

Serial Entrepreneur David Mansbery Revolutionizes the Way We Cook

By Beverly K. Bell

So what exactly is ‘cool?’

A fast sports car? A cute rock star? Maybe it’s a movie or video game loaded with special effects or a cell phone that records music, takes pictures and manages your schedule. A popular vacation spot can be cool. Ditto on the newest restaurant.

What is definitely not cool is an oven. On the typical slate of everyone-wants-it, gotta-have-it, can’t-live-without-it items, ovens are not only nowhere on the radar screen, they’re nowhere, *period*. Granted, an oven can be cold, but anyone can tell you that cold isn’t cool when it comes to what’s hot.

That’s about to change. There’s a new addition to the ‘it’ list. Decked out in stainless steel with a touch-screen menu, Tonight’s Menu Intelligent Oven (TMIO) can both cool and heat, allowing its owner to control the oven, via the Internet.

The man behind the revolutionary invention is Dave Mansbery, a self-described “serial entrepreneur” from Brecksville, Ohio, who looked at the way families cook and eat, and decided that existing ovens weren’t keeping pace with consumers’ busy lifestyles. Guided by a relentless passion, he has made the unconventional out of the conventional. In the process, he has abandoned outdated appliance design from the early 1900s in favor of 21st century know-how that delivers what technology has promised for so long — easier living.

It all began in summer 1994 when Mansbery’s youngest son, Steven, got involved in travel baseball. The schedule expanded to a grueling 90-game season and the Mansbery family found themselves spending countless evenings at ballparks. Their fairly healthy dinner habits deteriorated into a steady diet of hot dogs and fast food.

Mansbery targeted the blame for the family’s poor nutrition at the metal appliance sitting in his kitchen. “Out of the madness of baseball, I walked up to the oven and I said, ‘I don’t like you,’” Mansbery recalls. A new oven was the only solution, one that could both cool and heat, and be operated with a remote device.

In November 1994, he decided to take action. He made contact with David York, chief of flight software engineering for NASA. The space agency, he learned, was trying to figure out how to use the Internet as a means of command and control for some of its on-board computers. Mansbery was in a similar boat. He wanted to send signals to and from the oven, while controlling its operation from a remote location.

For the next four years, he tackled other aspects of his oven idea. He experimented with compatible software and hardware. Taking a conventional microwave, he equipped it with his own communications package. Using a thermoelectric method of cooling, he overcame the refrigeration hurdle.

Then in 1998, he met again with NASA and this time, it provided the final piece of the puzzle. Embedded Web technology would allow for the installation of a single board computer with Internet access into a device or an appliance. The question of how to command and control the oven had been answered. Patents were issued to Mansbery and his associates in September 2000.

By early 2001, Mansbery was ready to introduce the TMIO concept to the world. For an invention, there is no better coming-out party than the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) held every year in Las Vegas, Nev. CES is the largest electronics trade show, attracting more than 130,000 visitors and a virtual who’s who in the electronics industry.

Mansbery expected everyone to welcome his brainchild with open arms. It didn’t happen. In fact, when Mansbery tried to talk to representatives at the Microsoft booth about the oven, they wouldn’t even take his printed literature.

Undeterred, he returned the next year, this time bringing a microwave prototype and buying exhibition space. His booth was located in no-man’s land, at the far reaches of the convention center. Yet, when the consumer-electronics network Tech TV ran a feature on the oven, Mansbery and his invention became a hot commodity. Attendees lined up 20 wide, six deep at the TMIO display. Mansbery knew he had crossed a critical threshold.

At the 2003 show, the oven won the Innovations Design and Engineering Showcase Award, which recognizes the best of the year’s most technically advanced products.

In November of that year, *Time* magazine named the oven one of the coolest inventions of 2003. Both CNN and “*Good Morning America*” featured the product and *Reader’s Digest* recently included it in its list of America’s 100 Best New Inventions.

But the oven struck gold in January when it received the 2004 CES Best of Innovations Award in the home appliance category. The fact that this humble oven from Brecksville, Ohio, hit the jackpot in the hotbed of gambling — Las Vegas — seemed appropriate.

The awards have lent additional credibility to TMIO. While Microsoft wouldn’t even speak to Mansbery at the 2001 CES, TMIO is now part of the Microsoft Partner Program in which the software giant recognizes expertise in a field and provides marketing and sales support.

Brett Larson, tech and science editor for WCBS-TV New York isn’t surprised by the positive reaction. From the moment he learned about the idea in 2002, he knew that Mansbery was onto something.

