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Is it a good idea to patent an idea before I start to go calling on the potential customers?



James Caan

Dear James

I have been sitting on a concept in the aviation sector for a while as I don't know how to approach anyone. Do I patent the idea first? If

so, how much is that likely to cost? Or do I call on the airlines themselves? The idea would, on a long-haul plane, generate between £250,000 and £500,000 a year.
Neil Lawrence

I OFTEN find people are overly concerned with patents, thinking their new vision needs immediate protection. But it's more important to find out if an idea is commercially viable. Before doing anything else, talk directly to airlines. You need to

understand whether your product is something the airline actually has a need for. I've come across so many entrepreneurs who have put so much time and effort into a product, only to find out there are no takers.

Next, find out what the airlines would be willing to pay for it. This will help later when you are working out your pricing.

Ask the airlines to sign a confidentiality agreement. In my experience, large organisations respect confidentiality. And if they think there's real potential in your product, you could ask for a financial contribution.

Only then would I recommend you go ahead and register the product.

Patent costs can be high; you'd be looking at around £10,000 at least.

Bear in mind, too, that your patent lawyer will not be interested in whether your idea might work or not. And remember, patents are only valid for the material and design you are registering. Someone else could change a small detail and suddenly

they've created a similar product without infringing the patent.

It is important you ask your lawyer: "What would somebody need to do to create something as close as possible without breaching the patent?"

So speak to the potential buyer first. If talks go successfully, patenting might be a next step – but it should be one of the last ones.

■ *For the full article and news of James Caan's free app, go to standard.co.uk. His new book, *Start Your Business in 7 Days*, is out now*