

CEO helps ideas find place on store shelves

Jack Lawson wants to quickly put products in the hands of consumers.

As president and chief executive of Catalyst PDG, Lawson works with partner Dennis Turner and their 30 employees to take clients' ideas and turn them into items that can be manufactured and put on store shelves.

Though he will give his customers tips on how to make a product better, Lawson said he's not in the business of telling them whether their product is marketable. Lawson has had ideas cross his desk that he thought wouldn't sell that ended up being in high demand.

Catalyst works on all facets of bringing products to market -- from designing to engineering to manufacturing. His clients include Procter & Gamble, IBM and Leap Frog. About half a dozen clients are Indiana-based.

Question: How did your company get its start?

Answer: My background was in high-volume manufacturing and product development, and my partner, Dennis Turner, was a product developer for Cosco. We noticed that companies seem to have trouble with new product development. A lot of time and effort was wasted when companies used different companies at different stages of product development. We thought if a company existed that offered all facets of product development, it would be well accepted.

Q: How long does it take for a product to hit the market?

A: It depends on the product. An automobile, for example, may take eight to 24 months, but something simple like a child car seat can be turned around in six months. A child toy could be a two- to three-month turnaround. A lot of it is development and prototype because you have to be mindful of safety standards and industry approvals. When you have a working model, you can start getting approvals. We try to get a model done as quickly as possible for that reason.

Q: How do you keep competitors from stealing ideas?

A: We are very serious about security. There is a gatekeeper to get into the building. All employees sign noncompete agreements. Our firewall is hacker-proof, and data is backed up daily. We are very serious about not letting anyone sneak in the back door of the network to get ideas. Customers expect us to protect their intellectual property.

Q: What do you look for when hiring employees?

A: We try to hire people with an entrepreneurial mentality. We need people who think way out of the box. We take an intuitive approach for creative concepts. We want you to have confidence in what you are offering the client. It saves all parties time and money in the process.

Q: Why have you been successful in your career?

A: I am very hands-off as a manager. I believe in hiring people who are self-starters and understand the goal and know what they need to do to achieve the goal. One thing that Dennis and myself were committed to was making it a fun place to work. We wanted people to want to come to work. I am goal-oriented.

Q: What advice do you give interns?

A: A lot of times the interns we hire have never had a job in an industry that they hope to get a career

in. I think, especially in creative services, you don't want to do anything to squelch that. It's something that needs to be defined and nurtured. I tell people they have to keep their sense of humor. If you take life or your job too seriously, you will hate what you are doing. I think a lot of people don't have defined goals. I advise them to define and set goals and work toward that.

Jack Lawson

- Title: President, CEO and co-founder of Catalyst PDG.
- Age: 42.
- Personal: Wife Marsha; three children.
- Education: Bachelor's degrees in business science from Indiana University and mechanical engineering from Purdue University.
- Employment: ACI, White Industries and Compression Inc.
- Hobbies: Home improvement, golf, family, traveling.
- With whom he'd like to have dinner? Bill Gates. "In terms of management, he understands that a good manager surrounds himself with good people," Lawson said.
- Best advice: "Everyone here is important. The light at the end of the tunnel may be you," Scott Sparks, a former manager at K-Whit.

-- By Jill Phillips

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