

# Hearing the Gift of Forever

Audio attachments containing the giver's voice add emotional impact to keepsakes **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

**V**oiceGift® is, literally, a gift of voice created by Geoffrey Stern of Westport, Connecticut. Want to send audio birthday greetings to an old friend on the other side of the country, or record a special message for your grandchild? VoiceGift fits the bill.

**Edith G. Tolchin (EGT):** Please tell us about yourself, your background, and where you reside.

**Geoffrey Stern (GS):** My career has always sat at the intersection of technology, storytelling and memory. More than 20 years ago, I founded a company that develops voice-recording technology embedded in consumer and promotional products, enabling people and brands to communicate in the most natural way possible: self-playing voice.

Sound—and voice in particular—is one of the strongest triggers for memory and emotion. I've always believed products could help people express what they feel “in the moment.”

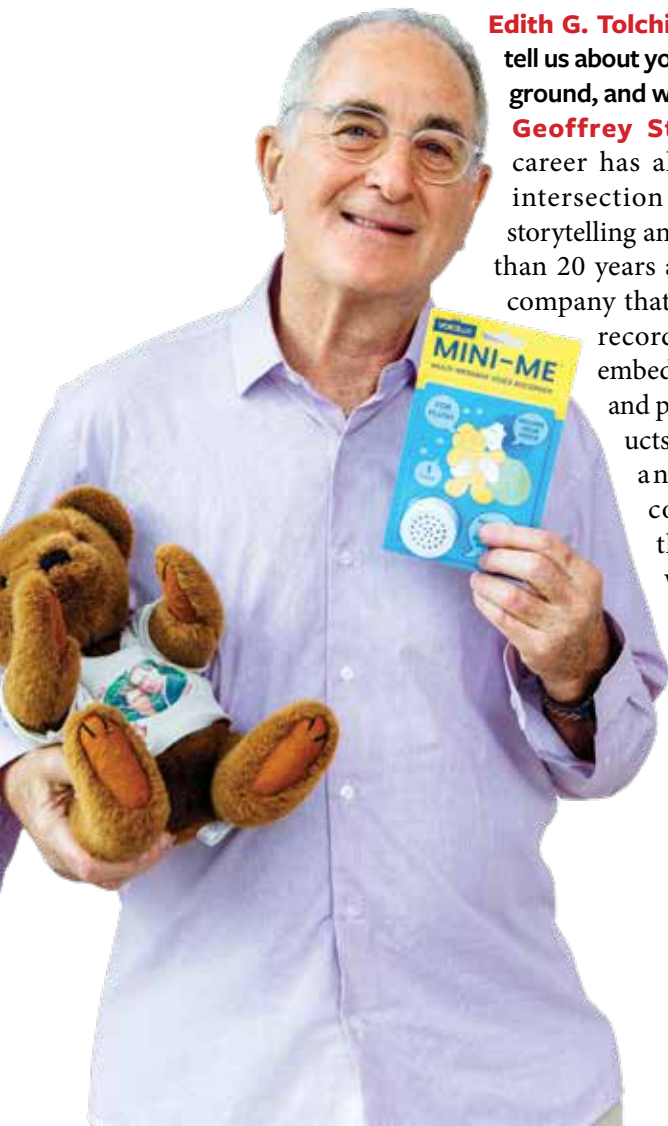
Although I do not have a formal technical background, I learned early how to work closely with engineers and translate ideas into products, resulting in multiple patents combining voice with gifting.

Long before voice texting became common, I was fascinated by the emotional impact of recorded voices. Hearing the voice of a parent, grandparent or child—even decades later—can instantly bring back a moment.

As I often say, voice is the most emotional medium we have. A photograph captures a moment, but a voice brings it to life.

Recently we've seen a renaissance in audio, alongside fatigue with constant screens. I host a weekly Bible podcast and have worked on digitizing family photographs and recordings, including an oral history of my 102-year-old grandmother. These personal experiences remind me that voices are among the most meaningful things we leave behind.

**“Voice is the most emotional medium we have. A photograph captures a moment, but a voice brings it to life.”** —GEOFFREY STERN



**EGT: When did you invent VoiceGift?**

**GS:** The roots of VoiceGift go back to the late 1990s and my connection with the Build-A-Bear Workshop®, which began with a bit of serendipity. Beanie Babies were wildly popular, and I experimented with embedding a small voice recorder inside a teddy bear. My goal was to engage multiple senses: the sound of a familiar voice, the feel of a plush toy and even a small, printed T-shirt.

After sharing a sample, I received a call from Maxine Clark, founder of Build-A-Bear in 1997, then operating a single pilot store. She asked if she could purchase just the recorder. I said yes—and the rest is history.

