

THE FIFTH WAVE: HOW TO RIDE THE NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN TECH

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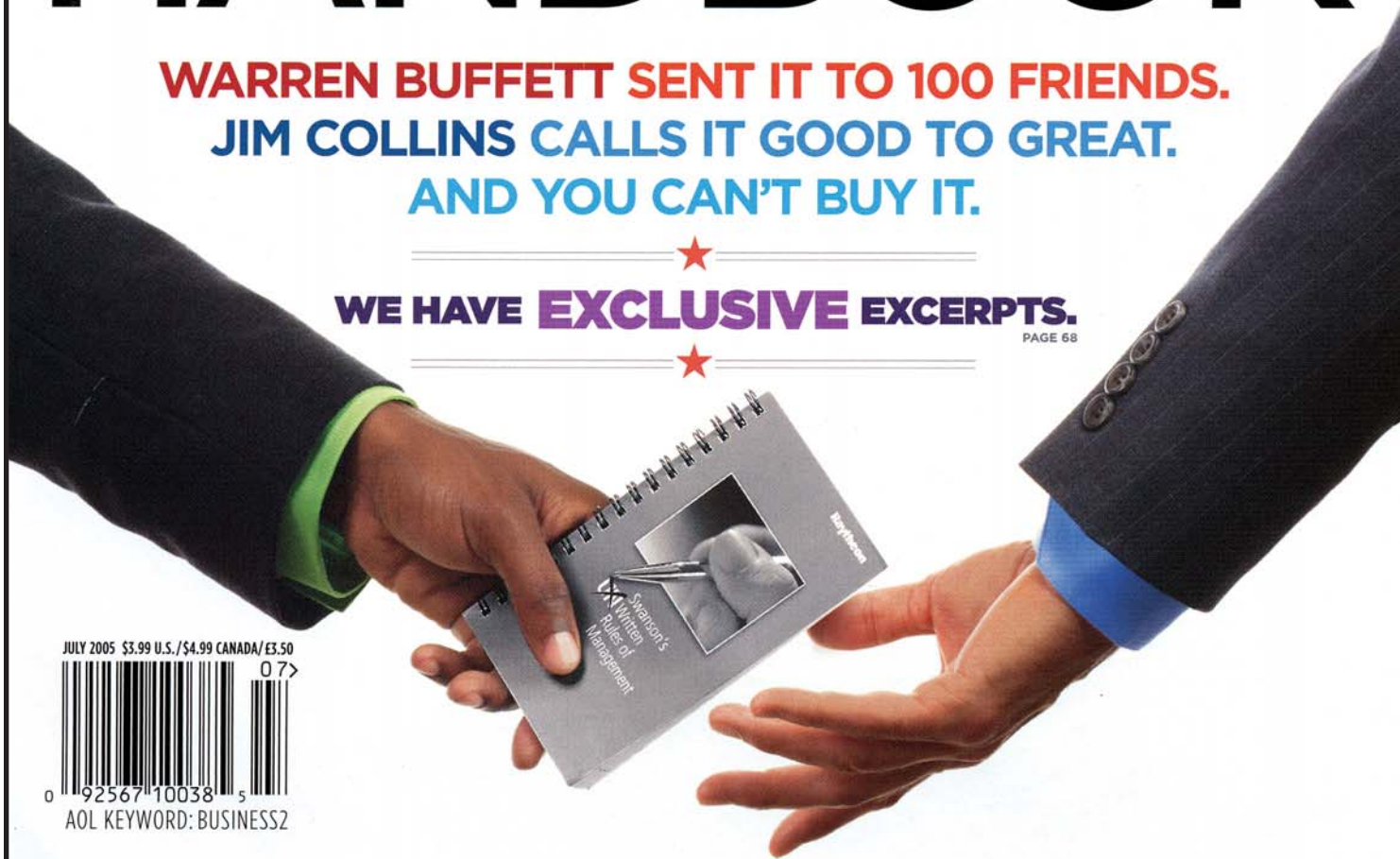
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# Thinking Out of the Clamshell

Everyone struggles with the packages Thomas Perlmutter helps to design. So he came up with **an easier way to open them.**

About four years ago, Thomas Perlmutter and his wife took their friends the Lewises out for dinner to celebrate Robert Lewis's 45th birthday. The Perlmutters even gave the birthday boy a gift: a Mont-blanc fountain pen. But when Lewis tried to use the pen, he found that he was unable to pry it from the hard plastic case in which it was packaged.

It was an especially awkward moment: Perlmutter's business was designing inserts for those obnoxious "clamshells," the difficult-to-penetrate plastic packages that hold everything from MP3 players to, well, fountain pens. "You," his wife complained, "should invent something to open those things."

That wasn't exactly a dumb idea. Manufacturers and retailers love clamshell packaging because it deters theft while showing off products in all their glory. But what consumer hasn't had to resort to scissors, keys, fingernails, or even teeth to get inside one? A friend of Perlmutter's once joked that clamshell makers probably own stock in kitchen-knife companies. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that attempts to open plastic packaging led to 2,943 injuries in 2004.

So Perlmutter took his wife's anti-clamshell sentiment seriously—and began addressing it immediately. Before finishing their filets mignons, he and Lewis had drawn back-of-the-napkin sketches for a safe, easy-to-use tool. A few days later, they met in Perlmutter's office and began working on a prototype, which took two months to bang out. "The hardest thing was to get the blade at the proper angle so that people wouldn't cut themselves," Perlmutter recalls.

That wasn't the only obstacle, though. Perlmutter was at first convinced that he could manufacture the cutting device—he was already calling it OpenX because OpenExperts was too long to write on the handle—in the United States. But factories in Pennsylvania and California, where he initially farmed out the work, were too slow. "It took them a year to

**THIS IS THE LAST PACKAGE YOU'LL STRUGGLE TO OPEN!**



**CUT MAN** Perlmutter invented OpenX, a tool for slicing the plastic "clamshell" packages that house everything from toys to electronics.

make a mold and forever to make some changes," he says. Finally, Perlmutter got in touch with a plant in Taiwan, which shipped back a finished product six weeks later. "They delivered exactly what they said they were going to deliver," he says.

In February 2003, Perlmutter and Lewis founded a company called Ranchmark to market OpenX. The tool sells for \$9.95 at the company's website ([myopenx.com](http://myopenx.com)) and at retailers including Amazon.com. Perlmutter, who is CEO and runs day-to-day operations, says Ranchmark was profitable on revenue of \$250,000 last year, and demand shows no signs of flagging. A big break came in May, when the popular gadget blog Gizmodo praised OpenX as "a great solution to an infuriating problem." The next day the company received 1,100 orders. Of course, such success pales in comparison with how OpenX has improved the Perlmutters' home life. The couple uses the cutter not only for plastic clamshells but also to open letters, boxes, FedEx envelopes, and plastic wraps around water bottles. "I was part of the problem, and now I have created the solution," Perlmutter muses. He's on the lookout for his next invention—and listening very carefully to his wife's complaints. — SIRI SCHUBERT

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY RANDY POLLAK, JOAQUIN PALTING (PERLMUTTER)