strings. We focused on the key benefit, which is string sound and extended musical life.

I revise product value statements as I learn and introduce product improvements. Learning can be the product, the market, market segments, or customer preferences. Bob Gore was a master at doing research quickly, and I remember engaging with a technology team on a personal computer keyboard film protector. The team did a quick-and-dirty water resistance test and assessed whether the film interfered with the keyboard operation. It seemed to work. Bob heard about the idea and bought a package of plastic wrap at the grocery store. It also seemed to work, and we dropped the project with only a few hours invested. Our keyboard protector would never be the “only,” which is a lesson in failing fast with quick

prototypes. How many presidents of \$3B companies would hear about a product idea, go to the grocery store to buy plastic wrap, and let the team know the idea was a bust? Bob Gore was amazing.

The same guidance for product value statements applies if your “product” is a service. A few years ago, my wife, Pamela, and I offered to buy a bar in southwestern Michigan, and fortunately, our offer was low compared to another bid. Our idea was to remodel a failing bar into an intimate restaurant. The menu was simple, and entrées were \$15 to \$20 with a selective beer, wine, and mixed drink offering. Seating was limited to forty people. A golden rule was no tables next to the restrooms or kitchen. On weekends, a corner of the restaurant would feature a local musician on guitar or keyboards. Many of our ideas came from personal experience in dining at exceptional restaurants in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. There was no comparable restaurant in the region. Our product value statement was “The only intimate restaurant in southwestern Michigan that features cold drinks, warm hospitality, and the best filet and salmon regionally.” We called the restaurant “The Cooper Inn,” and the signage featured a German Shorthaired Pointer’s silhouette. The financial plan was fun to put together, and I learned how hard it is to make money running a restaurant. Lunch, at best, was break-even. We would make money with dinner and drinks. After the deal fell through, Pam and I did not pursue other options to open a small restaurant. We had several issues, including the difficulty in hiring an experienced and reliable general manager and the time available to make this venture a success. Who knows, maybe we dust off this business plan in

the future? It sounds like a special place for a nice meal. Building a product value statement for outstanding services is just like a product value statement for a great product.

Product Lifecycle

Everyone knows the product lifecycle.

It is typically a colored chart that plots sales versus time. The first stage is product development, a flat line with no revenue. The second stage is market development, where sales are relatively low but growing slowly. Now the fun begins with the third stage as sales take off rapidly. Rapid sales growth happens in real life for successful products. Now the product lifecycle story takes a sad turn. Stage four is market maturity. Demand is flat, and everyone knows flat sales are bad. But it gets worse. The final stage is sales decline and, worst case, the product's death.

At this point, most people are nodding in agreement, and yes, we have learned this in our Business 101 class. However, I think the product lifecycle's primary use is to protect lousy managers who do not know how to grow their business and have stopped innovating. The classic product example used by these weak managers is the buggy whip that declined in sales as automobile sales grew. Cars were around for more than twenty years before they became commonplace. Twenty years is a lot of time for buggy whip manufacturers to innovate and develop new products with their existing manufacturing capability. I agree with the product lifecycle, but I would insist a successful product line or business is a never-ending series of products that transition from development to decline. I wish

I had a dollar every time managers claim business sales are flat because the products are mature. Shame on you. After all, you stopped innovating.

You need to plan on investing 3% to 5% of sales going to R&D to develop a steady stream of new products. More on this in Lesson 6 – The Important Numbers. Not all products will be successful, so it is best to have multiple irons in the fire.

Intellectual Property

My best advice is to consult with a proven patent and trademark attorney to understand how to protect your intellectual property. This area of law is specialized and can lead to high costs and expensive mistakes if mismanaged.

If you have a unique product, you will likely want to file for a patent in all jurisdictions where you plan on selling the product. I was lucky that Gore employed patent attorneys who not only knew the patent process but were consultants on whether to apply for a patent. I have utility patents and design patents. A utility patent covers the invention of a new product, process, or machine and is enforceable for twenty years from the patent application filing date. Design patents are less costly than a utility patent to file and are enforceable for fifteen years from patent issuance. A design patent protects the exterior of a product.

The GLIDE Floss dispenser is an excellent example of a product with utility patent and design patents. The utility patent covers the invention of a lens that allows for easy viewing of the floss supply and serves as a post for the floss bobbin. In addition, there are two design patents, one with the

floss dispenser closed and one with the floss dispenser open showing the lens.

Be aware that you must pay the Patent and Trademark office maintenance fees for utility patents to keep the patent active. Design patents do not have a maintenance fee. Take care when you use an invention publicly the first time. You have twelve months to file for a patent in the United States. Foreign patent rights are far beyond my knowledge, but I understand some countries do not have a twelve-month grace period.

You will likely make some inventions when building a new manufacturing platform for the product. Generally, these inventions are not patented, so that details are not available to competitors. The preferred alternative is to keep the manufacturing invention a trade secret. You should establish process, training, and employee agreements to protect trade secrets from becoming public knowledge. A trade secret that becomes public knowledge means anyone can use your invention.

Trademarks can be confused with copyright. A trademark protects your brand name and logos, and a copyright protects an original artistic or literary work. For example, GLIDE Floss is a registered trademark. We would copyright an advertisement or brochure that explains all the great features. Always be sure that your brand can be a registered trademark.

