The New York Times Magazine

https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/03/magazine/zpm-espresso-and-the-rage-of-the-jilted-crowdfunder.html

THE MONEY ISSUE

ZPM Espresso and the Rage of the Jilted Crowdfunder

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

April 30, 2015

“Thank you all very much,” Update 57 concluded, by way of goodbye. “Working on this project was the most ambitious and meaningful undertaking any of us have ever attempted. Getting to know all of you, and working to create some seriously cool technology, was one of the most rewarding things we’ve ever done. We are deeply and truly sorry that despite our best efforts, we were not able to get this machine across the finish line. Love, Gleb, Igor and Janet, Team ZPM.”

It had been three long years of gradual disappointment since the 1,500 or so supporters of ZPM Espresso — otherwise known as the PID-Controlled Espresso Machine project on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter — each put a few hundred dollars, or some $370,000 in total, into the campaign, and eight months since the last communiqué from the project’s creators. Now, with Update 57 in January, ZPM Espresso announced that it was winding itself down. For the backers who expected a ZPM machine for their pledge, there would be neither fulfillment nor refunds. All accumulated moneys, the update said, were dispersed on the nonrecoverable engineering costs involved in ZPM’s failed attempt to manufacture an inexpensive commercial-grade espresso machine for the home market.

Ian Woodhouse, the 44-year-old director of operations for a Toronto real estate developer, was one of ZPM’s earliest and most ardent backers. Three years on, though, no new blow could surprise him. The update represented exactly what he had long come to expect from the creators. It was evasive and opaque. There was no clear explanation for the company’s insolvency. Woodhouse was especially

nettled by that valediction: “love.” What he wanted, he told me later, was not another update “signed ‘love.’ They always signed their updates ‘love.’ ” He could see that it seemed like a peculiar fixation, but the word was so disingenuous and cloying, and it made him angry. “Notice,” he instructed me, “how I keep bringing up the ‘love’ thing.” It reminded him that what ought to have been a straightforward financial transaction had somehow left him feeling taken advantage of and betrayed.

Powerless to act individually, the backers began, in Update 57’s wake, to organize. Their first step was a Facebook group, “Ripped off by ZPM Espresso,” but Woodhouse feared it wasn’t private: The principals of ZPM, who seemed to him at once inept and robust in their malfeasance, might easily monitor the activity there. So Woodhouse, along with a few others among the more persistent backers, instead set up a private forum on the messaging service Slack, where they shared their sense of affliction and pondered legal or moral redress. The legal options were limited. Although Kickstarter’s terms of use stipulate that any creators unable to satisfy the terms of their agreement with their backers might be subject to legal action, no sane attorney would initiate a class-action suit on a contingency-fee basis against insolvent creators, and no sane backer would ante up the necessary legal fees.

The other alternative was a consumer-protection suit filed by a state attorney general, but for that to proceed, the backers would need evidence of actual fraud, which they spent an enormous amount of time and energy trying to uncover. As Woodhouse, who speaks in the tone of a reasonable man drawn hopelessly against his will into a vast conspiracy, put it to me, “We found out a whole bunch of interesting information.” He ticked off the names of four lawyers, an unpaid accountant and two Silicon Valley investors. He delved into what he dug up in the corporate-filings section of the State of Georgia’s website, and on a shady-seeming portal seeking to bundle Chinese angel investments. By his estimations, ZPM had ultimately raised $1.2 million, all of it gone and unaccounted for. The ZPM founders,

the backers discovered in their attempt to serve up (at the very least) a small-claims action, were lying low; they had left Atlanta and absconded for San Francisco.

Everything Woodhouse could find out, however, was “essentially hearsay,” he said. He was exasperated. As someone involved in the project from its beginning, he felt entitled to know everything. Why did the creators never reveal that the project’s founding engineer left the company for another job? Why were the other founders scrubbing their social-media profiles of connections to ZPM? Woodhouse had been caching screen shots, updates and videos to make sure the remaining data weren’t similarly disappeared.

As the backers exchanged theories in private, matters were quick to escalate. Woodhouse registered the web addresses glebpolyakov.com and janettambasco.com — the names of the two lead ZPM founders. He did it, he explained, “because I wanted to have something of value to them.” By then, it seemed to him that the only possible path to accountability was public shame. In response, on Kickstarter, Polyakov posted that he wished Woodhouse hadn’t done something so needlessly personal. To Woodhouse, this was yet another sign that the creators had all the leverage. Woodhouse was anonymous on Kickstarter, and Polyakov could have linked him to the domain names, he surmised, only if the private group was compromised — indeed, infiltrated.

