



Creating a Fabulous Career in the Arts An Interview with 'The Mother of Invention' Joan Lefkowitz

By Molly Anderson-Childers



This month, I'll be interviewing the fabulous Joan Lefkowitz, founder of Accessory Brainstorms and Accessory Resource Gallery. She started her New York showroom business as a licensing agent, consultant and sales representative for fashion accessory product lines in 1983. Known as "The Mother of Invention," she has become the premier expert at turning new inventions into highly recognized, commercially successful, products. Remember the [Topsy Tail](#)? Lefkowitz helped thrust the item to a \$100 million gross. The French Twist [Hairdini](#) was another success story (reaping \$20 million). Newer is a Lap-Top Manicure Tray, which lets women paint their nails anywhere — from an airport lobby to a moving car.

Ms. Lefkowitz is a professional member of the United Inventors Association, and is on the board of advisors for the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. She has given guest seminars on the subject of "How to Get Your Invention to Market" for Inventors Workshop International Education Foundation, Los Angeles Patent Library, Ohio Inventors Council, The Learning Annex, as well as New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. Holding degrees from New York University and Brooklyn College, she began her professional life as a drama teacher. Together, we'll find out how she got from there to the lofty position she occupies today... Read on!

Q: As unlikely as it seems, you started your professional life as a drama teacher. How and why did you make the transition to a new career as a fashion accessory designer's sales representative?

A: I wanted to expand my life experience by taking on something that I did not know and learn how to do it. I made a list of my interests, and my strengths and weaknesses. I pruned my list and found I was most interested in taking innovative unknown products and making them available to people.

Q: Why did you decide to become involved with fashion accessory and lifestyle inventions? What originally sparked your interest in this fun, fabulous career?

A: In junior high school, I was crazy for fashion. Not being able to afford all the clothes that I loved, my mother suggested that I start 'accessorizing.' So all those years I was buying, evaluating, and analyzing accessories and unconsciously storing up knowledge.

Q: What did it take to be able to transition to a full time position as a licensing agent?

A: I opened my showroom, Accessory Resource Gallery, in 1984. I represented designers' product lines of all kinds of fashion accessories. In 1992 a woman came to me with a solitary patent-protected product, the Topsy Tail, and asked me to market it for her.

The product wasn't an accessory per se, but a tool to make fabulous hairstyles. How were we going to market a tool into the fashion market? This challenge and the success we had was the beginning of a whole new chapter in my career. Many inventors heard of our success with the Topsy Tail, and asked if we could do the same for their inventions. Thus, in 1994, we started a new division of the company, which we named Accessory Brainstorms. This company is a marketer, licensing agent and consultant for fashion, beauty, and lifestyle inventions.

Q: Are there any challenges specific to women who are working in this field?

A: Many inventors lack the business experience to get their products from 'mind to market.' We give seminars at the Learning Annex, the Fashion Institute of Technology Continuing Education Department, and the Yankee Invention Convention, laying out the steps to take to get an invention ready for the marketplace.

Q: Our local elementary schools recently hosted an "Invention Convention" for students. Some of their ideas were truly amazing! Was there anything similar offered at your school when you were a young woman?

A: No, nothing like this existed in my public school education in Brooklyn back in the day. Had there been, my interest in inventions might have been piqued at a much earlier age.

Q: Do you feel that events like this are important in generating the inventors and new products of the future?

A: Yes, it creates a wonderful opportunity for young people to challenge themselves creatively.

Q: You're obviously a creative powerhouse. How did you find an outlet for your creativity as a child? Did all those bright ideas ever get you into trouble?

A: No, I was a quiet child. My creative outlets were acting, singing, costume design, and writing. I had no idea that I had some kind of a 'gift.'

Q: Your website is a fabulous resource for inventors. Aside from the excellent information offered there, do you have any general advice for young people hoping to break into this field?

A: Read books and magazine articles — anything and everything that has to do with inventions and entrepreneurialism. Use the Web to study what is going on in the marketplace.

