

Onto a clear winner

Every business owner wants a competitive advantage. Often that advantage – and the key to growth for small companies – is about having a novel idea and protecting it

Necessity is the mother of invention; it's a centuries-old proverb that remains true today. Just ask Jane and Warwick Allen.

Six years ago, the couple was running a landscape construction business when a client made a perfectly reasonable request. He wanted a glass pool fence, but one without posts. Sure, there were glass fences around at the time, but nothing strong and easy to install, so Warwick set about designing and creating a glass fence to fit the brief.

"He worked on systems to clamp the pieces of glass, rather than drill holes in them, which weakens the glass and is expensive if you make a mistake," explains Jane. "After playing around with a new clamping system for a few months, he knew he was onto something."

And he was. Before long, Jane and Warwick moved out of landscape construction, set up their new company, Glass Vice Products (GVP), and went into business designing and manufacturing frameless toughened-glass balustrades and pool fencing using their unique system.

"We invented a new way to install frameless glass," says Jane. "GVP is now the only company in New Zealand offering a fully adjustable clamp to cope with

uneven surfaces, that doesn't require holes in the glass."

Naturally, bringing such an innovative product to market wasn't without its challenges. The first was gaining PSI design certification to prove the system was fit for its purpose and complied with New Zealand's Building Code.

The next challenge was to market this new product to specifiers (architects and designers) and educate them about its benefits. This involved visiting architects and smaller glass companies nationwide to set up a distribution network.

But before they could show anyone their new invention, Jane and Warwick had to protect it.

"Once Warwick made the first prototype, our immediate thought was: this product solves a number of problems, so how do we stop someone else copying it? Patents, design registration and trademark registration were a key factor in our business plan from day one, but we needed specialist advice on this."

They approached intellectual property specialists AJ Park, and patent expert Anton Blijlevens worked with GVP to initially develop a protection strategy to support their business model.

"We carried out searches to see that we could secure solid

protection for their invention," says Blijlevens. "They're passionate about their product and business, and wanted to ensure that broad, mission-critical IP [intellectual property] protection was possible."

For GVP, AJ Park recommended broad patent protection established around the original core product, and covering variations and improvements made to it over time.

"As improved versions are made, these improvements are patented," explains Blijlevens. "This means that when the core patent expires after a 20-year term, competitors can only copy the 20-year-old product and not the improvements Glass Vice has made and protected along the way. This ongoing chain of patents helps keep competitors many steps behind."

He says having IP protection isn't the only ingredient for business success, but it's a very important one. And ensuring that it's properly and proactively enforced is also essential.

"Making sure our clients know the IP journey – its benefits, costs, processes and limitations – is vital. We take a collaborative approach to IP protection and enforcement decisions. Warwick keeps a close eye on Glass Vice's competitors, and we've

successfully taken action against several who have tried to copy their products."

The Allens know where they'd be without protection for their innovation.

"Someone would've stolen our idea and we wouldn't have a business today," says Jane. "It's been money well spent."

"When you're starting out, you don't necessarily know that you're going to be global. You do have some quite tough decisions to make at the beginning. This is where advice from AJ Park is very useful. You need someone with that expertise who can tell whether you've actually created something new that you can and need to protect. Anton knows our patents inside out and AJ Park has also helped us create and protect our brand."

GVP now exports to five countries and is about to launch some new products. The aim is to grow their export business while retaining the company's leading position in the New Zealand market.

"We started in 2007 when the economy was all doom and gloom," says Jane. "But architects like new products and the reception from the industry was good. For us, innovation became a recession beater. We haven't looked back, really."

Warwick (left) and Jane Allen worked with Anton Blijlevens to protect their innovative frameless glass products.



PHOTOGRAPHY: TONY NIEBERG

IN BRIEF

Glass Vice Products has created a unique postless fixing system for glass pool fencing, residential and commercial glass balustrades and internal and external staircases. Intellectual property specialists AJ Park have helped GVP protect its innovation both locally and overseas with a range of patents and trademarks.

CONTACT

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