Since Kickstarter’s debut in 2009, campaigns on the platform have raised $1.4 billion for the creators of more than 80,000 projects. In the process, the company and its crowdfunding competitors have invented a new sort of economic relationship, and a corresponding frontier of Internet acrimony. Disgruntled crowdfunders are not your typical Internet-commenting degenerates: In ZPM’s case, they are affluent, well-educated professionals, working in New York and Los Angeles as systems analysts, TV directors, research physicians specializing in adrenal pathology — the sorts of people you would expect to write off their $250 donation as a gamble gone sour. Yet they found, for reasons that weren’t always clear to them, that they couldn’t. A professor in Columbia’s graduate school of architecture wrote, on the private Slack forum, that he considered Polyakov to

have “neither humility nor shame.” He continued, “I also think it entirely appropriate that he never work in technology, finance, consulting or the coffee fields (sorry, that kills the barista career) again.”

The rancor is due, perhaps, to a fundamental confusion about what crowdfunding really is. On one hand, a backer is not a customer, because the product does not exist yet and may never; Kickstarter is constantly reminding its patrons that the platform is not a store. (On some level, backers must already know this, or else they wouldn’t be backers; if Ian Woodhouse had just wanted an inexpensive espresso machine, the top seller on Amazon retails for $86 and has thousands of five-star reviews.)

On the other hand, though, neither is a backer an investor, even if many of ZPM’s backers insisted they be treated as such. A Kickstarter pledge does not buy a portion of a company. Backers do not sit on the board; they are not enfranchised to review the company’s audited financials. Investors’ interests, at least ideally, are aligned with those of the company, whereas nothing in the crowdfunding relationship ties a backer to the company for the long term. Moreover, the last thing Kickstarter wants to deal with is S.E.C. regulations.

In the platform’s early days, Kickstarter’s founders hardly imagined that a situation like this would arise. Neither was a technologist — Perry Chen, now 38, was an artist and gallerist, and Yancey Strickler, 36, was a music journalist — and although several of their recent hires have engineering backgrounds, they continue to see Kickstarter as something of an arts institution. Their office building, in Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighborhood, is a remodeled pencil factory where thousands of square feet are given over to a gallery, a theater and a shadowy, silent library. During the platform’s initial phase, it did support some manufactured objects (simple iPhone cases, for example), but it wasn’t until 2010, when the founders were faced with an iPhone tripod proposal, that they had to decide if such commercial projects qualified as “creative” in the way they intended. As Strickler remembers it, the tripod’s creators responded that their particular tools happened to be injection molding and AutoCAD software, but that their enterprise was absolutely in the spirit of the platform. Kickstarter agreed to host the project, but

that decision inspired a sustained effort to shape best practices for gadget campaigns. Its new rules included a requirement that there be a working prototype, and a prohibition on fancy computer renderings. (A spokesman for Kickstarter noted that if ZPM had listed its project today, it would have had to work hard to bring its pitch up to that standard.)

Until last October, Kickstarter's terms of use stipulated that project creators had only two options to discharge their obligations: ship or refund. Today, in response to situations like ZPM's, creators can refund, ship or *explain*, and if a full audit — financial or narrative — shows that the creators have made "every reasonable effort" toward a decent outcome, the backers are encouraged to feel satisfied. Strickler told me he feels it undermines the whole concept of crowdfunding to guarantee that products will be delivered or that refund money will be held in escrow; the acceptance of some risk, after all, is an integral part of patronage. "We wanted to protect a creator who makes an honest effort and comes up short," he told me. "We wanted to reserve legal efforts for real bad-actor behavior."

Even arts projects, of course, sometimes fall through. In December 2009, for example, the musician Josh Dibb (a member of Animal Collective) raised $26,000 to travel to Mali and record an album; six years on, his backers have yet to enjoy a single limited-edition-LP chord. A documentary filmmaker I spoke with raised more than $100,000 in 2012 to make a film about happiness in the Himalayas; he is drained from the effort of trying to explain himself to his backers. But the problem is especially acute with devices. The Wharton School professor Ethan Mollick, who has published several papers on crowdfunding, has found that more than 80 percent of hardware projects ship with significant delays. Most of those do ultimately deliver something, but Mollick has found that 14 percent of the projects studied have, since 2012, shipped either nothing at all or something too shoddy to use. An entire new consulting industry has in turn grown up to help crowdfund products. Just last month, Kickstarter unveiled a new section of its site, Campus, where creators can share hard-won advice and concerns.

