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SPECIAL REPORT

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Inventor Will Pitts, left, shows TV host Walker how Flop Mops—flip-flops that scrub—work



TELEVISION

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MILLION DOLLAR IDEA, A NEW REALITY-TV SHOW, SHOWCASES INVENTORS—AND MAYBE THE NEXT BIG THING



BY SARAH STURMON DALE

For LeRoy and Cecilia Shinler, the best part of family snowmobile outings was the bonfire cookout they would enjoy deep in the icy woods near their hometown of Russ City, Minn. There was just one small problem: lugging the grill with them was no fun at all. Then about 12 years ago, LeRoy dreamed up an ingenious solution, a portable, lightweight grill that can be rolled up to fit in a small bag. Now, thanks to the exposure provided by a local Minneapolis, Minn., TV show called *Million Dollar Idea*, the Shinlers have

started to turn their brainstorm into a real product. "They've done a lot for us," says Cecilia Shinler, who with her husband has recently managed to get the EZ Roll-Up Grill stocked in several Twin Cities sporting-goods and outdoors stores.

Turning a homespun invention into a viable small business can seem like a pipe dream for many entrepreneurs, but *Million Dollar Idea*, which will start airing nationally later this fall, hopes to make it more of a reality. Created by a pair of veteran Minnesota marketers, Todd Philip Walker and Jean Golden, who also are the hosts, the syndicated 30-min. program lets celebrity judges and a live audience decide which inventions have the best chance of becoming the next big thing. "It's a way to let Americans decide what they want to see in the marketplace," says Golden, who has worked as a public-relations executive at Rainforest Cafe and **Fingerhut Companies**.

A cross between *American Idol* and *Antiques Roadshow*, *Million Dollar Idea* is filmed at Minneapolis' gigantic Mall of America (which also happens to be one of the show's chief local sponsors). Products featured on the show have included Breatheclean, a home air purifier that uses ultraviolet light; the Twister Bill Cap, which has a rotating visor and has garnered interest for licensing deals from the likes of **Disney** and **NASCAR**; and Flop Mops, flip-flops outfitted with scrubbing

soles to clean the floor while you shower. Even a 12-year-old Minnesotan who was always getting soaked in the rain waiting for his school bus got his invention on the air: a backpack dubbed the UmPack that has an umbrella hidden inside that can pop out with the pull of a string. The grand prize for contestants is a package of support services—from legal help with patents to advertising and marketing—worth \$50,000.

"We don't think we're changing the American economy," says Walker, whose résumé includes stints in advertising and as a literary agent and who, like his partner Golden, also does some consulting work for **QVC**. "But we do think we're helping cottage industries get ideas out there." So far, more than 100 inventors have turned out for live auditions, with an additional 400 sending in video pitches (submission rules are listed at [milliondollarideashow.com](http://milliondollarideashow.com)).

In a TV landscape increasingly dominated by the same tired reality shows, *Million Dollar Idea* may be original enough to attract a modest following. "It has all the elements to capture a national audience," says Gary Lico, president of **Cableready**, a distribution company based in Norwalk, Conn. In the Twin Cities area, the program had no trouble attracting a solid core of sponsors, many of which, like banks, also made brief on-air appearances to offer tips on how to get a business up and running. "This show talks to small-business aspirations, their hopes and dreams," says John Risdall, whose Minneapolis-based ad agency has been a sponsor for the past two years. "Everybody out there believes they have a great idea." With their show set to debut on 120 stations across the country, Walker and Golden will soon find out if *Million Dollar Idea* is one of them. ■