

# INVENTORS

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**“When people think of inventions, they think of long flumes with softballs rolling down and hitting a Ferris wheel and a ball gets picked up and dropped onto a teeter totter, striking a flint, igniting a Bunsen burner. But the best inventions are really just the simplest ones.”**

# Look Who's TALKING

## Adam Carolla: Lessons from a Foul-Mouthed Funnyman

By Mike Drummond

**When the recession put him on the unemployment roll, he re-grouped and re-launched his career. He's back on top. This time on his own terms.**

It's late June and I catch Adam Carolla in a chatty mood. Then again, when isn't the former co-host of *Loveline* and *The Man Show* not up for some conversation, or at least a good bitch session?

You'd think he'd have little to gripe about these days. Since getting canned last year from one of the biggest radio stations in one of the country's largest markets, Carolla has reinvented himself as an Internet sensation. *The Adam Carolla Show* is the top comedy download on iTunes and consistently among the top 10 in all genres. He uses the podcasts to promote his live stand-up shows, which have been selling out. And he's succeeded where traditional media companies have failed – he makes money while still offering free content on the Web.

Yet Carolla complains. He informs me he's fed up with the toaster and wants inventors to get on it.

"I feel like when I pop in a piece of toast and stand there and wait for it to pop out, it takes exactly as long as it took Lucille Ball to get her toast in 1957," he says. "It's an eternity.

"What's taking so f&ck%#@ long with that toast?" he says, ratcheting up the rant. "It's the ... exact same technology we've used since 1929. When you stare down the barrel of your toaster, you are staring at the past.



**Charles Strite invented  
the modern timer, pop-up  
toaster in 1919**

**“It should be everyone's  
DREAM to start a business  
and work with the  
people you want to  
work with.”**  
– Adam Carolla

“Also, I don’t need the setting on the toaster that will burn the toast on each side. That is like having a Jacuzzi with a skull and cross bones setting. It would poach anybody that got in it. Someone inevitably will turn that knob too far to the right and I’ll get the burnt toast. And I don’t mind crispy or even a little black, but this setting will destroy the toast.

“Don’t give me the option to destroy the toast,” he pleads, “and I’d like you to speed up the process a little more.”

For the uninitiated, Carolla’s rage against this machine may seem wholly disproportionate given all the problems the world faces. In an era when the Japanese are still slaughtering whales, European soccer fans are pelting black players with bananas and racist monkey shouts and our own deep sea oil wells can gush for months on end, who in their right mind gets worked up over toasters?

Carolla does. The opinionated, foul-mouthed funnyman has turned the improvisational tirade into a lucrative art form.

Good for him. What’s that have to do with us? His do-it-yourself philosophy and career experiences offer lessons for seasoned and aspiring inventors alike. Carolla has built an original comedic product line with sales channels that have included radio, TV, Web, live appearances and a forthcoming book; he’s packaged his line with innovative marketing; he’s taken risks and embraced new technology; and he’s surrounded himself with a trusted, solid business team.

At the core of his empire is his ability to identify problems. However, unlike an inventor who would try to solve these problems, Carolla riffs on them. Little is off-limits from what has become one of his trademark routines, “What Can’t Adam Complain About.”

- Push lawn mowers – should have disappeared the day the power mower was invented.
- Pre-school functions – highly over-rated, meaningless developmental exercises 3-year-

olds forget anyway.

- Alaska Airlines’ Eskimo logo – “a drunken ground dweller” is a poor metaphor for swift flight.
- Arizona’s immigration law – give it a chance and don’t insult Holocaust survivors and their families by likening it to Nazi Germany.
- Pot and prostitution – should be legalized.
- Santa Monica parking enforcement officers – leeches who treat taxpayers as ATMs.

His stream-of-criticism often draws from his blue collar narrative – a less-than stellar academic career at North Hollywood High

School, academic probation at a junior college, indifferent parents, days swinging a hammer as a carpenter, days slinging a shampooer as a carpet cleaner, teaching boxing and traffic school, and on through his rise as a radio and television personality.