The policy change has made things cleaner for Kickstarter when projects fail, but it arguably has complicated the creator-backer dynamic. If backers lack an absolute right to a product, and their legal options are limited, the policy only heightens their feeling of entitlement to full disclosure. “I long ago gave up on getting a machine, but I want my $250 of information,” Woodhouse told me. Backers feel they are part of an Internet community that has been not merely disillusioned but somehow also rendered unreal, and they get worked up to know how they were let down. The sense of broad collective purpose that makes any given Kickstarter campaign compelling is exactly what can make it, for backers and creators alike, especially dangerous.

On March 16, Gleb Polyakov and Janet Tambasco, each 26, sat on either side of me in an empty San Francisco cafe. It was the sort of laminate-floored, Mayan-mural-walled joint that could still afford rent but couldn’t afford one of the high-status, Ducati-looking contraptions with which ZPM sought to compete. The coffee wasn’t great, but it was free-refill plentiful, and they’d been a little wary about giving out their current mailing address. Recently one backer, an engineer and father of four who spent time on the phone with them offering design advice and kept a very religious Christian household, doxxed Tambasco’s mother, posting her personal information to a public Kickstarter thread. Polyakov and Tambasco had schlepped a Perspex box full of beta machines in various stages of dishabille.

“I wish the backers weren’t so mean,” Polyakov said.

Tambasco nodded. “I wish we’d done a better job.”

The founders Janet Tambasco and Gleb Polyakov at a studio in Berkeley, Calif. Mark Mahaney for The New York Times

The worst part, Tambasco continued, "is that the coffee machine works, and has always worked. It does what we said it would do. People are still emailing us to ask how to buy it." She assumed alternating whines. " 'I see your website is down. *How can I buy it?*' 'I saw your most recent update about how you failed. *How can I buy it?*' "

Polyakov is tall and stocky, with a wide, round face and hooded hazel eyes that suggest, in a cultured St. Petersburg family, the lingering threat of some ancestral steppe horseman. Tambasco is half-Italian and petite, with a dusky voice, profuse dark hair, vexed eyebrows and dark, shining eyes; like Polyakov, she makes an immediate impression of great intelligence, hers feisty and quilled even in her post-traumatic delirium. Without even once interrupting or talking over each other, they spent a few hours alternating their way through the story of how they ended up

broke and vilified. Tambasco wore two layers of faded-fern military fatigue jackets and high, zippered black combat boots over scruffy leggings; Polyakov, a light beige sweater and thin dress slacks. Although it was 75 degrees and sunny, Tambasco cupped her gigantic, bitter black coffee with both hands for warmth. The scene was far removed from the remote and starlit tiki lounge in the backers' imaginations, where she sipped umbrellaed drinks.

Polyakov met ZPM's original engineer, Igor Zamlinsky, when they were children in Atlanta's Russian-Jewish émigré community. In Russia, their parents were artists and scientists; in Atlanta, Polyakov helped his mother run a "European" deli, which provisioned Atlanta's expat scene with everything Continental, from weisswurst to stuffed cabbage. He was born on Sakhalin, a Siberian island where his mother was doing climatology research. He grew up in St. Petersburg and came to the States when he was 5. In high school, he and Zamlinsky split their time between the garage, where they disassembled appliances and played with chemistry sets, and the local coffee shop, where the espresso they chain-drank gave the air an aroma of lost cosmopolitan sophistication. In 2011, Zamlinsky, during his senior year of college, resurrected a crude but effective espresso machine he once jury-rigged from spare parts, and that summer, the two sat around tetchy and overcaffeinated, lobbing possible business ideas back and forth. The least contrived and lame idea they came up with was to sell their coffee, or rather their machine itself.

Unlike any espresso machine then available for either the home or the commercial market, Zamlinsky's device used a cheap microcontroller ($20 off the shelf at RadioShack), along with an innovative pump design, to provide exacting digital control over pressure and temperature. Nearly everybody agrees that when it isn't on the fritz, the coffee it produces is excellent, perhaps even as good as shots pulled from the sculptural chrome La Marzoccos on every grounds-strewn marble countertop from La Colombe to Intelligentsia.

