

## Retract-A-Gate

Who would have thought that welcoming a new puppy into the home would be the springboard for launching a new business? Marc Pichik and Christy Tvrdic had just gotten Carly, their new Tibetan terrier puppy, and she wasn't house trained. They wanted to find a way to keep her from romping (and doing other things) all over the house. They needed some sort of gate to keep Carly corralled.

Marc and Christy started looking around for a baby gate, but they didn't want just a traditional baby gate because they tend to be cumbersome and difficult to use. They couldn't find anything that they really wanted—the style of accordion gates hadn't really changed much since back in the 1950's—so they broadened their search to include pet gates. They checked out pet stores and then the internet, anywhere they thought would be a good place to look. Nothing doing.

Marc finally realized that if they were going to find the gate that they were looking for, they'd have to build it themselves. Since necessity is truly the mother of invention, they gradually switched gears from wanting to purchase a gate to figuring out how to build one.

Marc is a mechanical engineer so he's comfortable with designing and building things. He wanted the gate to be functional, durable and easy to use; plus he wanted it to be out of sight when not in use. If you've ever wrestled with a standard baby gate, you know the experience of feeling like a hurdler in the 200 meter dash.

Marc knew he needed to create something that was a departure from the standard design, but he wanted it to be simple. Was there a design for an existing product that would work for his application? It had to be tough, but it also had to be out of the way when it wasn't being used. What about a window shade? Instead of pulling the shade down from the top, what about turning it on its side and making it out of a tough material that could stand up to Fido barking at the mailman. He found some mesh material that is normally used for securing loads in the back of a car or truck and developed a roller that could be extended and locked in place. Marc had been renovating a historic 1880s dairy barn located on his property, and after searching around Galena for a good place to set up operations, he decided the barn would actually fit all of his requirements. Retract-A-Gate was born.

The first design went through a number of modifications and improvements until Marc had a gate he was happy with, although Carly wasn't too pleased that she didn't have the run of the place anymore. This was about the time when the idea first entered Marc's mind that maybe; just maybe, he could make the gates on a larger scale and sell them. Of course, designing and creating one gate—or one

widget, for that matter—is not the same as mass producing them. A prototype is one thing, but creating a working model and eventually a production model is something else altogether. And what about a patent? And what about the size of the market? And what about the materials and labor to produce the product? And what about distribution? And what about the liability ramifications of producing a safety device? Marc definitely had more questions than answers. Lots of questions, but he knew that the idea for the gate was solid. He knew that if he could methodically answer all of the questions, that the product could be successful. In addition to being a mechanical engineer, Marc had extensive sales/marketing experience (software sales of enterprise applications which encompassed accounting, operations, inventory, etc) and had always wanted to start and operate his own business. Marc began to realize that he had accumulated a lot of great experience over the years at different jobs which would be very helpful/beneficial in starting up a new company.

But he was still plagued with the requirements of developing a new product: sifting through the patent process, rough sketches of prototypes, conceptual drawings, working model and production model. Marc's lament was that the "concept is a far cry from a working model and a working model is a far cry from a production model." *The biggest obstacle?* Working with a dynamic device like Retract-A-Gate that contains a number of moving parts. Not only that, but the gate has to be installed to a wide variety of doorframes so designing it was a great undertaking with lots of trial and error. The gate is "strong and robust" and has a wide variety of use. Plus, Marc is a stickler for quality and durability so he spent extra time up-front to ensure that the product was reliable and durable. He has always been serious regarding stringent continuous quality control and it has paid off because he has received very, very few customer complaints.

The other big obstacle? Marketing Retract-A-Gate. Marc knew he would be dealing with a lot of unknowns regarding the market, especially customer reaction to something as familiar as a baby gate, but in a very new and different design. Marc wanted his new gate "to have market awareness but didn't want to rely on any pre-conceived notions in the mind of the consumer." He has relied heavily on his website - <http://www.retract-a-gate.com> – for market awareness as well as sales.

Marc attended a networking meeting where he met Don Henry of the Northwest Regional Entrepreneurship Center, and, after meeting with Don to explain his plans to market the new gate using the internet, received a NWREC Challenge Grant allowing him to proceed with developing the website. As a result of the funds to implement the website, Marc said that the majority of all the gates being produced are sold via internet sales, along with some new inroads into wholesale and retail sales.

So, what's on the horizon? "Our eye is on developing similar applications, but also broadening our marketing" of Retract-A-Gate. The gate currently expands to

52", and Marc is busy developing a newer version that will extend to 72". Plus, he wants to expand the line of accessories which can be used to aid in the installation of the Retract-A-Gate. He's also busy updating and refining the website since it has been such a large—and very successful—part of his sales and marketing efforts. Plus, he's also busy hiring new people to help with manufacturing and adding additional "barn space" for expanded operations.

Like most entrepreneurs, Marc's busy and wearing lots of different hats but he still has time to squeeze in some time for playing with Carly. It's only natural, since she was the one responsible for launching the company.