

Into the Dragons' Den

Sceptical millionaires in the Dragons' Den were the least of inventor Chris Haines' problems when it came to developing his bright idea, the Safe-T-Light. He tells Simon Evans his story

CHRIS HAINES vividly recalls his 'Eureka' moment. "It was 2003, and I was visiting my mother's house in Guernsey when she told me she had nearly fallen downstairs when there was a power cut. It struck me that the one safety measure we are told to invest in, which is a torch, is no use when you don't have any light, because you can't find it in the dark, or the batteries are flat, and you can't see to change them.

"What made it worse is that she had two

night lights, one just outside her bedroom door and the other in the hall. Yet the night-lights had, not surprisingly, gone off with all the others when the power failed.

"So all these things were going through my mind, and that's when it struck me that in such a situation you need something that combines the functions of both a torch and a night light, that you can find easily, and then use to move around in the dark without falling over. Within a few days I came up with a basic prototype of what

would later become the Safe-T-Light."

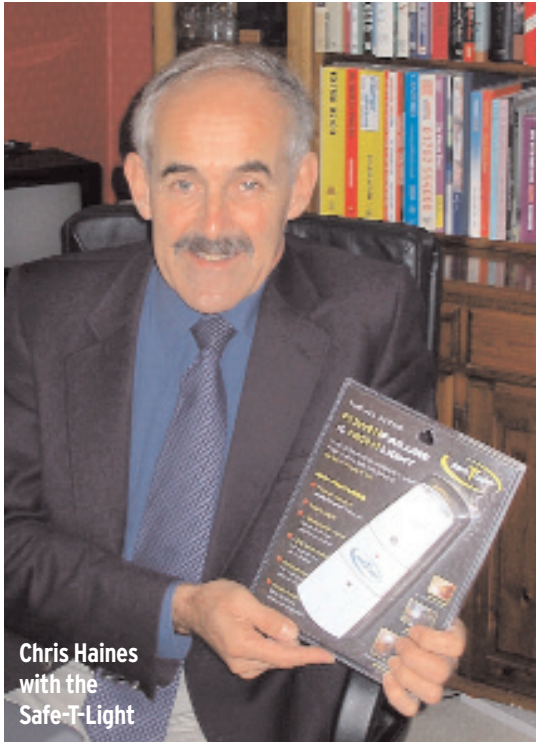
Convinced he had found a gap in the safety market, Chris set about taking it to the market place. He'd already had his fingers burnt some 30 years earlier, and was determined not to be caught out again. In fact, as Chris recalls, if not for that hard lesson the Safe-T-Light might never have got off the ground.

"It was 1971 and I was 23, studying, not very successfully, at the Royal Agricultural College. I happened to read in the paper



Facing the Dragons was the least of Safe-T-Light inventor Chris Haines' problems

BBC PICTURE LIBRARY



Chris Haines with the Safe-T-Light

The Safe-T-Light

The Safe-T-Light plugs into the mains, and in the event of a power failure switches to an internal rechargeable battery, providing emergency lighting for about ten hours. The head of the light can be removed and used as a torch.

When not needed, the Safe-T-Light provides gentle lighting, its light sensor automatically switching it on as night falls.

The low voltage nature of the illumination (it uses 20 times less power than the average light bulb) makes

the unit much safer than a conventional night light. If a normal night light lens cover is broken, the exposed bulb could give a dangerous electric shock, whereas, its inventor Chris Haines points out, the bulbs in the Safe-T-Light present no such danger.



How the Safe-T-Light can be helpful, especially for the elderly

that five children had died that year, getting hold of their parents' medicines. So I designed a bottle cap you had to push and twist at the same time, which would stop children under three opening up the bottle.

"I put all my designs to a marketing company, who charged me about £80 and came back a couple of months later with an appraisal of the product, basically saying there was no future in the design because pharmaceutical companies would never change their packaging.

"I gave up the idea and thought nothing more of it until 1979, when I had chronic back-ache and went to the chemist to get some pain-killers. I remember coming out of the chemist and looking at the bottle-cap of the pills, which used the same push and twist idea I'd had eight years earlier. It wasn't identical to mine, but it was exactly the same principle, so I thought, I was just too early for the idea to be taken up."

Bearing this in mind, Chris resolved that, when it came to presenting his idea for the Safe-T-Light, he would not be so easily discouraged.

"One of B&Q's suppliers said there was no market for it, which was disappointing, but I remember thinking 'that's exactly what they said about the bottle cap'.

I knew there was a need for it, because my mother nearly fell down the stairs. I didn't know then that more people are killed in the home than on the roads, and many of those are caused by falls. Not all

of those are caused by power cuts, but a lot of them are."

Undeterred by the initial reaction to his invention Chris set about looking for a designer and, through them, found a factory to produce the Safe-T-Light. By October 2005 Chris took delivery of the first container of lights, which is when the next problem presented itself – who would buy them?

"The two years producing the Safe-T-Light were difficult enough, before I could even start selling it, but I hadn't anticipated how difficult it would be to market it. Retail groups won't see one-product companies, so it's very difficult to get it to the market place."

Although he had been promised several orders while the Safe-T-Light was still in production, these failed to materialise, so Chris had to put a box in the back of his car and sell them direct to the shops.

Having worked for many years as a salesman Chris set about this task with surgical precision, researching a particular area, finding shops that may be interested in taking his invention, then driving there the next day and doing the hard sell.

