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# STAPLES LETS CUSTOMERS DO THE DESIGNING

By **Julia Boorstin**

April 18, 2005

**FORTUNE**

(FORTUNE Magazine) – MORE THAN 50 YEARS AGO, a frustrated secretary named Bette Nesmith mixed up a paint color that matched her office stationery to correct typos. Liquid Paper was born, and went on to become a multimillion-dollar business (Nesmith's son, coincidentally, went on to be a member of The Monkees). Now Staples, the world's largest office-supply chain, is hoping to capitalize on the pet peeves of desk-bound employees everywhere.

Over the years the chain has been so inundated with customers' product suggestions that last year it launched a competition, offering the winner \$25,000 and the chance to manufacture and market the product under Staples' recently relaunched store brand. After combing through 8,300 submissions, Staples decided to manufacture four new products, which will hit shelves this summer.

The first prize went to WordLock, a combination lock that uses letters instead of numbers. The inventor is 50-year-old engineer Todd Basche (he was trying to think up an easy combination for the fence around his pool). Basche, who has worked in product development for Hewlett-Packard and Apple, has invented reams of stuff, from a photo scanner to antipiracy CD software. He had patented the lock idea, but the buyers he approached didn't bite. "The lock companies were not looking for new products, and the consumer products companies felt their own product designers should have thought it up themselves," he says.

The three other inventions were dreamed up by R&D novices: Nancy Garner, a former teacher, designed the Handy Strap Stapler, which fits into the palm of your hand for stapling papers to walls. The stapler will share shelf space with Rubber Bandits (oversized rubber bands with labels to organize piles) and Tack Dots (minibulletin boards backed with adhesive, for tacking papers on small spaces like a computer or windshield). And it's not too late for other office MacGyvers to contribute: This year's submissions are due in June. --Julia Boorstin

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