Since then, I've produced more than 60 million sound modules for Build-A-Bear. Those devices have delivered songs, birthday wishes, proposals and deeply personal messages—including, at times, the last voice of a loved one.

What struck me was not just how often people used the technology but how deeply they valued it. These weren't novelty features; they became emotional anchors for important moments in people's lives.

That experience taught me the extraordinary power of voice to connect people—even when they are far apart.

Over time, I saw how people used these recordings—birthday greetings, long-distance messages, proposals and sometimes preserved voices from old answering machines. That led me to a broader question: What if voice could be attached to anything meaningful: a photograph, a book, or a gift?

There's a saying that "It's not the value of the gift but the thought behind it that matters." I began asking: What if that thought could be expressed in your own voice? That idea stayed with me.

The thought behind a gift is often invisible—but voice makes it tangible, personal and lasting. It transforms something fleeting into something you can revisit—again and again—long after the moment has passed.

The turning point came during COVID, when families were separated and many people simply wanted to hear a familiar voice. That's when I partnered with my daughter to launch VoiceGift as a consumer brand.

**EGT: Tell us about the line of VoiceGift products.**

**GS:** VoiceGift grew from a simple idea: If hearing a familiar voice can transform a teddy bear into a keepsake, why not allow people to attach a voice message to almost anything?

The simplest product is the VoiceGift Tag, which records up to 60 seconds of audio. Instead of reading a card, the recipient hears the giver's voice.

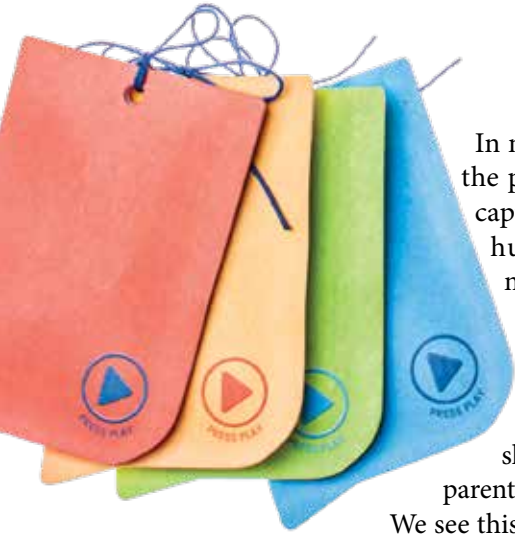
Your voice becomes the gift—and long after everything else is gone, it remains.



Above: Voice-Over® adds a recorded message to a framed photo or gift.

Below: Each time the gold button on the Memory Box is pressed, it plays a special message, voice of support, a first word or a parting message.





Above: The VoiceGift Tag allows you to add a personal message, song or sound to anything.

Below: VoiceGift PLAY is a 10-hour capacity, screen-free voice recorder, playback tool and portable electronic story player.

In many ways, the tag represents the purest form of what we do. It captures not just words but tone, humor, and everything that makes communication human.

My daughter even has my 4-year-old granddaughter record a tag on the way to birthday parties. Inevitably, she receives a call from another parent asking, “Where can I get one?”

We see this again and again. People don’t talk about the object itself; they talk about the experience of hearing a voice they recognize. It shifts the focus from the gift to the relationship behind it.

Another product is VoiceGift PLAY®, inspired by museum audio guides. Users assign numbers to objects—photo albums, recipes, heirlooms—and record voice notes that can be played back on demand. It becomes a kind of personal audio guide to your own life, where every object has a story told in your own voice.

We also created PLAY for Kids, designed for storytelling. Parents and grandparents can record stories or songs children can replay anytime—even when you’re not there.

Voice-Over® adds a recorded message to a framed photo or gift, and when in light sensitive mode can play automatically when the box or tin is opened, creating a delightful surprise.

We also offer recordable ring boxes, memory boxes and Mini-Me®—our version of the iconic recorder we sell through Build-A-Bear, for plush toys.

The most common feedback we hear is: “I wish I had this 10 years ago.” And when someone receives a VoiceGift, they often say, “It was just like you were here.”



**EGT: How do they work? Are batteries required?**

**GS:** VoiceGift products use compact digital recording modules designed for simplicity. Users press a button, record a message and play it back instantly. Some products hold a single message, while others store hundreds of recordings.

Power comes from long-lasting batteries, either replaceable or rechargeable—and recordings remain preserved even if power is lost. The goal is simple: no apps, no screens, no subscriptions—just voice.

**EGT: Where are you manufacturing, and have you had any logistical problems?**

**GS:** Our products are manufactured in Asia with partners we’ve worked with for decades. Like most electronics companies, we faced challenges during COVID with supply chains and shipping, and now tariffs, reinforcing the importance of flexibility and strong relationships.

