Colleen DeBase answers questions about patenting ideas, marketing jewelry and the costs of a family restaurant

Q: My partner and I have a great multimedia-business idea that we want to put into action. I would love to tell you what it is, but am afraid if word gets out, we'll be too late. How do we get a patent, so we can lock down our concept before someone else gets wind and runs with it?

—Will, Atlanta

A: First off, don't assume that a patent is the ultimate safeguard. "Philosophically, folks assume there is some sort of special protection for them out there while they develop their plan" into a viable business, says Maria Scungio, co-chair of the trademark and copyright-protection group at Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge LLP in New York. "The short answer is there's not."

The irony of filing with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office is that your application (complete with descriptions and drawings) becomes public record, generally 18 months after filing. That means any competitors can view your idea—and adopt a slightly different version, if they desire—while you're developing your business.

Also, don't take for granted that your concept is patentable in the first place. In general, you need to show that you've invented a system, process or method that's useful, novel and "nonobvious"—that is, your idea can't be well known or commonplace to somebody who understands the field.

"You shouldn't assume you're the first one on the scene," Ms. Scungio says. Perform a search on the USPTO's Web site, which lists some seven million patents, to see if your invention currently exists. Or seek the advice of a patent attorney, who can assist you in the search, advise you on whether your idea is protectable and help you prepare an application—for a fee, of course.

Expect to pay hundreds of dollars in legal fees just for the search, and easily between $10,000 and $20,000 depending on the complexity—to secure a patent.

Last, don't become so consumed with staying mum and seeking a patent that you delay execution of your great idea.

"For most people out there, a patent is not what you need," says Bo Fishback, vice president of entrepreneurship for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo. "You need to get started and build something of value."

To do so, you need to consult any number of people—potential business partners, investors and customers—about your great idea. "One of the risks you take as an entrepreneur is talking to people who will be helpful, and who you're pretty sure won't run off and steal it," Mr. Fishback says. "Ideas are worth nothing until other people know about them."

Q: My husband and I have recently started a business making and selling Southwest-inspired jewelry. We are beginning to participate in craft shows, but how else can we market our product to a larger audience?

—Lisa Daggett, Los Cruces, N.M.

A: It's a fine idea to attend craft shows, especially big ones where you might meet buyers, vendors and potential partners. But keep in mind: You'll need a clever way to set yourself apart from the pack. To do that, think about the story you wish to tell. What inspired you to start the business? Do your pieces have cultural or spiritual significance? Have you designed them for people to wear on job interviews or first dates?

"You are not just selling jewelry—everybody is trying to sell jewelry—you are selling your story," says Jen Groover, serial entrepreneur and author of "What If? & Why Not?", a book about starting your own business. "That is what makes people connect with you and want to buy from you."

That story can become a central part of your overall marketing strategy, Ms. Groover says. Use it to land media opportunities, perhaps with your local newspaper or television station. And use it to develop ties with other businesses, particularly those in related fields, with whom you might build cross-marketing relationships.

For instance, ask a successful clothing retailer with a robust client base to give your customers a freebie—such as a pair of your earrings, with a print version of your story attached—with purchases. Or you might consider an affiliate marketing program.

"Find other people who like your jewelry, and give them incentives to sell it through their Web sites," such as a small percentage of sales, Ms. Groover says.

Once you've built your brand, you may be able to win a licensing deal with a corporation that has resources in place to manufacture, distribute and market your designs to a much larger audience.

Q: How much money does it take to open a restaurant when you will be staffing it with mostly family?

—Jackie Raney, Houston

A: Payroll is just one of the many costs associated with starting a restaurant. No matter how many of your relatives are cooking or waiting tables, your biggest expense will likely be the space you're leasing.

"Nothing supersedes facility costs," says Howard Cannon, chief executive of Restaurant Consultants of America in Chelsea, Ala., a consulting firm that advises aspiring restaurateurs.

Often, a restaurant fails because the owners have neglected to consider the impact of monthly rent on their cash flow, Mr. Cannon says.

"They can figure out labor, and food and beverage, but they tend not to consider that they are spending $208 per square foot for a restaurant that's selling $1 hamburgers," Mr. Cannon says.

In general, whether you're opening a restaurant or any business, your best approach to estimating start-up costs is to brainstorm everything you'll need to open your doors, from tangible goods (such as inventory, equipment and fixtures) to professional services (such as modeling, advertising and legal work).

Then, develop an operating budget for the first six months or even year of business, factoring in ongoing or "carrying" costs, which is the money needed to pay for rent, utilities, taxes and other expenses. For help, try the WSJ Startup Calculator at WSJ.com/smallbusiness.

Send your questions about starting or managing a small business to smalltalk@wsj.com