variations, but she wasn’t interested in making cheaper versions of her own product. “I truly focus on what’s going to bring value to my business and studio as far as quality of life,” she says. “Offering a lower-cost line wouldn’t improve our quality of life at the studio.”

Instead she decided to thwart knock-off artists—and foster a culture of making—by providing guerrilla DIYers with the tools to create their own pieces. She posted “You Make It” instructions on her website detailing how to construct Adelman-style chandeliers using standard parts available on Amazon. The move has had the indirect benefit of boosting her brand awareness, as well as helping the designer step up her own game. “Knockoffs are a catalyst to continue to develop new work,” she says. “It gives me motivation to stay one step ahead and to work at a higher skill level.”

Designer Sara Selpepouchin founded Girls Can Tell, which sells tea towels, lunch bags and coasters adorned with her signature diagram illustrations for $14 to $40. She has seen copies of her products in the marketplace—including one by a kitchen-goods behemoth whose representatives had visited her booth at a trade show. “A lot of people have one thing they’re known for, so it’s particularly devastating when that one thing is knocked off,” she says.

For Selpepouchin, who has been alerted to imitators by friends and fans, the uniqueness of her aesthetic serves as protection. “If you really have an authentic look and feel, you’re doing that much of a favor to yourself,” she says. “Your brand will protect itself.” She is also very protective of where she sources her materials. “That makes it a lot harder for people to really knock off what I’m making,” she points out.

Marc Misthal, a partner at Gottlieb, Rackman & Reisman, a New York firm specializing in intellectual property law, agrees. “It’s going to be easier to legally protect something that people look at and say, ‘That’s a whomever design.’” He suggests going a step further by securing exclusivity with suppliers for materials.

Josh Owen, who runs his eponymous design studio in New York and chairs the Industrial Design Department at Rochester Institute of Technology, says one key to defending designs against copycats is being first in the marketplace. New mechanisms—such as membership-based prototype facilities, crowdsourced manufacturing and the ability to sell directly through one’s own website—allow nascent designers to get up and running faster than ever before.

“It’s still not a perfect system,” Owen says, “but designers are more empowered now.” Most of all, he warns his students, “Don’t hold your ideas so close that you become a paranoid troglodyte hiding in your basement holding onto these ideas. You have to strike a balance between being a steward of your ideas and finding partners who can help protect them.”