When it comes to the human condition, Carolla is a pragmatist. He’s fond of using a Winnebago analogy when tracking the hierarchy of *homo sapiens*. Some of us are in back pushing, the good people who are trying to advance the RV of society. Others, sadly, are freeloading inside, helping themselves to Cheetos and Dr. Pepper. Then there are your bad apples, your Bernie Madoffs and Islamic terrorists, who are in front impeding progress. Carolla has zero tolerance for the latter and wants them put on a disposal or “predator drone” list.

Carolla embodies the aspirational Everyman, the beer-drinker with the champagne taste who – dysfunction be damned – crossed class barriers to become rich and famous.

At times he has crossed the line. During one unscripted rant this year, he insulted Filipinos by saying the country had “nothing going for it except sex tourism” and boxing

**Carolla met Jimmy Kimmel at Los Angeles radio station KROQ in the 1990s. Carolla asked how he could get into radio. Kimmel, who regularly appeared on KROQ’s morning *Kevin and Bean* show, told him to create a character. Carolla joined the cast as “Mr. Birchum,” an angry Vietnam veteran and shop teacher. Carolla and Kimmel remain best friends.**

hero Manny “Pacman” Pacquiao, after the fighter refused to take a drug test. Carolla later issued an apology on Twitter.

For the record, he’s not a racist. He’s an equal-opportunity offender. And he’s parlayed keen observational skills, self-deprecation, ambition and an expansive vocabulary – “gravitas,” “doppelganger” and “narcissism” are part of his nomenclature, as is the F-bomb – into a franchise.

With his off-topic, off-color musings, he proved an able and salty foil to Dr. Drew Pinsky’s cerebral, sage relationship and sex advice on the syndicated radio show *Loveline*, which also enjoyed an MTV run from 1996 to 2000.

Likewise, he played capable, beer-swilling co-host with Jimmy Kimmel on the television program *The Man Show*, which aired five years, 1999-2004.

When Howard Stern left for satellite radio in 2005, Carolla slipped into his time slot at Los Angeles-based CBS radio affiliate KLSX.

Carolla seemingly cemented his arrival following his 2007 feature film *The Hammer*, a loose autobiography and sports comedy about an amateur boxer. Although the movie failed to light up box offices, *The New York Daily News* carried a typical review: “Carolla’s grumbly, monotone, stoop-shouldered pessimism in *The Hammer*,” the daily wrote, “... is actually funny.”

And then, at the top of his game with talk of television pilots in the works, Carolla came crashing to earth. Like millions of Americans during the Great Recession, he found himself downsized early last year, axed from a multi-year gig when KLSX changed formats from talk to Top 40 in a cost-cutting move.

Faced with a mortgage on his hillside L.A. home, toddler twins and a growing car collection, Carolla had to reinvent how he plied his comedic craft, redefine his relationship with his audience (customers) and retool his revenue model.

Carolla had a recognized brand and a product people wanted – there was demand for his rantings based on his previous radio and TV ratings. Think of those ratings as market research, data every inventor or product developer should have.

Embracing risk and innovation, but lacking a traditional media outlet, Carolla turned to the Internet – the primary threat platform to traditional media. He rolled out *The Adam Carolla Podcast* on his personal Web site two days after getting canned from KLSX.

By its third episode, the show was the top



## Car buff and amateur racer Adam Carolla is partial to Datsuns, BMWs and Lamborghinis.

download from iTunes in the United States and Canada.

He also launched a *CarCast* podcast, devoted to automobiles, natch. His wife and close friends also launched their own podcasts through his Internet “Ace Broadcasting” network.

This year he renamed his flagship podcast *The Adam Carolla Show* and “got the band back together,” hiring friends and staff from the radio program. Like any good businessperson, Carolla surrounded himself with a solid support team. As of this summer, the show was by far the top comedy download on iTunes.

He’s incorporated segments from his old radio show, including news and movie trivia games. Unshackled from corporate bean counters and government censors, Carolla and team have shown themselves eager to explore the limits of free and raunchy speech. His shapely sidekick and muse Teresa Strasser, for instance, tends to deliver more headlines about bestiality now that she doesn’t have a program director telling her otherwise.

