

The Commercialization Planning Workshop:

Bringing New Corrections Ideas to the Marketplace

By Cindy Barone

Professionals working in any field or with any tool long enough are at some point likely to have an idea for how things could be improved. Unfortunately, most of these ideas are soon forgotten or dismissed as pipe dreams.

Many people have ideas for new or improved technologies or tools, but few take the initiative to act. Why? Because getting an idea to market is time consuming and complicated, and there is no guarantee of success.

For an idea to materialize on store shelves, there is an intimidating succession of hurdles to be crossed. Will the idea even work? Is anyone else doing it already? How is a prototype developed? How is a patent acquired? Will enough be sold to make the idea profitable? Is a partner required? The list could go on. It is easy to see how the process can become overwhelming and stop a good idea in its tracks — that is, if it must be done alone. Fortunately, it does not.

One Place to Get Help

The Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization (OLETC) was established in 1995 by the National Institute of Justice to develop and deploy an active, broad-based, national program to assist in the commercialization of innovative technology for use by the law enforcement and correctional communities. The assistance provided by OLETC is given at no cost to entrepreneurs and technologists.

“We want to discuss your technology with you, perform market research for your technology and, in some cases, ‘field test’ your technology to determine its effectiveness in the law enforcement and corrections community,” said Chief Operating Officer Nick Tomlin.

OLETC examines new concepts that offer technological solutions to national priorities outlined by the Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Advisory Council. The council reviews and analyzes the present and future technological needs of the criminal justice system and then advises NIJ’s National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center network, which includes OLETC. Council members are appointed based on their records of distinguished service and include representatives from federal, state, local and international criminal justice agencies and organizations.

Nearly 20 years ago, at the request of the Department of Energy, Mohawk Research Corp.¹ developed a process to assist budding entrepreneurs and technologists in getting their ideas to market. Over the years, Mohawk has refined that process.

Commercialization successes for OLETC include a product called the RoadSpike, a retractable spike barrier strip to safely

end high-speed vehicular pursuits; an odor inhibitor for use around decomposing bodies; a drug detection device that measures the eye’s pupillary response to light stimulus; and a unique security/video system that incorporates sophisticated camera, microphone and recording equipment into a patented car seat system.

Since the events of Sept. 11, 2001, OLETC has greatly expanded commercialization efforts to include technologies within the broader public-safety arena. More than 100 technologists and entrepreneurs are receiving assistance from OLETC. From a helmet that lets response team members hear their commander’s whispered directions to puncture-resistant latex gloves that help prevent the spread of diseases from inmates, OLETC has established itself by providing assistance to technologists in every step of the commercialization process.

In 1997, OLETC contracted with Mohawk to bring its vast experience to the aid of technologists and entrepreneurs whose ideas could benefit the correctional and law enforcement communities. This assistance is delivered through the Commercialization Planning Workshop. The five-day workshop is designed to provide the necessary tools, procedures and information to help participants work through the commercialization process. Each workshop is limited to 12 participants. Among those 12, OLETC strives to have a wide representation of emerging technologies and concepts offering solutions to operational requirements identified by law enforcement and corrections professionals. The participating technologists come to OLETC from national laboratories, independent research and development labs, and criminal justice agencies. They are entrepreneurs, inventors and law enforcement and corrections professionals with ideas, concepts and products gleaned from their professional experience.

During the workshop, attendees work both individually and in groups with instructional staff comprised of experienced commercialization instructors from Mohawk and OLETC. Each instructor has a major area of commercialization expertise, including technology assessment, licensing, capital access, intellectual property, market evaluation, prototype development, negotiation and strategic commercialization planning.

The workshop is offered three times a year, and while there is no formal application, OLETC does qualify attendees by judging if the proposed product meets prioritized law enforcement and corrections needs, whether it is not currently available, is an improvement to existing technology, offers a material cost advantage or is the next generation to an existing technology.

Note: The views and opinions in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect an official position of the U.S. government. References to any specific commercial products by trade name, trademark, manufacturer or otherwise do not constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation or favoring by the U.S. government.

The Innovation Process

Mohawk has broken commercialization down into a four-stage "innovation process." Instructors take participants through the requirements of each of the four stages. The research stage takes the proposed technology from idea to engineering applications. The innovations stage takes the project from product definition to engineering prototype. The entrepreneurial stage takes the project from prototype to production. And the managerial stage takes the proposed technology to production for major market penetration. Within each stage, Mohawk defines what should be happening regarding technical, market and organizational development; describes the skills required to successfully complete each phase; and lists the people who would ideally be involved.

After instructors present an overview of each major area of commercialization, they meet individually with each technologist to collect specific information on the project as it relates to his or her area of expertise. The entire Mohawk team and selected OLETC staff members meet each evening to discuss each technology's relative strengths and weaknesses and determine how best to assist the technologist in the commercialization process. In addition to the Mohawk team, OLETC provides law enforcement and correctional experts and market research staff to maximize the assistance available to each technologist.

The workshop ends with each technologist presenting a commercialization plan for the project to the instructors, who then review the plan and determine the critical "next step" the technologist must pursue in the process. Upon completion of the workshop, the OLETC project managers follow up with the

individual technologists to prepare and implement their commercialization plan and evaluate the level of OLETC assistance required to bring the technology to market. The workshop is just the beginning of the process to take technology to market. OLETC then provides assistance as appropriate throughout the innovation process.

A Good Idea by Itself

Having a good idea for a tool that people need is just the start. Ultimately, it is the willingness of the entrepreneurs or technologists to persevere, pay attention to details during the entire process and seek help. That help cannot come too soon. "We can help you reduce potentially wrong turns, missed opportunities and provide a clearer path to a commercialization success," said OLETC Project Manager Wayne Barte. "Your concept may be in need of our Commercialization Planning Workshop or other options that can help you before adversity strikes."

ENDNOTES

¹ Mohawk Research Corp. offers research, consulting and specialized educational programs to promote the commercialization of innovative technologies. Through an ongoing cycle of research, evaluation and teaching, Mohawk provides up-to-date guidance on all aspects of the commercialization process. For more information, contact the company at (520) 733-5900; or visit www.mohawkresearch.com.

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