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SMALL BUSINESS

Q&A : American Inventor Judge Doug Hall

Inventing guru Doug Hall gives us a behind-the-scenes look at *AB American Inventor*, plus what it takes to turn your idea into a product that sells.

By Sarah Pierce
Entrepreneur.com

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For those of you who've been watching the show *American Inventor*, it's hard to escape the quirkiness of Doug Hall, the eccentric, often barefoot, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing judge who's been described in our weekly episode recaps as the "loose cannon" of the show. But in between fiery exchanges with fellow judge Mary Lou Quinlin and bringing contestants to fuming indignation with his straight-shooting criticisms, Hall really does know his stuff.

Hall has been inventing since he was 12 years old, joining Proctor & Gamble after graduating with a chemical engineering degree and setting a P&G record by inventing and shipping a record nine innovations in 12 months. Hall is now CEO of Eureka! Ranch, an inventing, training and research firm in Cincinnati that helps businesses grow, as well as bestselling author, radio host and speaker.

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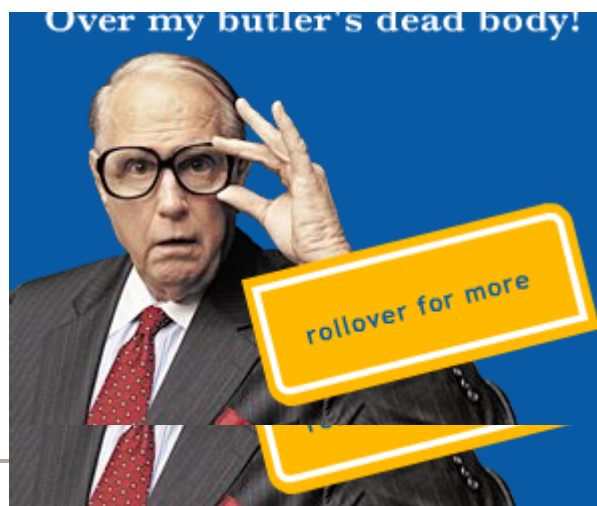
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We caught up with Hall en route to one of his many speaking engagements to get an inside look into *American Inventor* and what it takes to bring your invention into the homes of people everywhere.

Entrepreneur.com: *You've been inventing since you were 12 and have what is reported to be 15 to 18 inventions in the average American's home. What qualities does an invention need to have to have in order to make it into the market and into people's homes?*

Doug Hall: The first thing is the invention has to solve a real problem and ideally solve it in a very unique way. In other words, [the inventor is] bringing something really dramatically different to the market.

The second thing you have to do is make sure it's manufacturable at a reasonable price. You can create solutions, but if [your invention is] more expensive than products similar to it, it's not worth it.

The third thing is that in an ideal world for an inventor, [the invention] has to be protectable, which means *have a utility patent*--not a design patent, but a broad-claiming utility patent. Design patents are relatively meaningless when it come to licensing an invention.

Entrepreneur.com: *In your bio you call yourself a corporate rebel and small-business advocate. What exactly do you mean by that?*

Hall: In [my work with] corporations, I pretty much shake them up. I explain to them how big ideas happen. A dramatically different idea is an idea that causes chaos in one or more departments; in other words, if you're looking for incrementally small changes, you're not going to get anything big. It's only by making big changes that you're going to get big differences and results. So I push them pretty hard.

From a small-business advocate standpoint, CBC-TV called me "the small-business Robin Hood"--that I take from the big guys and give to

the small businesses. And so between my public radio show and public appearances, I commit a pretty decent amount--20 to 30 percent of my time--to giving back. I feel it's a great responsibility that I've been very fortunate in life to give back to others. And I choose to give back through entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneur.com: *After you left Proctor & Gamble, you started a business [Eureka! Ranch] with three Visa credit cards...*

Hall: Two Visas and a MasterCard, actually.

Entrepreneur.com: *...so you obviously understand the struggle that many of the inventors who audition for the show--and entrepreneurs in general--face.*

Hall: I've been there.

Entrepreneur.com: *What advice can you give to aspiring entrepreneurs who are struggling to start their own business?*

Hall: Well, the big thing is, we know 75 percent of small businesses are started [by someone who] already has a day job. And that, I think, is a very good thing to do. It's important for a number of reasons. The most important [reason] is because it forces them to do the right things in the right way. You know, when you have the urgency of money you can tend to shortchange your product and not get as much development [completed]. So the longer you can hang it out [with a second income], the better off you're gonna be.

The second thing is, take your business and make it real as fast as possible. In other words, as I sometimes will call it, "Make a little, sell a little and learn a lot." Be it nights, be it weekends--make it happen. Now people will oftentimes say to me, 'But Doug, I don't have the time to do it.' I say, 'Well, you can work 80 hours a week if the second 48 hours is on your dream.' That time just disappears when you're working on your dream. And if you're not willing to work like that, then you have your answer: Give it up.

