**[Ivan Wong](http://www.ivanwongphotography.com/) struggled** with his camera strap. It would whip through the air when he turned his lens, occasionally flapping into the frame and destroying the composition. It’s a common issue, but for Wong it was more than an annoyance—as a professional sports photographer, he depended on his ability to capture the perfect moment. A wayward strap could kill an entire assignment.

Wong talked to some fellow photographers—his brother, Ben, and his friend [Anne Bui](http://www.annebui.com/), a product developer at [Fox Racing](http://www.foxracingshox.com/). They agreed it was a problem. So they did what any modern maker would: They designed their own solution. The idea was to connect the strap to one point on the bottom of the camera—the threaded tripod mount—instead of two points on the top. That should keep the strap out of the shot and reduce tangling. They grabbed some nuts and bolts from a local workshop and hit Ivan and Ben’s parents’ garage. Their prototype wasn’t pretty, but it worked. They called it the [C-Loop](http://customslr.com/) and began to think it might have commercial potential.

The team had some manufacturing experience, but they had no idea how to bring a product to market. And money? They didn’t have that either, and it would cost $15,000 to produce a minimum run of 500 C-Loops. They considered pooling their savings (including Ben’s college money) and taking out a loan, but nobody relished that idea.

Then they found [Kickstarter](http://www.kickstarter.com/), a website where people post descriptions of their projects and anyone can chip in to help fund them. Ben had discovered the site after hearing about a couple of guys who wanted to manufacture a tripod mount for the iPhone 4. Ivan pledged $20—in effect preordering one of the gizmos. “I thought, that could be us,” Ivan says. Using Kickstarter was an appealingly offbeat approach, and there was no risk. Even if they couldn’t raise the full amount, they’d build a following and win some free publicity.

The C-Loop team started going through Kickstarter postings to see what traits made for a good project. They put together a video that described the device and conveyed their passion for it. Then they began thinking up rewards for various funding levels—for $5, contributors would get some stickers and their name on the new company’s website; for $35, they’d get a C-Loop in a microfiber pouch. And they set a fund-raising target of $15,000 in 42 days; if they didn’t hit that goal, none of the backers would be charged and no money would change hands. (This was a Kickstarter rule, designed to protect investors from sinking money into half-funded projects.)

Kickstarter approved the C-Loop, and on November 2, 2010, the Wongs and Bui posted it. Two weeks later, they had raised $8,000—more than halfway to their goal. Then, at 4:39 am Pacific Time on November 17, Engadget published [a post about it](http://www.engadget.com/2010/11/17/c-loop-camera-strap-contorts-in-ways-your-first-party-strap-coul/), with a link to the Kickstarter page. By 10 am they had hit their target of $15,000. Four days later, funders had pledged $30,000. Bui quit her job at Fox, and Ben decided not to return to school. By the end of the funding period they had raised $63,163.

Two months later, the trio had manufactured and shipped 1,800 C-Loops. In addition to the presales they booked on Kickstarter, they have been selling the device through their own website; they say they’ve received calls from two dozen distributors around the world and are in early talks with some prominent camera retailers. The team has also launched a new product, the [Split Strap](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/customslr/split-strap-a-comfortable-ergonomic-and-adaptive-s)—an ergonomic accessory for a camera, laptop bag, duffel, or guitar—which they think has even more potential than the C-Loop. After about two weeks on Kickstarter, fund-raising for the new project surpassed the team’s $5,000 goal. After a month, they had raised $10,000. A little more than a month after that, with 13 days still to go, the total stood at $20,772.

Kickstarter visitors pledged more than $60,000 toward the C-Loop, which keeps camera straps away from the lens. Its designers say they've received calls from distributors around the world.  
Photo: Gus Powell

**Build a better mousetrap** and the world is supposed to beat a path to your door. It’s a lovely thought, one that has inspired generations of American inventors. Reality, though, has fallen somewhat short of this promise: Build a better mousetrap and, if you’re extremely lucky, some corporation will take a look at it, send it through dozens of committees, tweak the design to make it cheaper to manufacture, and let the marketing team decide whether it can be priced to return a profit. By the time your mousetrap makes it to store shelves, it is likely to have been fine-tuned and compromised beyond recognition.

