

SOLIO®



Enterprise

Solio® manufacturer, Better Energy Systems, was founded in 2001 with a vision to develop renewable energy technologies. There was a gap in the market, with innovative technologies going unnoticed due to poor design, and poor marketing and distribution strategies. Chris Hornor, founder and Chief Executive Officer of Better Energy Systems, aimed to fill that gap.

The power gap

Chris and his team knew that, in the growing area of mobile technology, battery and energy technology was a huge limiting factor. Phones were starting to have attractive features such as TVs and radios, but they were quickly draining the life of the battery. This was the 'power gap' – the difference between battery technology and the increasing sophistication of technological devices. The batteries simply weren't keeping up with the technologies they were required to power.

Renewable energy

Chris saw huge advantages in using solar energy:

- It's convenient – no problems with different electrical systems or connections around the world, or concerns about finding an electrical socket; after all, there aren't many electrical outlets in the Himalayan foothills or the Australian outback for charging up your iPod®!
- It's environmentally friendly – solar energy doesn't use up precious fossil fuels.
- The sun's energy is free!



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The market place

Although there were solar chargers already on the market, research showed that they didn't work very effectively. Chris considered them poorly designed and marketed, and they were produced mainly for technicians in the industry rather than for mass market consumers making lifestyle choices. Better Energy Systems wanted to develop a brand that was seen as a 'must-have': go anywhere in the world, take your mobile phone, your iPod®, your Global Positioning System plus Solio® to power them all, wherever you are.

Issues

The challenges

Asked to sum up the challenges that he faced during the three years spent developing his dream, Chris identified:

- Maintaining a healthy cash flow
- Finding the right people to give advice
- Finding the people with expertise
- Managing the launch of Solio®
- Making sure no-one else used their ideas



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Development

Working with partners

To get the unique design of Solio® underway, Chris appointed designer David Fowler.

During the development of Solio®, Better Energy Systems also needed to make links with other companies. Chris approached a solar energy manufacturing company based in the USA who were making a product similar to the concept that he had planned, although they did not have a patent. Chris wanted to learn from their expertise as he had no experience of manufacturing and hoped that they would share the initial costs.

The discussions were successful and Chris signed a Joint Development Agreement with the American company, allowing 50/50 joint ownership of the solar technology. Once Better Energy Systems had developed their actual design for Solio®, they could then file their own design registration with the UK Intellectual Property Office in the UK.

In addition, Better Energy Systems approached engineering firms in Germany to run toxicity and life cycle analyses. They also worked with companies including Motorola®, Orange®, Apple® and Vodafone® when launching Solio® on to the market.

By establishing a relationship with partner companies, some of the costs of research and development could be shared, and friends and family had the confidence to invest in him. Chris also qualified for a grant from the Department of Trade & Industry, who also gave advice. Once Better Energy Systems started receiving orders, they could borrow money from the bank to complete the orders.



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Defining the brand

Chris had a vision that every stage of development of his solar charger should be thought about from the point of view of sustainability and the environment.

The innovative 'clam shell' design of the product was a successful blend of technology, the environment, durability and sustainability.

Better Energy Systems give no obvious messages in their promotion strategies about the environmental and ecological aspects of Solio®. Instead, they prefer to allow the whole brand to capture the environmental concept. A lot of thought went into the packaging and branding to give the underlying environmental message without appearing to dictate to the public how they should behave towards the environment.

Chris decided on France as their launch pad for Solio®, using their contacts in that country. This was less risky than a worldwide launch – if anything had gone wrong, the reputation of Better Energy Systems could be damaged on a global scale. But France was a success and, following the UK launch, the product sold out for the 2004 Christmas market!



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Protection

Throughout the research and development process, Chris and his team ensured their intellectual property was protected using Non-Disclosure Agreements and by registering designs and trade marks with the UK Intellectual Property Office.

Protecting Intellectual Property (IP)

Working closely with partners gave Chris access to the expertise and knowledge that he was unable to bring to his project himself. However, every discussion and meeting meant that more and more people were learning about Better Energy Systems' new ideas. Non-Disclosure Agreements and contractors' agreements were put in place to ensure that anything created in relation to Solio® became the property of Better Energy Systems and not the partners.

As Chris observes:

“When anyone is starting to develop a new product or a concept, who you tell and talk to about it is key... you don't just disclose to everybody what you are doing. If you do disclose, make sure you have a watertight Non-Disclosure Agreement.”

Once the development of Solio® was underway, Chris and David registered the designs with the UK Intellectual Property Office (www.ipo.gov.uk). This registration, together with the Non-Disclosure Agreements, gave Better Energy Systems the protection to go ahead and develop their product (and determine the research, development and launch plan) without worrying that someone else could use their ideas and enter the market ahead of them. This is crucial because it took around three years for Solio® to develop from concept to commercialisation.



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Outcome

Solio® is an effective and compact solar charger with its own fully integrated internal battery. It can be used to recharge a variety of devices, including mobile phones and iPods®, by capturing energy from the sun. Solio® is the most innovative solar charger on the market and its unique design makes using solar technology easier than ever. You just attach a cable to your phone or iPod®, press the button and the sun's energy recharges your device – that's it!

Plugging into the sun

Solio's® fan blade design, the Solar Blade, allows it to achieve maximum solar area for recharging. It neatly folds shut to the size of a small mobile phone when not in use.

Developing the trade mark

The product has been created so that it can be disassembled at the end of its life. Each individual Solio® can be re-used, made into something else or recycled. Trees have been planted to offset the carbon emissions of the manufacturing process. So, from day one, the consumer has purchased a product that is carbon-neutral and a net producer of clean renewable energy: a 'walking power station'. Chris observes: "The point of the brand name and getting the trade mark right in terms of relative costs is very important and, after you have decided on a brand and mark, you stick with it and make sure that you get it into every major market that you can."

Chris Hornor wanted to come up with a name for the product that was going to be universally acceptable and appealing – and that hadn't been used before. For a global brand, the name had to make sense (and not be offensive) in different languages.



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It was also important to think about the future of the product. If the name was trade marked, could it be used for future products when the brand was extended to other product areas? Better Energy Systems felt that the name 'Solio®' met these criteria. By registering their trade mark with the UK Intellectual Property Office, the company gained exclusive use of the name in the UK.

Additional learning

Diversifying for the future: the TREAD
Better Energy Systems built on the success of Solio® by looking for a case to hold the product. Lorenzo remembers:

“We were looking for a case using some form of environmental material for our Solio®, and whilst Chris was down in Colombia he came across these guys that work with rubber from truck tyres, from the inner tubes.”

The cases - called TREAD - are made from these inner tubes, and each one has its own unique pattern. The TREAD name relates to the tyres, but also implies making 'an environmental footprint'. Chris and Lorenzo were also excited by the unique selling point of using materials from Colombia, each case having its own unique history from its travels in South America.

