

# Local entrepreneur takes on Google, Staples over 'Back Saver Wallet'

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Vlad Gribovsky is a 70-year-old entrepreneur who has a history of overcoming the odds.

Gribovsky was born in 1945 in a German dislocated-persons camp.

His Ukrainian parents were imported as slave labor during World War II to the Nazis' Nordhausen rocket factory. It was captured in a daring 1945 raid and they were liberated by advance units of Gen. George Patton's Third Army.

The family immigrated to the United States and settled in a Ukrainian corner of northeast Minneapolis. Gribovsky's dad worked as a machinist.

Vlad Gribovsky worked in the 1970s and 1980s in food service and sales for Pillsbury and others. He also has made a buck as a consultant, manufacturer and manufacturer's rep. He's been fleeced in business in Ukraine and Russia. He's still involved in a U.S.-to-Russia cattle venture funded by a partner.

In America, Gribovsky is still confident in the rule of law. And he and his 10-employee TPK leather-accessories manufacturing

firm in Waconia have gone after the likes of Staples and Google, threatening legal action to protect a key product.

"I think it is criminal for a large company to steal intellectual property and think they do so with impunity," Gribovsky said the other day.

About 15 years ago, Gribovsky invented, trademarked and patented the "Back Saver Wallet®." Gribovsky, who suffered from crippling sciatica, got partial relief at the advice of his chiropractor, by not sitting on his wallet. Already a maker of leather holders for golf scorecards, checkbooks, passports and other items, Gribovsky's TPK came up with an expandable wallet that's thinner and slips into a side pocket.

He said it galled him when he learned in 2014 that Google was using "Back Saver Wallet®" through its search engine to drive Internet shoppers to imported-competitor products. That violated Gribovsky's 2003 trademark. And his tolerance.

Google ceased after Gribovsky's IP lawyer, Mike Bondi, wrote the Internet-search giant a letter a couple of years ago to warn that TPK "is prepared to take appropriate action to protect its rights in its registered mark Back Saver Wallet®."

Gribovsky doesn't have the deepest pockets. He's friendly. And he's not imposing physically. But you still wouldn't want him hanging around your headquarters in a bad mood. He's dogged.

Bondi wrote another letter this month, this time to retail giant Staples. He accused Staples of wrongfully peddling a "Back Saver Wallet" on its website in an effort to "misdirect potential customers from purchasing the genuine Back Saver Wallet®, which is not available for purchase" on the Staples website.



"They are selling something, but it's not a real Back Saver Wallet," Gribovsky said. "We ordered one. To see what it is they are selling."

The Staples legal department acknowledged Bondi's letter last week. But a spokesman declined to comment. Vlad suspects it's also just a way to draw traffic to other Staples products.

Staples advertises a product for \$5 less that looks a lot like the Back Saver Wallets sold for \$34.95 at [www.tpkgolf.com](http://www.tpkgolf.com).

"I want them to stop stealing my intellectual property for the benefit of their website," Gribovsky said. "The wallet and the name has significance. The longer they wait to respond, the more it is proof of what they are doing. They have evidence of our registered trademark.

"It's kind of a sign of the times. The Chinese steal using computers. And these big guys think they can do what they want. Staples will get a second letter from my lawyer on Monday. And if they don't respond, I will sue them."

Gribovsky is nothing if not inventive. And determined.

TPK — which stands for Tournament Pro Kit — was launched about 20 years ago for the leather scorecard holder and has expanded to include a patented "putting stick" that has been endorsed by several professional golfers. TPK's wallets, card holders and other leather products are made from leather tanned at S.B. Foote Tanning, part of Red Wing Shoe Co.

In addition to being inventive and determined, Gribovsky is curious and confident. He laughs a lot. He drives a luxury SUV and has lived on Lake Minnetonka for 30-plus years. He's also the delivery man who fetches leather from Red Wing and loves the food at a modest Asian buffet a couple of blocks from the plant.

Gribovsky was doing so well promoting dances and concerts that he dropped out of the University of Minnesota in 1965. He took a day job with Pillsbury in customer service. By 1968 he ran a sales territory that spanned several states.

A golf nut, he became friends with pro Tom Lehman in the 1990s. Lehman endorsed some TPK products.

CEO Mike Hoffman of Toro said Gribovsky represented Toro in Russia from 1999 until 2007, a small, growing market. Gribovsky wowed the locals when he introduced Lehman, who ended up on the cover of Golf Digest's Russian edition.

Gribovsky gave Hoffman a Back Saver Wallet years ago as a gift.

"I found it innovative ... liked it and have given some of them as gifts to customers over the years," Hoffman said.

Another Toro executive, Darren Redetzke, was involved with Gribovsky in Russia. "Russia wasn't the easiest place to do business," Redetzke said in an e-mail. "He is tenacious. Vlad would just dig in and keep trying to move forward."

Good luck, Staples.