But now some inventors are finding that promise rekindled, thanks to Kickstarter. The site launched in 2009 as a way to crowdsource the funding of idiosyncratic arts projects. Rather than run a gauntlet of agents, studios, producers, publishers, gallery owners, foundations, and philanthropists, applicants simply uploaded a description of their idea. Kickstarter empowered creators, who had a new, no-strings source of funding, as well as audiences, who had the opportunity to help realize the kind of art they wanted to see, rather than what some suit thought would be profitable. “It has changed who the gatekeepers are,” says [Douglas Rushkoff](http://rushkoff.com/), author of the anticorporate manifesto [*Life Inc*](http://rushkoff.com/books/life-incorporated/)*.* “It has opened up the things you want to do to the free market.”

More than 14,000 people have posted projects on Kickstarter, and more than 400,000 people have supported them, contributing a total of more than $35 million. Eighty new projects are launched every day, and $1 million is pledged every week. The site has tapped a source of patronage that was all but nonexistent before. The result, says cofounder and CEO [Perry Chen](http://perrychen.tumblr.com/), has been the realization of thousands of passion projects—[a lone sailor](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/eerichmond/lets-sail-around-the-world-the-first-ever-communi) who wanted to travel the world and send Polaroids and origami boats to backers, [a designer](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/tnp/building-a-free-collection-of-our-worlds-visual-sy) who created a free online library of symbols, a [vegan food truck](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/965883070/morels-vegan-food-truck) in Louisville—that might never have found funding otherwise. “Kickstarter has the potential to jump-start—I guess the word would be kick-start—an explosion of creation and invention,” says [Caterina Fake](http://caterina.net/), cofounder of Flickr and an investor in the site. “There was a compelling need for something like this.”

How to Get Started on Kickstarter  
Inventors and industrial designers may be using Kickstarter, but the site hasn’t abandoned its artsy ethos. Here are some pointers to launching a successful project, whether it’s a dance performance or a shoe line.—C.A.

Have Passion  
The Kickstarter community responds to energy, excitement, and emotion. If you think your invention will make you a millionaire, go the corporate route. If you think it’ll be fun, and you don’t want to compromise, stick with Kickstarter.

Be Personal  
Kickstarter funders like to know who they’re helping. That’s why 48 percent of postings that include a personal video get funded, versus 30 percent of those without [a video](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/customslr/c-loop-camera-strap-mount-solution).

Set a Tight Deadline  
You determine how long people have to put money down, but give funders too long and they’ll just have an excuse to procrastinate. Projects that raise funds for 30 days or less have the highest success rate.

Be Realistic  
If you miss your fund-raising target, you won’t receive anything, so don’t get greedy. At the same time, if you undercharge for preorders, you won’t be able to deliver on your promises.

Give Updates  
Backers will feel more connected if you keep them in the loop with progress reports. It gives them confidence that you haven’t absconded to Anguilla.

But now people are using Kickstarter for more than just quirky arts projects. [Lumi](http://lumi.co/), a design studio that used Kickstarter to develop its textile printing process, now sells its pieces at [ABC Carpet & Home](http://www.abchome.com/). [Schuyler Towne](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/schuyler/lockpicks-by-open-locksport), a competitive lock picker, raised $87,407 in preorders—15 times more than his goal—to launch a line of homemade tools. When a small footwear company called [Vere Sandals](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/968255949/vere-sandal-company-usa-2011-collection) wanted to develop its 2011 collection, it turned to Kickstarter to cover production costs and gauge demand for its designs.

Ray Riley, the general manager of Microsoft’s design studio, says that every industrial designer is now watching the site because it offers so much insight about forging a “deeper connection to consumers.” Brett Lovelady, founder and CEO of [Astro Studios](http://www.astrostudios.com/), a San Francisco firm that designed the [Boxee Box](http://www.wired.com/reviews/2010/12/boxeebox/) Internet TV appliance and works with A-list clients like Microsoft, Nike, and Virgin, says his firm has discussed putting ideas on Kickstarter periodically to gauge their potential. “It’s a pretty brilliant way to find markets you never knew you had,” he says.

While plenty of people are willing to extol Kickstarter’s earth-shattering potential, its founders are not among them. “We never had change-the-world aspirations,” says cofounder [Yancey Strickler](http://yancey.tumblr.com/), who insists he just wanted to help artists get stuff made. (Strickler’s team approves every project before it’s posted, and Strickler has personally funded 340 of them, making him the site’s greatest patron.) But the world may have other plans for the site. The Kickstarter guys may have kick-started something bigger than they ever intended.