**EGT: Have you had any issues in patenting VoiceGift?**

**GS:** We have registered trademarks for VoiceGift, Mini-Me and Voice-Over, as well as “A new way to gift” and “The way life sounds.”

We also have U.S. patents on a system where online and in-store shoppers can seamlessly add a VoiceGift Tag to any gift. Patenting helps define what’s unique about your idea but should not define the range of products and services you offer.

**EGT: Any tips for novice inventors?**

**GS:** Start simple, test your idea quickly, listen to how people actually use your product and be open to opportunity. Persistence is key. 🗨️

*Details: [voice.gift](https://www.voice.gift)*



Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 ([edietolchin.com/portfolio](https://edietolchin.com/portfolio)). She is the author of several books, including “Secrets of Successful Women Inventors” (<https://a.co/d/fAGlvZJ>) and “Secrets of Successful Inventing” (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).

# 1-2-3

## Common Invention Questions Answered

BY BEN GREENBERG, FOUNDER OF INVENTIONS UNLIMITED  
InventionUnlimited.com • Ben@InventionUnlimited.com

### 1 What's the most significant mistake inventors make when choosing a manufacturer?

They choose the cheapest quote instead of the best partner. Low prices mean nothing if quality is inconsistent, communication is poor or timelines slip. Manufacturing is a relationship, not a transaction. A slightly higher cost from a reliable factory is often far cheaper than missed launches, defective units or damaged customer trust.

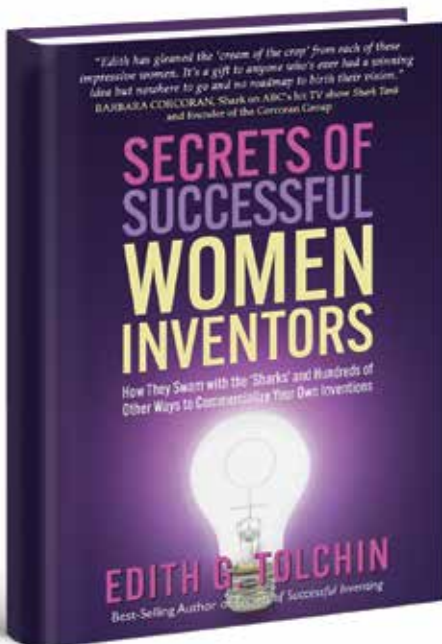
### 2 How do inventors know when they're ready for mass production?

When their design stops changing, if you're still tweaking features or fixing usability issues, you're not ready. Mass production multiplies every flaw. Before scaling, your prototype should be stable, tested and manufacturable. If it only works because you babysit it, it will fail on a production line.

### 3 Should inventors manufacture in the United States, or overseas?

It depends on volume, complexity and risk tolerance. U.S. manufacturing offers speed and communication, but higher costs. Overseas manufacturing offers scale and price advantages but requires tighter oversight. Early runs often benefit from domestic production. Once demand is proven, overseas manufacturing becomes more viable for higher margins.

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**Edith G. Tolchin**  
(photo by Amy Goldstein Photography)

### Edith G. Tolchin knows inventors!

Edie has interviewed over 100 inventors for her longtime column in *Inventors Digest* ([www.edietolchin.com/portfolio](http://www.edietolchin.com/portfolio)). She has held a prestigious U.S. customs broker license since 2002. She has written five books, including the best-selling *Secrets of Successful Inventing* (2015), and *Fanny on Fire*, a recent finalist in the Foreword Reviews INDIE Book Awards.



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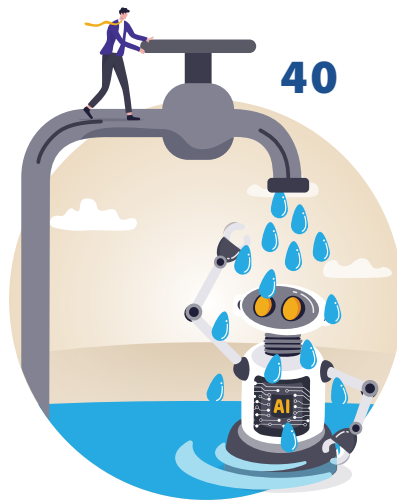
## They Said What?

- 9 “Comments are turned off—maybe with the assumption that the general public could be as well.”
- 13 “I may have been thinking about bowling them over. But if they don’t have the flag, they cannot burn it.”
- 40 “This is not software eating the world. This is concrete, steel, copper and silicon eating the world.”



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Article 1, Section 8, Clause 8,  
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# Inventors

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