

Joan Lunden's New Role: Inventor

The television personality and her husband create a product that keeps kids close--and safe.

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Television personality Joan Lunden remembers Saturday mornings as a child, when her mom would send her out to play until lunchtime. Today, she says, "we live in a very different time. Most parents would never dream of giving their children that kind of leeway."

Those parental fears are what that inspired Lunden and husband Jeff Konigsberg--parents of two sets of twins--to become inventors. "This all started in a store one day," she says. "We had all four of them, and I was taking one at a time into the dressing room, trying things on. He was corralling them as they would decimate the neatly folded stacks of clothes." Frustrated, Konigsberg exclaimed, "There's got to be a better way."

Neither Lunden nor Konigsberg wanted to use a leash on their kids, so they began thinking about alternatives. In fact Lunden, who used to do commercials for toymaker Hasbro Inc., says the only time she turned down a commercial was when Hasbro wanted her to promote a child leash. "I find that objectionable. It's like walking your dog," she says.

One day at the airport, they saw a man wearing a retractable cord on his belt that allowed him to swipe his ID card to get through a door. This sparked an idea. They wondered, "What if you took this thing and put a Swatch Watch on it?" Kids can wear something they won't object to, and parents can keep a close eye on them.

With that in mind, Lunden and Konigsberg hired a patent lawyer and developer, showing them the retractable cord and suggesting wristband-like cuffs on both ends. With the KinderKord, kids can't go farther than three feet, but they get a sense of independence. "So you're in the mall and you're holding your packages and your coffee or your bottled water--and you're still holding your child." Parents can even hook two kids to one KinderKord. And unhooking them is easy when it's time to get back in the car.

"It makes your Saturday shopping trip or going to the amusement park or going to the zoo--no matter where it is--a calmer, happier day." Lunden adds that she doesn't have to continuously yell at her children to stay close.

Still, getting KinderKord from idea to store shelves



Joan Lunden uses her KinderKord invention to keep track of daughter Kimberly, 4, while grocery shopping.

was a complicated--and expensive--endeavor. "You don't design anything until you do your research," Lunden says. That includes identifying the target audience, setting the price, and selecting colors acceptable to both parent and child. Retailers only want one SKU--a product's barcode--so a single, unisex color was required.

The developers conducted focus group studies to decide who comprised the target audience and what was already on the market. Only then did they begin working on the design. The company went through a whole series of possible locking mechanisms. Lunden and Konigsberg also had weekly conference calls with the development company, which demonstrated various iterations of the product via computer.

Lunden researched the various prototypes by using her own kids as test subjects. "We put the bands on their arms"--they were quick to object if the band was too hard, too big or if it irritated tiny wrists--"until we came up with bands they were willing to wear for any length of time."

What Lunden and Konigsberg learned was just how long it took--and how expensive it is--to launch an invention. "It took 14 months from the time we started this until we walked into Babies 'R Us," the company they hoped would launch the product. They scheduled an appointment to visit the store's New Jersey headquarters and pitched the KinderKord to company representatives. "We showed how it works and why we thought every parent should have it. Thank God we met with three women who all had children, and they totally got it," Lunden says.

Babies 'R Us bought the product. (It's also sold through Amazon.com and Target.com, as well as some specialty boutiques and toy shops.) Then Lunden and Konigsberg found a manufacturer in China where, Lunden quips, they discovered the meaning of "a slow boat from China."

Getting the product produced overseas adds extra steps to the process, Lunden says. The product has to be manufactured and transported to the United States. Someone has to meet the product at the dock and walk it through customs. A transport company picks up the product and takes it to the fulfillment center, but that isn't the end of the process. You also need a tracking company that uses your SKU to keep track of everything going in and out of the fulfillment center.

Lunden says she shelled out several hundred thousand dollars to launch her product, a concern she has for other entrepreneurs. "In this country it takes money to get a patent, design a concept, get it manufactured and ship it back home." And if you want to become a vendor with a large chain or with QVC--especially if your product involves child safety--there's liability insurance of \$40,000 to \$50,000, she adds.

An added complication for most prospective inventors is the fact that most vendors don't want to carry single products--they want a line of products to sell. Lunden finds that discouraging. "That keeps ideas [an entrepreneur might develop] from becoming much-needed products you and I would have bought," she says.

That vendor desire for a line of products is one reason KinderKord is undergoing an upgrade in design, with a wristband that looks more like the originally envisioned watchband and that attaches to the arm with a buckle instead of Velcro.

The upgrade is driven by safety considerations as well. The wristband buckle makes it harder for a child to remove and will also reduce the likelihood that any of the device's parts will break.

Then there's the product's packaging. Lunden credits Babies 'R Us for helpful packaging tips. Lunden's photo, for example, was on a little card inside the package. "They said, 'You have to remember that you're Joan Lunden. Put it on the outside,' " Lunden recalls. They also advised her to move information on the back of the box to the top left and to put the most powerful, impactful words on the front of the package.

The current packaging is already being changed. The next generation of KinderKords will be encased in blister packs. (That means they'll be inserted under a plastic dome.) There are two reasons for the change, Lunden says. First, you can stack more of them into a box, which keeps prices down. Second, they won't get damaged as they're being shipped.

Feedback on the KinderKord has been positive overall. "I've looked at a lot of consumer comments [on the web]," Lunden says. "I keep seeing, over and over, 'It turned our vacation into a comfortable, happy kind of occasion.' That was part of my reason for wanting to do this," she says.

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