Entrepreneur.com: *Now for American Inventor. In the first couple of rounds, contestants had only two minutes to impress the judges. Is this sort of quick judgment similar to what inventors can expect in the real world?*

Hall: I think actually on *American Inventor*, they probably got more time than they would normally get. In this case, they had two minutes to make a pitch in which we listened to them, but they ended up with 15 to 20 minutes talking before the judges, so there was actually a lot

more time than what you saw. And then what you saw on TV was a fraction of what really happened. It's a TV show. It's not real world.

Entrepreneur.com: *So if first impressions are everything, what makes an invention stand out as a good one, and what immediately strikes you guys on the show--and in real life--as poor inventions?*

Hall: What makes it very difficult to present on the show is that you have basically three distinct audiences who have three distinct needs: Myself, who's looking for the "wow"--in other words, what's the problem and what's your solution?; Peter [Jones], who's looking to see if can he make money on it; and Ed [Evangelista] and Mary Lou [Quinlin], who are interested in the idea, but are *much* more interested in the person. And so for [Ed and Mary Lou], the story of your, as I jokingly called it, "bad country music song"--you know, your wounded dog and your tragic life--plays really well to those marketing people because they kind of like that story. Peter's looking for the money and I'm looking for the "wow." So it's difficult because you have to hit all three [audiences], or at least two of them, because you need three votes to get to the next round.

Entrepreneur.com: *So what is it like to work with the other judges since you guys are so different, personality-wise and in terms of what you're looking for in an invention? What is it like when you disagree on an invention and have to come to a decision?*

Hall: Well, I'll tell you that off the set, we are... *civilized* to each other. And in a bizarre way, [we] are becoming friends. We wouldn't normally be, but because we're in this together we are becoming friends. But when we get behind that table, the frustration and anger you see--there is no acting. None of us has the ability to do any acting; that's totally clear. It's very real frustration and very real anger that goes back and forth because we all have very firm views as to what matters. I mean, Mary Lou believes the engineering is totally irrelevant, and I believe the person's sob story is totally a waste of our time. And this is a black-and-white difference. Now I respect where she's coming from, I just think she's misguided, and she thinks I'm just an amazing twit. So it works.

Entrepreneur.com: *Well, speaking of the sob stories, were there any inventors who actually had inventions that played close to your heart or did you just kind of disregard their stories and focus on the products?*

Hall: I'm human, so needless to say, some of the stories are incredibly emotional. I mean, they're intensely emotional. They're incredible stories. And that's nice entertainment, but my job is to be the judge

and to find the greatest American inventor, and I don't think [sob stories are] part of that judgment. Having a great bleeding-heart story is not on the judging [list of] criteria--nowhere does it say the inventor has a bleeding heart. So in wanting to make sure [that I] tell the truth [with my vote], I must disregard their stories because that's not on the criteria.

Entrepreneur.com: *Were there any inventions that appeared on the show that stand out in your mind as immediately having the elements that make a good invention?*

Hall: The three that I picked to coach all immediately have it: the circle car seat that Janusz has, Sharon's Restroom Door Clip, and Joe and Jenny's Flushpure toilet seat. All three of them solve real problems. Some of them are problems that are small but frequent--as in Sharon's--and some of them are big problems that happen infrequently, as in Janusz's car seat. But all three of them solve real problems and I think they're all awesome. I think they're the absolute best of the bunch, and that's why I picked them.

Entrepreneur.com: *You had a few inventors who were cut because they presented what you thought weren't actually inventions, but gimmicks. What separates an invention from a gimmick?*

Hall: The scope of the problem it solves. Gimmicks are amusements, but they don't solve a meaningful problem.

Entrepreneur.com: *How many invention auditions did you actually have to sit through?*

Hall: We looked at 400. And there was thousands more that, *fortunately*, we didn't have to look through.

Entrepreneur.com: *How much faith do you have in the American public to choose the invention you see most fit to win?*

Hall: I'm actually more confident than I thought I would be. I was at a middle school [recently] and I gave the kids a number of different sets of [inventions], and I was surprised by their judgment. So on the teens' vote, I'm very confident. Now their parents I'm not sure about. But the youth appeared to be able to see past the smoke and mirrors to the real idea.

Entrepreneur.com: *What has the show taught you about American inventors today?*

Hall: The people are awesome. While I laugh [at them on the show]

sometimes, I'm laughing with them, because in my mind these are people with the guts to get up, get out and do something. My concern and my frustration are with the people who sit there and say "I got an idea" but don't do anything with it. I mean those are the sluggards who I ridicule. I will not ridicule the people [on the show]. I can get frustrated and angry, but it's very different from really ridiculing them. I've tried very hard to never be mean to them.

Now that said, as Simon [Cowell, one of the show's executive producers] told me early on [when] I said, 'Simon, I don't want to be mean. I love these people--they're my people,' and he's like, "Doug, you don't understand it. When you say no, you're going to be seen as mean no matter how you say it. A no is a no, and that's the way it is." And I respect that. People get mad at me when I say certain things. But you know, I could say no now, or I can say yes and then they could just get killed later.

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