

## Rockin' Chairs

I recently had the good fortune to bump into Mark and Jon Owen at a business event in Cardiff and was immediately intrigued by both their product, and the way in which they had developed it and got it to the market. Those with design heads will of course marvel about ergonomics, design and manufacturing but what about the human side, what about (dare I say it) Innovation? I'm sure that Jon and Mark did not really see themselves as innovators but they are doing something different and making headway, so what happened?



Mark had been a wheelchair user for over a decade and had been going with the flow. Wheelchairs were an engineering solution to a medical condition. Did that have to be the case? Had being confined to a wheel chair caused a major personality shift, changed his interests or priorities in life? No, but it had placed him in an entirely new bracket within society. He was now classed as disabled. One thing that struck Mark and Jon was the ugliness of mobility products. Just as we feel close to our iPhone or other gadget, so Mark had a gadget that was with him all of the time which was transport, sofa and office chair - so why couldn't it be cool too?

Nomad was born! Why hadn't this been done before, why did nobody see this opportunity? Was it market, was it international conglomerates or blinkered stakeholders (you decide)? With an emphasis on design and with access to a unique perspective on the marketplace a unique wheelchair was born. Made of lightweight aluminium, engineered to provide day long comfort and requiring less effort it sure does look cool, even people who are not disabled will want to have a go! You can even propel yourself with one hand!

So how did they get here and more importantly how did Mark and Jon start out? A discussion whilst on holiday convinced them that this was possible. Time out to think is always important, without it the results could have been a badly engineered product in a garden shed!



Inspiration was drawn from a variety of sources, not just pinching ideas but values and lifestyle cues as well. So take a look at a Nomad chair and you may very well see hints from cars, bikes and fashion. All good stuff but knowing what you want is great, how do you actually get there? Usually this means engaging outside help to acquire the skills that you yourself do not possess. It also means that you also have more people to bounce ideas off and gain inspiration from. In this case, local designers were the key.

Was it all plain sailing? Jon says that prototyping was a little tricky as others do not always wish to push the boundaries, but they can be convinced if the vision is strong enough and the message is compelling. How many people say to you “that will never work”? Being brothers of a similar age, Mark and Jon often disagree but seem to have a fairly comprehensive support system that includes both each other and parents so (creative) tension is channelled into Nomad and is seen as a positive factor. Do readers of this article actually think about their own environment, support mechanisms and close advisors?

Mark and Jon seem to have created an effective ‘mash’ of traditional and innovative with their approaches to design, planning, risk assessment, company culture and having fun. They have balanced risk and planning, creativity and control but above all they have an in depth understanding of their environment (both internal and external) and are revelling in the challenges and opportunities that they are discovering. By coincidence, these are also the main drivers to ensure that a business has a (high) capacity to innovate. The future looks bright for Nomad.

This article has been produced with the assistance of Nomad. To find out more about their products or contact them directly please go to <http://www.nomadwheelchairs.com>