

“American Inventor” Television Program

Review by Ralph Czerepinski, PhD, and Joe Miller

<http://www.trizpqrgroup.com>

It's only entertainment. "Reality" TV. A way for enterprising people to maybe win a million \$, and get some publicity. A showcase for hustlers and con artists. Or desperate people willing to reveal their dreams.

Or maybe it's a snapshot of what innovators go through every day, when they're attempting to get acceptance and support for a new idea.

Structure of the Competition

This latest version of Reality TV shows the highlights of four Judges interviewing literally hundreds of applicants in auditions staged in 7 American cities. The judges' challenge is to pick 12 finalists who will be given \$50,000 each to “take their invention to the next level.”

The exact nature of the final competition has not yet been revealed, but the ultimate prize will be \$1 million dollars, and “a chance for mass production”.

What's the competition? It appears to be a somewhat diffuse blend of Best Inventor, Best Invention, and Showmanship, with the criteria being revealed a bit at a time, and with a heavy dose of subjectivity from the judges. While this at first blush seems like a circus, it may be a very good caricature of real life. Applicants are seen struggling to make a good case for their new idea against poorly understood guidelines, while judges struggle to make good decisions with vague criteria, incomplete information, and staged, emotional presentations.

Best Inventor?

Best Invention?

Best Reality Show Competitor?

For all of these, the blended criteria seemed best expressed by Ms. Quinlan;

Something that is innovative,
Something that the money from the show could take to another level, and
From a person that could really make this happen as a leader, and
Something that could “make life better.”

All three of the other judges also expressed strong interest in the financial possibilities of the “inventions”.

The Show Itself

The American Inventor sometimes appears intent on perpetuating the myth that inventors are all kooks. That alone might be a reason to give it four thumbs down. The show does nothing to tell the naïve what a true invention is (e.g. U.S. Patent Office definition).

Mostly the judges appear to like things that are slightly gimmicky, emotionally supported, and marketable by TV marketers who keep shouting, "But wait! There's more!"

Some of the contestants shown during the first 3 hours of the show seemed truly dedicated but totally misguided, to the point of delusion and desperation. Some others of the contestants clearly arrived in a little white wagon, and after they get their next dose of Thorazine, they should be comfortable back at the county facility, and rendered totally harmless again.

We started out being disappointed in the selection of judges. Doug Hall, developer of the Eureka Ranch development approach, is the only one we can see as familiar with the process of invention, and what characterizes a good one. The other three, Ed Evangelista, Mary Lou Quinlan, and Peter Jones, are in advertising, marketing and the British telecommunications industry, respectively.

While we don't want to demean the value of advertising, marketing or finance in order to make a good product successful, we don't think that the marketing/advertising mindset alone can distinguish a good invention from a bad one.

It may turn out that the real capability of the judges will be revealed only as the show episodes unfold. In any event, they are shown as frequently being in disagreement, and troubled by voting "No" for contestants they liked, but who had poor ideas.

The 3-16-06 Chicago Tribune advance review of the opening show (by Ms. Maureen Ryan, Tribune staff Reporter) suggested that "American Inventor" needed to reinvent itself. Ms. Ryan observed that "There's a lot of wretched auditioning to endure before you get to the good (or at least decent) stuff", and that even with the "likable presence of real-life inventor Doug Hall, who at least knows what he's talking about in this realm of contraptions and such, ... the panel of judges ... is just kind of ...blah."

You can read more about the judges and the show at:

<http://abc.go.com/primetime/americaninventor/about.html>

We'll have more comments about the future episodes of the show in future issues of the TRIZ Journal. It is broadcast Thursday nights on ABC in the US, and will probably be syndicated in other countries, if the precedent of other competitions, such as the entertainment "Idol" series is followed.