The advantage of the podcast over terrestrial and satellite radio is “doing it on your own terms and being your own boss, working with people you want to work with and not being heavily formatted,” Carolla says. “It’s feeling like you’re creating something new versus piling on something that’s 100 years old.”

The only downside, he adds, “is not being paid.”

### Profitable Podcast

Carolla tends to sweat the details.

“You see that show *Modern Marvels*?” he asks. “The thing that pisses me off is at the very beginning it shows a crescent wrench going on a hex-head bolt and it makes the back ratcheting sound.

“Where’s the ratcheting sound coming from? You guys can’t get that f&ck%#@ right? You’re

Modern goddamn Marvels!

“All credibility,” he adds, “is gone.”

Beneath the joke lays passion and a working-class ethos that informs his new role as new media entertainer and entrepreneur – a role that has allowed (forced?) him to forge a stronger bond with his audience and his sponsors.

He’s extended his product line to include live stand-up shows, paid content that he also edits and uploads for free download on iTunes. Nothing brings you closer to customers than meeting them in person – for inventors, that’s often trade shows, in Carolla’s case it’s nightclubs.

He’s fond of admonishing listeners to find something they like to do, do it well, even for free early on if you have to, and success will follow.

“I would do the podcast independent of the money for the same reason I don’t get paid to go to the garage to tinker on my car,” he says. “If somebody said, ‘Nobody’s listening, but here’s a million dollars a year,’ or, ‘You have a million downloads a week, but you get no money,’ I’d pick the million downloads a week.”

All jokes about not getting paid aside, he acknowledges that the podcast is making money.

For that he can thank sponsors, including Mangrate.

Computer entrepreneur and founder of Virginia-based EarthWalk Communications Evan McConnell invented the Mangrate, a “grilling enhancement system.” It’s really just two hunks of serrated cast iron that go atop your existing grill. But the Mangrate has a design patent, so we’ll allow McConnell the “invention” designation.

“I see (Carolla) as our George Foreman,” McConnell says.

Carolla pitches Mangrates – he calls them

a “grill on steroids” – and has shot Web video clips of him using the product, evoking bygone television slots when folks such as the aforementioned Lucille Ball would urge viewers to smoke Phillip Morris cigarettes.

“What Adam has done, it’s almost old school,” McConnell says. “And he’s really good at pitching ‘man’ things.”

Edison Research, on behalf of the Association for Downloadable Media, this year found that price and quality being equal, 80 percent of consumers “prefer to buy products from companies that advertise on or sponsor” the podcasts they regularly enjoy.

Unlike conventional radio advertising, which takes a shotgun approach to spraying the airwaves, podcasts cater to a targeted audience and can assure advertisers that listeners actively sought them out, notes Oscar Zeballos.

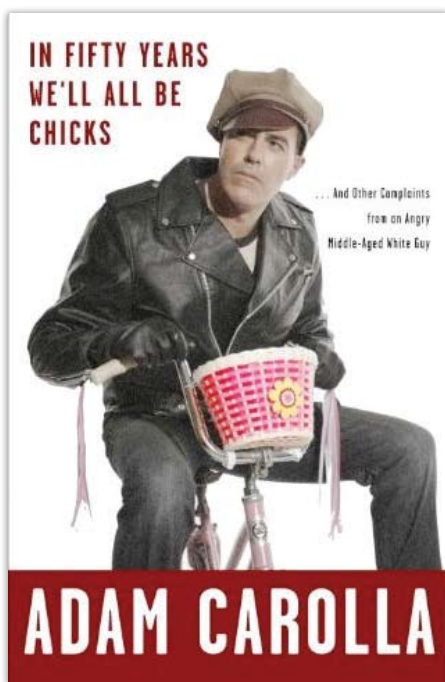
Zeballos is the vice president of marketing at EarthWalk who helped arrange the Carolla sponsorship deal. He also is involved with *The Mike O’Meara Show*, a former D.C.-area FM broadcast that got booted off the air in a format change and went to podcasting this year.

“In terrestrial radio, listeners are just numbers,” Zeballos says. “The podcast is a community.”