Q: One way of measuring success is to look at the way someone deals with failure. Could you talk about a recent invention or idea that failed, and how you dealt with that setback?

A: We represented for licensing a patented handbag that was customized to hold cosmetics. It was a brilliantly conceived item. The problem was that it would cost a potential licensee over \$100,000 to make the initial molds for the piece. We met with a variety of manufacturers and it all came down to the problem of cost.

After spending extensive time and energy on the project with no result, we returned all the samples, photos, and printed materials to the inventor. After clearing my office and my mind of the project, I was able to then refocus on other projects with full vigor.

Q: What type of criteria help you to choose which inventions to market?

A: See 'Tips & Articles' in my website: www.accessorybrainstorms.com.

Q: Have you ever worked with a great invention that just didn't make the cut?

A: Many times. There are many factors beyond the invention itself that help determine its success or failure including price, quality, the amount of time it takes to manufacture, trends in the marketplace, the size of the potential demographic for the product, and more.

Q: What is the most original, creative invention in your portfolio — your favorite, or the one you're most proud of?



A: TAG TAMERS, from Hollywood Fashion Tape, is the only invention that I invented and licensed myself. I found a need in the marketplace, could not find a product that solved the problem, and set out to create it myself.

Q: You're wildly successful, and at the top of your game. What's next for "The Mother of Invention?" What are your goals and dreams for the future? Where do you hope to be in ten years?

A: I love my work and plan on continuing what I'm doing. In ten years I hope to be collecting residual income from all the deals that I have made!

Q: How do you deal with the stresses and challenges of this type of work? Do you ever have days when you miss the simple, carefree life of a drama teacher?

A: I am teaching every day. I guide inventors and their products...and there's plenty of drama in the challenge of convincing companies to buy or license these products.

Q: What is your favorite way to relax, unwind, and spoil yourself a little?

A: I take time out to go to my retreat upstate. It has beautiful views of the Hudson River. I travel around the area and enjoy watching the changing seasons. I spoil myself by taking courses at the Landmark Forum and buying accessories for myself and my home.

Q: What is your best advice for young women hoping to make their creative dreams come true, just as you have?

A: Pursue your interests even if it is aside from what you do for a living. Study and work on them whenever you can and write everything down so that you have a 'log.'

Q: Who is your greatest teacher?

A: No one taught me how to do what I do. A lot of it has been trial and error.

Q: Who is your greatest inspiration? What is the best advice you ever received?

A: My greatest inspirations were my 9th grade art teacher, and my mother. My art teacher told me that I should go into the fashion field — though I resisted, and initially went into another profession; my mother first fulfilled her creative dreams when she was in her 70's, which proves that it's never too late.

Q: What helps you to stay inspired, juicy, and full of creative energy?

A: The amazing people and products that I get to deal with everyday keep me going back for more! ♦ Joan Lefkowitz, founder of ACCESSORY BRAINSTORMS, NYC. (accessorybrainstorms.com), has made a career out of spotting the novel ideas of others and bringing them to market. She started her New York showroom business as a licensing agent, consultant and salesrepresentative for fashion-accessory product lines in 1983. Along the way, she has become the recognized expert at turning unique-new inventions in the Fashion/Beauty/Lifestyle categories, from unknown entities, into highly-recognized commercial success stories. Remember the TopsyTail? Lefkowitz helped thrust the item to a \$100 million gross. The French Twist Hairdini was another success story (reaping \$20 million). Newer is a Lap-Top Manicure Tray, which lets women paint their nails anywhere — from an airport lobby to a moving car.

Frequently interviewed in the press, on TV, and on radio, she has given guest seminars on the subject of "How to get your Invention to Market" for Inventors Workshop International Education Foundation and the Los Angeles Patent Library, Los Angeles Patent Library, Ohio Inventors Council, The Learning Annex, as well as New York's Fashion Institute of Technology.

She holds degrees from New York University and Brooklyn College.

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