**The building at 155 Rivington** on Manhattan’s Lower East Side is easy to miss. Its only sign, painted in gold letters in the window above the front door, reads underwear—a relic from a former tenant. Inside, as you walk past a pile of junk mail and up a flight of rickety stairs, it’s hard to believe that this is the home of an entirely new business model.

Chen and Strickler also seem like unlikely guys to have built the latest hot web startup. They don’t pull all-nighters at the office, they don’t coin neologisms like *crowdfunding*, and they don’t drip with ambition. Chen’s five years with Kickstarter stands as the longest he has ever held a job, one that he says he never dreamed of doing in the first place.

The two founders take great pains to emphasize the modesty of their vision. According to the pair, Kickstarter began in 2002, when Chen was unemployed, living in the French Quarter of New Orleans, working on his own music (electronic, mostly), and riding his bike. He wanted to throw a late-night show with Austrian DJs [Kruder & Dorfmeister—](http://www.myspace.com/kruderanddorfmeister)he stresses that this was back when they were relatively unknown, before they could be heard in every boutique hotel lobby—but he was daunted by the $15,000 that the gig would cost up front. What if nobody showed up? “The risk really scared me,” he says.

Chen dropped the concert idea, but later he wondered: What if he had asked people to pay in advance? If enough had coughed up, he could have paid for the band without fronting anything out of his own pocket; if not, he’d have known there wasn’t enough interest and could have saved his time and cash. Chen didn’t pursue that idea either, but it stayed with him when he moved back to New York in 2005. While waiting tables at a hipster restaurant in Brooklyn called [Diner](http://dinernyc.com/), he befriended Strickler—a brunch regular and an editor at the online music retailer [eMusic](http://www.emusic.com/)—and shared snippets of his brainstorm with him.

Strickler says the concept immediately made sense. (Chen quips that it was “the best idea any waiter pitched him that year.”) The two bought a whiteboard and began planning the site. They figured they could start out offering the service for free and eventually take 5 percent of the contributions to fund the site. A friend of a friend, an interaction designer named [Charles Adler](http://www.source-id.com/), developed the site’s look and feel. None of them knew how to write the necessary code, so they hired someone to do that. But the next step, populating the service with art projects, was something they could do. They knew artists and musicians and photographers. They mimicked Gmail’s invitation-only rollout, giving friends access and asking them to invite five more people. There was obvious demand: People began contacting them through the site’s customer-service section, asking to post their projects. Kickstarter obliged.

In the site’s first week, two projects met their fund-raising goals. (An art project called [Drawing for Dollars](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/darkpony/drawing-for-dollars), in which backers paid an illustrator to pen a drawing, raised $35, and an offline [Wikipedia app](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/dphiffer/offline-wikipedia-iphone-app) for the iPhone raised $145.) The founders’ own project, [New York Makes a Book](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/nymab/new-york-makes-a-book), to which 100 people contributed photos, art, and stories for publication, quickly accumulated $3,329.

Kickstarter began much like one of its projects—bootstrapped with a series of small investments from fellow artists. (*Arrested Development* star [David Cross](http://www.wired.com/underwire/tag/david-cross/), whose cousin was a friend of Chen’s, was an early investor.) But as the site began to take off, the cofounders started looking for other sources of funding and advice. Before long, they had rounded up a who’s who of angel investors, including Twitter cofounder Jack Dorsey, Meetup cofounder Scott Heiferman, and Vimeo cofounder Zach Klein. “I think the model can be applied to many things,” Dorsey says. “That’s what’s so exciting.”

Indeed, some of the investors seemed to see great commercial potential for the site. “I said I was interested in investing only if the vision was more than creative arts projects,” Heiferman says. “When businesses are being started and products are getting made this way, interesting things are going to happen.”

It’s easy to see why Kickstarter’s model would appeal to businesses as well as artists. The site offers a chance to build a very deep connection with an audience. Sure, getting almost 4,500 people to contribute nearly $350,000 was a great coup for director [Steve Taylor](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2128223578/save-blue-like-jazz-the-movie-0). But what was almost as valuable was the knowledge that those 4,500 people are likely to see his movie when it’s released—especially if they ponied up $100 for an associate producer credit. The Kickstarter process also reveals the kind of insights that marketing departments salivate over. For example, when filmmaker [Gregory Bayne](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/gregorybayne/jens-pulver-driven-a-documentary-film-about-a-le?ref=live) set out to make a documentary about mixed-martial-arts champion [Jens Pulver](http://www.sherdog.com/fighter/Jens-Pulver-228), he didn’t just get money to make his film, he got the names and email addresses of thousands of Pulver’s most dedicated fans, many of whom were happy to share more details about themselves. He’s using the intelligence he gleaned—a large percentage of them are in the Midwest, and a surprising number of the most vocal supporters are women—to plan where he screens his movie.

