

PicoPad

Alan Regala, a 28-year-old mechanical engineer with degrees from California Polytechnic State University and Stanford University, has created a personal information storage and retrieval system.

He isn't trying to revolutionize the way people use information. He isn't planning to change the world one gadget at a time.

He just thinks that even if you leave home with your camera phone, iPod, Palm Pilot, laptop, and BlackBerry, you still might need something else to facilitate communication and help you remember important things—a pen and paper.

The concept provokes what you might call a “Duh!” moment. A pen and paper? Doesn't everyone already have those? Of course we do. But do we have them when we need them?

Regala didn't. “I had decided to start a business, so I knew I had to find a need and fill it,” he explains. In classic entrepreneur style, he began to make notes throughout the day whenever he saw an opportunity for invention. He continues, “If you're ever somewhere and you think, ‘I wish this could be made better,’ or ‘This really annoys me,’ you say, ‘Oh, that's good! I'll write that one down.’ But then you need something to write with.”

A solution to a previous problem gave him an idea. “I used to forget to bring my lunch when I went to work,” he remembers, “until I put a sticky note on my wallet.” Regala realized that if his wallet could hold a pen and extra sticky notes, he would carry them all the time. That would be handy in a wide variety of situations, from making an impromptu shopping list to jotting product ideas to networking at social events.

From this most mundane of beginnings sprang his company, Everyday Innovations, and its flagship product, the PicoPad. The concept is almost comically

simple: It's a little sticky-note pad, complete with mini pen, squeezed into a credit-card-sized paper package. But bringing the concept to fruition was not the cakewalk one might



expect. His first version, a credit-card-sized dry-erase board, proved unworkable. “I went through about 50 iterations before arriving at the current design,” sighs Regala.

The attention to detail shows. Small tabs at the top and side of the pad provide easy grips for sliding it out of a wallet. The beautiful heavy paper covers came from a friend, Los Altos stationer Elli Barnacchi. But the trickiest design issue was the pen.

An ergonomically viable pen does not usually fit inside the credit card pocket of a wallet. Regala's solution, like the wallet-notes concept itself, is not obvious but simple. “The key to the pen,” he explained, “is the butterfly grip.” Two paper flaps maximize the surface area of the minuscule ballpoint pen, so you don't have to squeeze the tiny thing for dear life every time you jot a note.

Regala sees the PicoPad as an addition to, not a replacement for, all the battery-powered personal-organization paraphernalia you might already have embedded in your life. Consumers do too;

stationers in tech-heavy Palo Alto and West Los Angeles say it's selling quite well. In fact, what's most surprising is that with all the gizmos people in these areas buy, such a basic item isn't commonplace already.

That's what makes the PicoPad interesting: It's the opposite of what “innovation” brings to mind. Instead of whiz-bang gadgetry, it relies on a concept well known in certain contexts but curiously absent from our own.

“Appropriate technology” has been a catchphrase since the 1990s among organizations working in developing countries, and for good reason. I remember hearing years ago from a Stanford engineer who had gone to a school in rural Africa on a mission to bridge the technology gap between electronically privileged American computer donors and silicon-deprived African schoolchildren. She was excited to install a sizeable donation of old computers, powered by new solar panels. The program was touted as beneficial for everyone: reducing toxic disposal here, helping needy children there. But when she got to Africa, she discovered that the solar panels were being vandalized and dismantled for scrap. The old computers consumed too much power to be useful for classroom applications; what the teachers had really wanted were pens.

The lesson in that engineer's experience was primarily about asking people what they need before trying to help them. But it also demonstrates a problem of imagination, of recognizing what is truly useful. Which tools are the ones we need most: the expensive ones we covet or the simple ones we all too soon forget?

For more information, see <http://www.picopad.com>.

- Angie Heile