

AN ENTREPRENEUR'S EXPERIENCE From Idea, to Thriving Business, to Buy Out

Marina Hatsopoulos refers to the company she started as "a textbook example of how technology transfer can work." Her ongoing dream to start a business mixed well with her undergraduate degree in math and music, and a graduate degree in mechanical engineering. But the brilliant idea she hoped would materialize didn't. Hatsopoulos spent a year looking at failing businesses to turn around, but found "most were failing for

engineers had developed a process unknown at the time, called 3D Printing, which was a particular method of rapid prototyping. They were looking for someone to help them commercialize it. She fit their criteria and, after conducting market research, found that competing technologies were expensive, slow, and required special equipment. She says, "We set out to produce a rapid prototyping machine that was small, inexpensive, and fast, that could operate in an office environment." She knew that they could accomplish this. The engineers had the brilliant idea. She had the business acumen from previous Wall Street experience in corporate finance. Though she had never worked as an engineer, her mechanical engineering degree gave her the ability to speak the language of engineers as well as business. Consequently, she came to M.I.T.'s negotiation process well aware of the system and negotiated a payout when the business was sold, rather than the equity arrangement M.I.T. usually preferred.

Compared to other tech transfers, Hatsopoulos and the two inventors navigated the licensing process in an unusually short time. She first saw the technology in August 1994, signed the license agreement that December, and by December 1996 had a product to sell at their newly-named Z Corp. The first two years were all development, but because they were engineers, they handled this phase themselves along with other M.I.T. engineers they hired. After the development phase finished, they hired sales

A current model of a Z Corporation color 3-D printer.



CREDIT: Z CORP

and marketing people.

Last year, a Danish company bought Z Corp for a tidy sum. "It was the right time," she says. "They approached us and we were a healthy business. The timing was good for me personally." As the company grew, it was more difficult for Hatsopoulos to maintain an entrepreneur's mentality or hours. "You can't arrange meetings around your schedule and make it work," she says. With four small children, she has stepped back for a while — until the next brilliant idea comes along.



Marina Hatsopoulos, former founder of Z Corp. and current director of GSI Group and Context Holding, which acquired Z Corp.



CREDIT: Z CORP

Printed prototype of a running shoe sole and matching production shoe (top in photo).

good reasons, mostly product differentiation." Her master's thesis advisor at M.I.T. suggested the university's technology transfer office. She followed through, and a "whole world opened up," she says.

As she explored the possibilities, she looked for something that was not software but could be commercialized in two years. "I didn't have a lot of capital to spend," she says. It also had to be niche-specific and something she understood. Out of two technologies that interested her enough to investigate, one looked promising. Two M.I.T.