That’s why even people who don’t need Kickstarter are turning to the site. Industrial designer [Scott Wilson](http://www.mnml.com/), for instance, has no trouble getting his products made. Formerly the global creative director at Nike, Wilson—whose work has been displayed in the Cooper-Hewitt, MoMA, and Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art—has worked on the Xbox 360, the Dell Venue Pro Smartphone, and Swingline staplers. Still, when he had an idea to create a wristband that would convert an iPod nano into a watch, he decided against the corporate route, where his idea could get weighed down with “big company politics and indecision.” So he posted it on Kickstarter, asking for $15,000 to cover tooling costs for the parts. After 30 days, he had [raised $941,778](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1104350651/tiktok-lunatik-multi-touch-watch-kits) from 13,512 people—the biggest haul any Kickstarter project had ever received. Seventy-six percent of those people didn’t even own a nano but planned to buy one specifically to use with the watchband. (Wilson has had to hire six people to answer the more than 40,000 Kickstarter-related emails he’s gotten, check message boards, and manage fulfillment and customer service.) He says the process helped shorten his production timeline from the typical year or so to 30 days.

After Wilson’s success, several other industrial design projects popped up on the site (including a few similar iPod accessories). Wilson’s big corporate clients say they’re jealous of his experience, while other designers have asked him for advice on using Kickstarter to get closer to their customers. Wilson says that in the coming months, more companies will be inspired to use the platform, and there may soon be demand for a full-fledged commercial version. “Kickstarter has a huge opportunity,” he says.

**At least so far,** the founders are studiously avoiding that opportunity. Sitting in Schiller’s, a restaurant on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, at 11 am—an early start for Chen, who usually comes in around lunchtime—the founders say they don’t want to see their site go corporate. Since Wilson’s project, Kickstarter fans have been wondering what the first $1 million project will be, but the Kickstarter guys say they couldn’t care less. “The album that costs $2 million is not the best album of the year,” Chen says. They point out that only 10 percent of Kickstarter funds have gone toward the creation of gadgets or other tech products, and they don’t seem eager to increase that number.

It’s hard to blame them. More money, as the saying goes, more problems. Right now, Kickstarter donors are happy to chip in funds to help a new artist or fledgling company get started. If they don’t receive the rewards they were promised—if that CD never gets recorded or that camera strap never gets made—it’s mildly disappointing but an acceptable risk. But if Kickstarter loses its personal touch, if it becomes little more than a corporate presales channel, things get more complicated. (At least one would-be competitor, a New York startup called [Quirky](http://www.quirky.com/), is taking this kind of sales-driven approach.) What happens when a Kickstarter inventor fails—when he can’t deliver the product his customers think they’ve already purchased? What is the creator’s responsibility when she raises more money than she needs? What if someone simply scams funders, taking the cash and running off to Barbados? Right now, the site operates on the honor system. But if the stakes grow higher, it doesn’t take much imagination to foresee a morass of lawsuits, escrow accounts, and mellow-harshing rules and regulations. Small wonder, then, that the founders would want to protect their starving-artist ethos.

That won’t be easy. The Kickstarter guys are now getting phone calls—from big brands, rock stars, people with patents and NDAs, people who hope to sell their products at Walmart. (So far they say they’ve steered away from anything that smacks of corporate complications.) And in spring, the company expects to move into new offices, a larger space better suited to a burgeoning startup.

Klein, the Vimeo cofounder, says that if Kickstarter outgrows its current vetting process, which has Strickler’s team approving each project, it will have to adapt. The solution, he says, is more transparency: “Reputation systems will become very important. They became essential to good business transactions on eBay. We’ll need to know more about somebody before we give our money to them.”

In any case, just as Twitter outgrew its beginnings as a humble messaging system, Kickstarter may not be able to maintain its low profile much longer. “The most interesting companies demonstrate emergent behavior,” says [Fred Wilson](http://content.usv.com/pages/fred-wilson), a venture capitalist at Union Square Ventures, which invested in Kickstarter. “People’s use of the service is never what the creators intended.”

*Carlye Adler* ([carlye@carlyeadler.com](mailto:carlye@carlyeadler.com)) *wrote about gadget blogs in issue 16.04.*