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AS MUCH AS HUGH BRYDGES MAY PRIDE himself on the products he's created, his greatest invention could very well be the radical marketing strategy he's deployed in his newfound career as an entrepreneur: utter humility. "I'm just stupid enough to make this work," brags Brydges, 42.

Of course, he's hardly the first of the self-made set to realize that rocket science wasn't a practical career option. But standard-issue entrepreneurial behavior doesn't involve openly admitting such vulnerabilities. This is the crowd, remember, that not long ago embraced Attila the Hun as its role model for a leader's behavior.

Brydges hasn't always subsisted on a diet of humble pie. For a dozen years, he developed commercial real estate, parlaying his connections in his hometown of Virginia Beach to buy land, build apartments, and "sell them off to investors who wanted to take a write-off." By the mid-1980s he toiled about in dueling BMWs, each equipped with a phone. "I was having a good time," he recalls.

That ended with the sudden collapse not of the real estate market but of Brydges' health. In 1989, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

Sidelined by the disease, he says, "you realize that money is something you can make a pile of, or lose a pile of, and it matters none." That insight was driven home when he found himself declaring personal bankruptcy in 1990, having piled up debt at the rate of more than \$10,000 a month. As he recovered, he waited tables.

Around the same time Brydges began researching a product idea that he had first conceived as a teenager

THE LEARNING CURVE

Josh Hyatt

Surrounded by brains

**Entrepreneur is smart enough
to seek help from everyone**

tending to the family boat: a weight-and-pulley system that kept boats centered in their slips despite changing weather. Having determined that nothing similar had been patented, he began fiddling with a prototype. He started looking hard at turning Sea Safe Inc. into a serious enterprise, with the help of - well, just about everybody. "Some really good brains have opened up to me," he says.

For help securing a patent, he turned to his step-brother Richard, whose four master's degrees endowed him with sufficient brainpower to explain Brydges's creation in terms the Patent Office could appreciate.

"He could prove that it worked, mathematically," notes Brydges. He also sought out executives at boat maker

Boston Whaler; the communiques he sent them included a video showing his device holding one of their 17-foot models in place during a hurricane.

Rob Noyes, then Boston Whaler's director of marketing, recalls that Brydges "was very open about saying, 'I don't know what to do.' It was four hours of my time to try to help somebody, and also to have our brand be used in his advertising. Every now and again, you get lucky." Brydges did as Noyes had suggested - creating a brochure, getting in trade magazines, appearing at industry shows - by maxing out on "tons of credit cards" belonging to his then-girlfriend.

His other investors are family members, as had been recommended by another adviser: Ralph Miller, head of entrepreneurial studies at nearby Regent University. As the company gained visibility, Miller scrutinized proposals from would-be investors. "When people think you have something and don't know what to do with it, they want to take it from you," says Brydges. Sea Safe Inc. will soon be partially or wholly acquired by Brunswick Corp. Brydges says, He's already developed other products, including a mooring system for handicapped boaters and a dock-mounted grill.

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