Now, a counterargument against patents. A patent discloses how to make your product. Creative people will immediately conspire to develop workarounds if your claims

have value. How much time and money do you want to spend defending your patent? GLIDE Floss and ELIXIR Strings are patented, but companies worked around claims and launched competitive products within a year or two. Patents for GLIDE Floss and ELIXIR Strings are expired. Today, respected consumer brands and registered trademarks provide ongoing protection. There is a good argument that being first to market and building a powerful brand is more important and valuable than a patent's benefits.

I am suspicious of the claims in some patents. For example, a patent just issued when I committed to developing GLIDE Floss claimed expanded PTFE could only be coated with microcrystalline wax for improved grip. Note the word "only" and a specific mention in the issued patent that no other wax worked. My first action was to buy a sample of every wax available, including beeswax (animal-based), carnauba wax (plant-based), paraffin wax (petroleum-based), and microcrystalline wax (petroleum-based). I set up a simple fiber coating process in a laboratory using a hairdryer to melt the wax and pulled expanded PTFE fiber across the wax for a thin coating. Every wax worked fine. I launched GLIDE Floss using beeswax, not the more popular microcrystalline wax, to avoid conflict with the issued patent. What happened? The patent owner filed a lawsuit against Gore for patent infringement under the theory of doctrine of equivalents. The equivalents doctrine is an interesting legal rule that allows a patent holder to claim infringement even if the alleged infringement is not within the patent claim's scope but is "equivalent" to the patent claim. This rule prevents an infringer from stealing the benefit of a patented invention by making minor changes and

retaining the same functionality. The court quickly ruled there was no equivalence doctrine because the patent holder claimed that beeswax did not work, and only microcrystalline wax worked as a coating on expanded PTFE fiber. The patent was garbage and intended to block innovation. In the meantime, Gore had to pay lawyers and spend time in court defending against a patent claim that had no basis.

I end with my beginning suggestion. First, consult with a proven patent and trademark attorney to understand how you will cost-effectively protect your intellectual property.

Competition

I like competition. There is a story of a lawyer who settled in a small town and hung up her shingle. She was the first attorney in the village. After six months, she was ready to pack it up until a second lawyer moved to town, and there was suddenly more business than either could handle. I need to revise the beginning of this paragraph to be “I like competition if I have the best product.” Think about two restaurants in town. You can be average but be the preferred establishment if the other restaurant is terrible. I would never suggest anyone try to be “average.” Always strive to be “special.”

As mentioned above, GLIDE Floss had competition within months of our launch. The products worked but were not as good GLIDE Floss. The alternative floss products were part of an oral health care product portfolio that included higher dollar items like toothbrushes and toothpaste. Dental floss did not get top billing in marketing events or advertising, and the competition did not focus on dental hygienists for marketing.

There was a lack of focus. There were no clinical studies to prove the products worked and no ADA Seal of Acceptance. The fiber denier was too low, allowing lower costs since there were more feet per pound of fiber. Typical feedback from hygienists was, “I tried the competition, but you are so much better. We love GLIDE Floss.” From my perspective, the introduction of lower-performing non-shredding floss helped GLIDE Floss succeed.

ELIXIR Strings had a coated guitar string competitor within two years after our launch when our sales were accelerating. The competitor’s product was excellent, and their introduction gave credibility to the idea of a coated guitar string. Nevertheless, many musicians remained skeptical whether a coated string can sound great. A credible competitor assured guitar players that the new technology was plausible. Gore no longer had “the only” coated guitar string, but it had “the only” guitar string with a coating covering the entire string, including the gaps between windings. I do not believe having a competitor with a coated string damaged ELIXIR Strings’ success; more musicians opted to use coated guitar strings.

It is essential to understand the competition to objectively evaluate your product’s benefits and build a compelling product value statement. Nothing good can come from a discussion with your competitors. Stay clear of your competitors at trade events and stay in your lane.

The following is my advice when credible competition arrives, and it will. Evaluate the alternative product, understand your product’s differences, and never discuss the

competitive product with customers or distribution channel partners. If questioned, acknowledge the product, and begin talking about your product. Time is always the scarcest resource with customers, so use any time to talk about yourself. As I always say, “Enough about me, what do you think about me?” If a competitor violates your patent, engage with legal counsel, and develop a plan of action. The typical first step is a letter from the patent owner notifying the alleged infringer of the patent’s existence and the infringing activity. A demand to cease is standard, but you may offer options to resolve the issue in a more friendly manner. I did experience a competitor who was violating an ELIXIR Strings patent claim. Our team elected a prompt, mutually acceptable settlement and moved forward without further distraction.

Lesson 1. Product Lessons

- You do not have a product until you have many satisfied customers and your project is profitable.
- Dream and innovate with your eyes wide open.
- I am most innovative when I do not know what I am doing.
- Create and continually update a crisp product value statement that focuses on the benefits to the customer.
- Product lifecycle is for losers; continually innovate and grow your sales.
- Consult with a proven patent and trademark attorney to understand how you will protect your intellectual property.

From Dental Floss to Guitar Strings

- Never brainstorm solutions to a problem or a new product idea with your customer or competitor.

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From Dental Floss to Guitar Strings

**SUCCESSFUL
GRASSROOTS
PRODUCT
LAUNCHES**



JOHN SPENCER, JR.

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