## Get Out and Push

Carolla appears focused on his community and comfortable in his niche.

“My sort of Sam Adams of comedy is not ever going to be a big mass appeal,” he says. “I’m never going to be Budweiser. That’s Howie Mandel’s job.



“I feel if 90 percent of the country was in love with me,” he adds, “I’d be doing something wrong. But there’s a way to get your audience, make your money and do your thing. You don’t need to sell out Madison Square Garden.”

Put another way, he has developed a marketable product to a specific type of customer. And like any successful product developer, he embraces continual improvement if not a commitment to quality.

“I always feel like if you’re just making people laugh, but not making them think, it’s kind of empty calories,” he says. “Making them laugh is hard to do, and it’s good to do. But ultimately it’s really like sex with a prostitute. It feels good at the time, but you’re not real proud of yourself the following day. It doesn’t stop you from doing it again, I’m just saying when you’re in the mirror you don’t like what’s staring back at you.”

So in his own crass way, Adam Carolla is trying to make the world a better place.

“I have a personal invention that doesn’t involve any hardware and it’s free,” he says, somewhat out of the blue. “When people call you on your cell phone, do this when you pick up, say, ‘Hold on, let me get rid of somebody.’

“Just come back five beats later and say ‘Hey, what’s going on?’ And they’ll always think you like them better than the person they thought you were talking to,” he says. “It makes everyone feel better.”

On his show, he frequently references inventors or inventions. With his background as a carpenter and his affection for wrenching and driving cars, he seems to have an affinity for tinkers and problem solvers. I ask him about this.

“I think inventors are almost a metaphor for our country,” he says. “Just the idea that people are out trying to sort of better their own

situation and better the lives of everyone else.

“Our economy, our way of life, our rallying call is essentially that. In a weird way, every immigrant is an inventor in that he’s going to reinvent himself. He or she is going to come to this place, often times from very far away and with a different language, and risk their lives often times with nothing to start this experiment, this invention called life in this country.”

He wagers that more inventions and innovation spring from free societies as opposed to “shitty communist countries” (a hunch that’s verified through patent filing data, by the way).

“I think those type of regimes almost break people,” he says. “Even if you come up with something good, you’d never be able to profit off it anyway. It becomes a ‘What’s the use?’ kind of thing. And before you know it the supermarkets are open a half hour everyday and there’s nothing on the shelves.”

No. Despite its many flaws, Carolla says the United States has gotten most of the things that matter right. Sure, other countries have better healthcare. Many have better rail systems. We’ll have to work on those. But when it comes to the ability for an individual to make a mark in the human continuum, a place where an idea can become a product and a livelihood, where risk and failure are seen as virtues, then the United States is “pretty near the top of that list.”

“And by the way, it’s a level playing field in that if you invent something that everyone wants, you’ll probably be pretty successful,” he adds. “And if you invent something that nobody wants, well, you’re not going to be too successful.”

Inventors, then, enjoy an honored place in Carolla’s catalog. They’re outside, somewhere in the back, sweating on the desert highway of life, pushing hard on the Winnebago. ■

Visit [www.adamcarolla.com](http://www.adamcarolla.com)

Carolla’s new book *In 50 Years We’ll All Be Chicks ... and Other Complaints from an Angry Middle-Aged White Guy* is due out in November (Crown)

# GRILL THRILL

## Dinner (or Lunch or Breakfast) Date with the Mangrate

By Mike Drummond

I told Evan McConnell that I've barbecued pizzas made from scratch on my charcoal Weber grill and he one-upped me.

He regularly cooks Sunday breakfasts on his grill. Bacon, eggs, toast, the works.

McConnell has made a comfortable living as CEO of mobile computing enterprise EarthWalk Communications. He founded the Manassas, Va.-based company in 1996. It now deploys computer labs for school districts and other clients across the world.

But what really gets McConnell's juices flowing is grilling. Simple, primitive, cookin' outside, grilling.

He "invented" the Mangrate, mail-order hunks of cast iron grills – 16-inch long, 8 pounds of heft forged in the United States and made from the same stuff used in engine blocks.