“What struck me about this device was not only Dave’s enthusiasm for the product, but also the practical application of technology,” says Larson. “More often than not, I see technology solve no real problem — a sort of technology for technology’s sake.” The intelligent oven, he says, addresses the real issue of helping busy, active families eat better.

Cool/Connect/Cook

Today, “Cool/Connect/Cook” is the slogan for the revolutionary new oven, but it might as well be the catchphrase for the inventor himself. With cool confidence, he has plugged into the needs of consumers with his various businesses. If momentum is a precursor for success, then Mansbery is definitely “cooking” and has been for some time.

Just four years after graduating from UK in 1976 with a degree in accounting, the then 26 year old left his job at Republic Steel Corporation in Cleveland, Ohio, and with \$9,000 to his name, started Duck Creek Energy, an oil and gas exploration company. Three years later, Mansbery formed JDS Energy, which marketed natural gas.

Deregulated natural gas is nothing new today, but 20 years ago, JDS Energy was the first company to provide service on the Dominion-East Ohio Gas system. “People laughed at me,” Mansbery remembers. “They said, ‘People aren’t going to buy gas from you. You’re not the utility company.’ I smiled and said, ‘Oh yes they will.’”

Mansbery got the last laugh. Not only are both companies going strong, JDS Energy is one of the largest natural gas marketers in Ohio.

In addition to his oil and gas companies, the divorced father of two started Fielder’s Choice Baseball, an indoor baseball school in Cleveland. This particular project was driven by both his love of the game and what he saw as a need for quality instruction. Busy lifestyles were once again the culprit, Mansbery says, with parents having less time to pitch ball with their children. “We wanted to make them better players, better (at) fundamentals, start them at a young age,” he says.

On his 50th birthday in May, Mansbery received one of the best presents imaginable: the first Fielders Choice player to make it to the majors signed with the Seattle Mariners.

The personal drive behind all these endeavors as well as TMIO comes from the same place inside of Mansbery. His older brother, Rusty, suffered with serious kidney problems most of his life. Mansbery watched his only sibling in his day-in, day-out, life-and-death struggle. Even with their mother donating one of her kidneys, Rusty died in 1975 at the age of 25, teaching Mansbery that in comparison to his brother’s fight, most of life’s setbacks are insignificant. It also left him with a sense of urgency and a deep understanding that every day is important.

Perhaps it was this philosophy of going after life instead of waiting for it to come to him that led him to the University of Kentucky. Possessing above-average basketball skills, the Ohio native graduated from high school in 1972 and believed he might be able to walk on at UK. Referring now to his initial sports goal as “misguided” thinking, he visited the campus, liked what he saw and enrolled.

While basketball pursuits didn’t pan out, the university provided Mansbery with the learning environment he needed to succeed. “The ’70s were somewhat of a tumultuous time. Yet, Kentucky was able to keep a set of standards,” Mansbery says. “Kentucky allowed you to have some discipline in your life. All kids, including myself, need that structure and discipline, especially when you’re away from home the first time.”

Entering college, he was a teenager with a C+ average and mainly interested in three things; basketball, baseball and golf. "Then I went on to Kentucky and realized the next four years in school (were) going to determine my lifestyle," he says. He got serious about his classes and ended up with a 3.4 average.

Mansbery had planned to join the FBI upon graduation. At the time, the usual career path into the agency was either with a law or an accounting degree. But after working two summers during college for his future employer, Republic Steel, Mansbery's interest in the FBI waned. In 1976, he accepted a full-time position with the company, continued his education and earned a master's degree in finance from Case Western Reserve University.

When it came time for his two sons to attend college, Mansbery asked them to consider UK. They did more than that. Both graduated from UK in 2003 with finance degrees. David Jr. and Steven are currently enrolled in law school in Ohio.

Future Plans

As for TMIO, the oven is expected to hit the market by the first quarter of 2005. With design teams in Tennessee, tool and die operations in Louisville and software experts in North Carolina, Mansbery is using his past experience in the oil and gas industry to build ovens. Overseeing the drilling of 500 wells in four states taught him how to take a project from "bare rock" to a functioning surface facility.

TMIO will retail for \$7,500 and will compete with professional series, double-wall ovens that typically sell for \$5,000. Mansbery is also working on a compartmentalized microwave that can cool and cook three separate meals. It's designed to help elderly people who need extra help, but want to maintain their independent living.

And to think that all this innovation comes from a "numbers guy" who planned on working for the FBI, switched to oil and gas, and now is on the cusp of changing the kitchen forever. What's even more amazing is that throughout the entire TMIO venture, with all the national press it's garnered, Mansbery has never hired a public relations firm or a publicist.

Then again, when you invent something as cool as TMIO, it's hard not to be hot.

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