"I tried disability shops, hardware shops and electrical shops and went round selling them out of the boot of my car," Chris recalls. The response was staggering. "I would sell in probably eight out of ten calls to independent shopkeepers, which is a very high ratio indeed, believe me."

Enter the Dragons

Having realised the demand for his product, Chris realised he would need some financial backing to be able to take his product to the next level – which is when he decided to audition for the *Dragons' Den* TV programme.

For anyone unfamiliar with the show, it gives entrepreneurs the chance to pitch their particular idea to five successful businesspeople, in the hope that they will win some backing. The gladiatorial nature of the programme makes for great television – and there have been several success stories associated with it. Chris's experience of the show was a mixed one, although he has no regrets about taking part.

"The audition wasn't that rigorous, you are just there with two people and a cameraman and you explain your product as if you were doing the TV programme. I found it very easy to talk about the Safety Light, because I understand the problems that it solves."

The programme was filmed in December 2006 and eventually aired in March the following year. Although Chris's presentation took 50 minutes, only about ten minutes of that was used.

One aspect of Chris's pitch that was kept in the finished show – and caused much comment from viewers – was his confrontation with one of the Dragons, Peter Jones.

"He kept on comparing it to a night



Chris, left, winning an award

light and didn't understand," Chris recalls. "He actually got quite annoyed because at one stage he told me 'you've nothing unique here, unless I've missed the point,' and I said, 'well, yes you have', because I was amazed that he couldn't understand what I was saying.

"After the show I had one e-mail from a lady in Wales who said she'd tried to phone Peter to explain it. He kept saying he had these touch lights, but my point was you've got to find your way in the dark to find them in the first place."

Chris found another of the Dragons, Theo Paphitis, much more amenable.

"I didn't get on with him at first," Chris admits, "but then he asked me what I'd been doing with my life, and I told him I'd run a family business for 21 years then been sailing for eight years, so he asked me 'what happened, did you get lost?'"

"I realised what I'd said – here I am in front high-powered business people asking them for £100,000 and I've admitted I'm rather prone to going off sailing for eight years. So Theo kept coming back at me, asking how big the boat was, and why did I need to be there if I'd got so much money. So we had quite a little banter."

"Theo said he didn't have a problem with power cuts in the UK, although between the recording and the screening there were tens of thousands of people who had suffered power cuts. Theo went on to say that at his house in Spain they get power cuts all the time and he would install some of the lights there."

Theo – in concert with fellow Dragon Deborah Meaden – eventually came up with an offer of £95,000 to back Chris's invention, in exchange for 30 per cent of the company. "I'd actually only been offering 10 per cent of the company, so,

although I was delighted to get the backing of two of the Dragons, it was a very difficult decision to have to make on the spot," Chris recalls, "but I thought it was worth pursuing.

"Later, what scared me was the contract. It was 34 pages long and that's when I began to think, the Dragons don't get

that wealthy by being kind. I had this fear that if I signed something now and then tried to do something two or three years down the line I'd be told I couldn't do it. I thought, I can't work like that, and that's why I started looking for other options."

Chris never actually turned down the Dragons' offer, but his accountant advised him to ask them what they could bring to the table, other than finance. "I never got a reply to that," Chris explains, "so it left me in a kind of limbo."

Beyond the Dragons

Boosted by a clutch of awards for his product, including a double gold award at the prestigious Alexandra Palace Inventions Fair, Chris set about looking for other partners, and hit upon Hometech, a well-established electrical appliance company.

"Where the Dragons are involved in retail, Hometech are involved in manufacturing, and I could see the attraction in that," Chris says. "Also, I haven't lost any of the equity in my company through the tie-up with Hometech."

Although appearing on *Dragons' Den*

has not directly benefited his company, Chris has no regrets about the experience. "If nothing else it gives you a massive boost publicity-wise, since it's watched by about four million people, and when you are trying to sell a product to the public that can only be beneficial. I'm not ruling out going back to the Dragons, but at the moment I don't see the need for it."

In any case, through Chris's hard work over the past five years, the Safe-T-Light has already appeared in hundreds of shops and many catalogues, including Lakeland.

"That was a real boost," Chris says. "Lakeland is a very young and dynamic company, and not closed to innovation. It was one of four companies I sent a sample to in 2005 and the only company that took the trouble to send the sample back with a rejection letter, saying they didn't want to frighten customers with talk of power cuts.

"I sent a letter back thanking them for sending the sample back and saying I hope the directors don't have an elderly mother who's standing at the top of the stairs one day when there is a power cut. Two months later I had a letter asking me to resubmit the sample and, as a result of that, they put in an order for 1000. From that, and *Dragons' Den*, we have been bombarded by catalogues and online shops."

Chris is also grateful to *Choice* for publicising the Safe-T-Light back in February 2006. "*Choice* was the first magazine to carry any editorial about it, and we got 20 to 30 orders out of that, which we were very grateful for," Chris said.

He's currently working on a version of the Safe-T-Light for distribution in Europe, and is also looking to sell his invention to small hotels and B&Bs.

As Chris puts it: "Whenever you see something that appears to be an overnight success you often ignore the ten years it took getting there."



Find out more

■ The Safe-T-Light costs £22.99, including postage and packing. Go to: (www.safe-t-light.com), or write to: Safe-T-Light, Windward House, 34 Hayling Avenue, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO3 6EA, e-mail: (info@safetlight.co.uk).