For grilling devotees, the Mangrate serves as an intriguing implement, a "grilling enhancement system" and another tool in the seemingly inexhaustible chest of cooking gadgets. Yet the Mangrate saga also embodies the entrepreneurial, inventing spirit and illustrates how homegrown, low-tech marketing even in the digital era can help boost the simplest of products.

The aptly named Mangrate (McConnell's wife's idea) owes its origins to a demolition project. Some 20 years ago, McConnell bought an old steakhouse to convert into a nightclub.

Trained as a mechanical engineer, he was reluctant to toss the big iron bad boys.

"I brought them home and put them on my grill," he says. "After a while I said, 'I'm cooking just like at a restaurant.'"

When his son came of age and bought his own home, appointed with a requisite backyard barbecue, he wondered why his steaks didn't taste as good as dad's.

The father and son determined it was the iron grates. Unable to find restaurant-grade grates for backyard barbecues, they decided to fabricate their own.

McConnell's product research included visiting hardware stores and measuring grill sizes. He also took the opportunity to redesign the conventional steakhouse grate.

"I analyzed the importance of collecting some of the grease," he says, "so I added these

gutters along the bottom because I wanted the smoke."

He also aligned the grate blades to make them easier to clean. Three prototypes and a design patent (issued this year) later, he started selling Mangrates.

Although McConnell's computer company does business across the world, he insisted on having the Mangrate, including the wood-handle, wire cleaning brush, made in the United States.

The grates are made at an undisclosed foundry somewhere in the Midwest. When it came to sourcing the wood, one supplier mentioned that the material would come from Canada.



"I wanted U.S. wood," McConnell says. "I know we still grow trees."

Indeed, he got the domestic wood for the same price as the Canadian offer.

"For some reason, we think everything is cheaper and better from overseas or outside the U.S." he says. "Not true."

When it came to advertising, Oscar Zeballos, the marketing vice president at EarthWalk, persuaded McConnell to explore the emerging world of podcasting, in addition to more conventional Web-based banner ads and infomercials.

As timing would have it, TV and radio personality Adam Carolla was experimenting with his own podcast show after getting sacked early last year from his lucrative radio gig in Los Angeles.

Carolla, a fan of grilled food (who isn't?) and heavy, mechanical things (he was co-host of *The Man Show*, after all), embraced the role as Mangrate pitchman. He sings its praises

Entrepreneur

Evan McConnell received design patent No. D610,405 for his Mangrate product on Feb. 23, 2010.

before or during his daily podcasts, something media hosts used to do in the early days of television.

"The only complaint you can have about (the Mangrate) is that it's not in every American backyard of this barbecuing nation of ours," Carolla says.

"When people think of inventions, many think of long flumes with softballs rolling down and hitting a Ferris wheel and a ball gets picked up and dropped onto a teeter totter, striking a flint, igniting a Bunsen burner," he adds. "But the best inventions are really just the simplest ones."

Although Mangrates enjoyed robust sales in the run-up for Father's Day weekend in June this year, "Adam's sell-through hasn't been as good percentage-wise as our local (podcasting) guy," McConnell says, noting Carolla's numbers peaked at 8 percent. The local podcasing show's figure is about 11 percent.

Carolla's audience, however, is substantially larger.

McConnell says he's learned a couple of things from the podcasting ad experience.

- 1) Carolla has a "great personality and he's good at pitching man things."
- 2) That the Mangrate is a tough sell. "People say, 'What's the big deal?'"

The value of the Mangrate, according to McConnell, is that the cast iron – "Mother Nature's non-stick surface" – sears and cooks meats and other foods. Other grilling techniques rely mostly on hot air. The grates also season with age and use, infusing food with incomparable flavor, he adds.

"If you go to Mortons," he says, "this is what they're cooking on."

The message may be working.

At the time of our interview, McConnell said True Value and Ace Hardware chains had agreed to carry Mangrates. Moreover, he's instituted a referral program. Send a friend an e-mail. If he or she buys a Mangrate, you get one free.

"Word of mouth," says McConnell, "is the best way to advertise." ■

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