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Inventor Kitter Spater, left, and his wife, Erica, with help from their dog Zelda, demonstrate how the Backseat Barrier product Kitter invented is used to prevent canines from moving around inside a car.

## Inventive mind

Portsmouth man tinkers at home, and cranks out new products

By Michael McCord  
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PORTSMOUTH — Spend a few minutes with Kitter Spater and it doesn't take long to realize that he looks at the world differently than most of us.

Spater, 32, is a compulsive tinkerer who also happens to be an inventor with an entrepreneurial bent. He's a principal in a Newburyport, Mass.-based business called Motivation Design that develops, markets and sells products he's invented.

"I'm not a micro guy," Spater tells me as we stand in the drive way of the Portsmouth home he shares with his wife, Erica, and their dog Zelda. "It's best to be master of nothing and a tinkerer of

everything," he said.

Spater's tinkering has led so far to a full-time career as an established inventor of patented, and patent-pending products that people are actually buying — practical products such as Tire Totes, Tire Tote Wheel Felts, the Emergency Tire Tote, Tire Garage, and his latest gadget, Backseat Barrier.

(Funny thing about Spater's current auto-related theme of inventions. "You'd think I was a big car nut but I'm not," he said.)

The secret to his success so far? "It's important to take time to look at people and see how they accomplish tasks, how they interact with different

products and tools," said Spater, who admits to lingering in various stores just watching people.

It's not surprising to hear that Spater, a native of southern Vermont, studied anthropology and studio art as an undergraduate at the University of Vermont. He wasn't interested necessarily in following in Margaret Meade's footsteps by studying primitive or ancient cultures — observing modern, civilized Homosapiens using their gadgets was enough to spark his imagination.

Another factor so far has been Erica's status as the family breadwinner. Just recently, Kitter drew his first paycheck because sales have been on the rise of late. "It's always exciting, always something new and it always generates plenty of con-

### ON THE WEB

See more about Motivation Design and its product line at [www.motivation-design.com](http://www.motivation-design.com).

versation," Erica Spater told me about being married to an inventor. "It also means moving a lot of stuff back and forth around the kitchen."

Erica studied industrial design herself so she also helps out as "a sounding board" to Kitter's busy stream of ideas.

Motivation Design is a two-person (Kitter's brother Gordon is the business and marketing whiz of the family), two-year venture, conceived in Brooklyn, N.Y., at an incubator associated with the Pratt Institute.

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## Inventor makes a career out of tinkering

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Spater did graduate work in industrial design at Pratt and found he had a gift for pragmatic yet innovative product solving.

Consider the Tire Tote. It's hard to believe but in this great country of tinkers, there was no product quite like Tire Tote, which covers a tire and can be easily handled because, well, there is a handle with the special fabric cover.

The Tire Tote, the company's most popular product to date, was born out of Spater's own childhood experiences and frustrations with lugging around tires after seasonal tire changes. He was also astute enough to know there are approximately 10 million snow tires purchased annually and that means 2,500,000 potential customers tired of lugging dirty, plastic-sheathed tires into the garage.

"I like to look at a problem and want to solve it," Spater said. He must like looking at a lot of problems at once. Four times a year he and Gordon put together a list of 100 potential products ideas.

"Some of them are the worst you can imagine. But some of them are pretty good," Spater explained. He has initially focused on the protective/safety side of the product equation

but has learned, by watching closely, that Americans aren't the most proactive creatures when it comes to safety.

The Backseat Barrier, which retails for around \$49.95 has the potential to be a very good idea because it solves a potentially serious safety problem — dogs who can't stay still in a moving automobile.

"Erica and I have been concerned about this ever since we got Zelda five years ago," Kitter told me. Zelda is an excitable, 50-pound Plott Hound who liked to sit on the center armrest or tried to climb into the front of the car. Spater experimented with different fabrics and bungee chord configurations before settling on an elegant solution of nylon and Velcro that works as a baby gate for the restless fido set.

"This is going to be our biggest seller," Spater predicts. And if you think that in this early stage of the 21st century that Spater simply sits down at his laptop and goes through numerous design paradigms before settling on his favorite, you'd be wrong.

He literally tinkers with materials, cutting and sewing (using Erica's old Singer machine), and building the potential final product one stitch at a time.

One odd quirk. Before the products are made in factories in

China — the only place he can afford small-scale production — Spater rarely sends technical specs to the manufacturers.

They like tearing apart a finished prototype and reverse engineering it for production.

You don't have to go far to realize a fundamental truth about the global economy — if China doesn't make it today, it likely will tomorrow. While looking for an affordable manufacturer, Spater called the Chinese Consulate in New York and was sent to a Web site containing the names of hundreds upon hundreds of manufacturers along with the types of fabrics they produced.

Spater admits to being afraid of having his creations being produced out of sight and so far away, especially in a country with a deserved reputation for patent stealing. For now he has to run on faith that the manufacturers he uses are not ethically challenged.

Motivation Design — the name arose from a beer-drinking conversation between overworked graduate students who wondered where their motivation had gone — has been kept afloat through private financing from friends and family Spater said he's looking for a second round of investors who can help his company move into the next growth phase.



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Kitter Spater's Tire Tote holds a tire and has a handle for easy carrying.

"We're really close to breaking even," he said. "We're gaining traction." Spater's products are starting to pop up in Brookstone catalogs and at Canadian Tire, a major department store chain which he said was like "Canada's Wal-Mart."

His products also can be found locally at Discount Tire, Bavarian Auto Sports and, in a few months, at VIP auto stores.

He plans to hire the company's first non-family employees to bolster its sales capabilities. And Kitter Spater tells me he's ready to branch into other

invention lines. Though he wouldn't reveal any detailed secrets, he did tell me that Americans are going through a do-it-yourself home remodeling and are transporting a lot of materials in vehicles not necessarily suited for the task ... and they may need some gadgets to make tasks a little easier to do.

Michael McCord is the Herald business editor. Beginning June 26, Out on a Limb will move to the front page of the Sunday business section.

Beene had worked at Tyco International as an administrative assistant at its former headquarters in Exeter for almost nine years before being laid off in 1998, when the company began moving most of its operations moved to Boca Raton, Fla.

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## Private