Polyakov thought Kickstarter was the likeliest place to scrounge up $20,000. That would allow them to buy a milling machine and set up a backyard foundry. If they were willing to discount to zero the value of their own labor, and put materials costs on their credit cards, they could hand-assemble 50 prototype units and price them

at $200 apiece without losing all that much money. For help with their initial pitch, they drafted Tambasco, a high-school friend with a degree from Princeton in molecular biology and a minor in creative writing; she studied under Joyce Carol Oates. The trio shot a bumbling sales-pitch video of great charm, which ought to have dispelled any doubts that the two principals were anything but echt engineers. On Dec. 10, 2011, Polyakov pressed publish on their campaign and went to bed.

When they woke up, they discovered that they had already raised $10,000. Their campaign then got picked up by a well-respected coffee blog, and they achieved the $20,000 goal within the first day. They closed out their second day at $32,000. The tech blog Gizmodo wrote that they "might not suck," and Kickstarter featured them on its front page.

With Zamlinsky in the garage tinkering with machine design, and Polyakov frantic on the phone with contractors and suppliers in seven countries, they needed somebody to deal with the front end. During the initial Kickstarter campaign alone, they received more than 4,000 emails (more than a few of them, even then, in all caps). Tambasco had never intended to make ZPM customer service a full-time job, much less a three-year source of dark and deepening hollows under her eyes, but somebody had to answer those emails and write the updates. In late January, their campaign closed with $370,000 in pledges, of which they went on to collect about $330,000. They were the sixth-most-funded Kickstarter project to date. They had 1,500 orders to fill.

A chief tenet of the Internet age is belief in the natural proliferation of democracy and decentralization, in the ability of distributed networks of everyday people to achieve what once required top-down hierarchies and a great concentration of power. When you contribute to a Kickstarter campaign that funds an album or a documentary, you're participating in the creation of cultural value outside the risk-averse bureaucracies of mass cultural production. You're kicking in to cut out the middlemen of music labels or Hollywood studios.

A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

Some crowdfunding campaigns create marvelous temporary communities that build a lasting spirit of harmony and mutual aid. Others, not so much.

LOVE



Sad Pictures for Children

Raised $51,600 to print a book by a popular Internet cartoonist. After the cartoonist had a public breakdown before delivering all the copies, a backer stepped in and paid to mail the rest.



Ostrich Pillow Light

Raised $141,500 to make a lightweight eye-covering pillow for daytime napping — with a design based almost entirely on feedback from funders of the project's first, heavier version.



Rebecca Schiffman Jewelry

After Schiffman raised $6,700 to make jewelry based on architectural details from the Upper East Side, she wound up marrying one of her backers.

HATE



Hanfree

Raised $35,000 to make an iPad stand and failed to deliver. Two backers filed a lawsuit, and the creator filed for bankruptcy.



Instacube

Raised $621,000 to make a wireless photo frame. After delivery lagged, backers harassed the campaign manager for months via phone and social media; she eventually left the firm that owned the project, which is now being marketed as #Cube.



mPrinter

Raised $88,000 to make a pocket-size receipt printer. After two years passed, backers began filing complaints with the attorney general of Texas, where the project was based.

Illustrations by Craig & Karl

The same goes for gadgets, perhaps even more so: You could always record an album in your basement, after all, but it's only recently that a novice outfit might attempt industrial-scale appliance production. Projects like the Oculus Rift virtual-reality headset or the Pebble watch (both of which were Kickstarter successes that went on to become big independent businesses; the former was acquired last year by Facebook for $2 billion) course with a special energy that derives from the exchange of far-flung resources among the sympathetic and like-minded. The realized object takes on a kind of totemic significance through the aspirations and the values of the community that brought it into being. It's not some black box made elsewhere and delivered overnight. The backer feels less like a passive consumer than a proud co-conspirator.

At the same time, like all 21st-century consumers, Kickstarter backers have been trained to expect a world custom-engineered for total frictionlessness. Everything is supposed to work easily, right away and well. One benefit of giving our lives over to machines and algorithms, after all, is that there's no margin for human error. As

for our physical objects, we expect them to be sleek and perfect, designed with a religious devotion to the harmony of form and function. It's no accident that the most common way people refer to the industrial-design studio at Apple, with its prototypes hidden from visitors under white shrouds, is as a temple. This is a kind of perfection created under the auspices of the old model: high priests, secret tabernacles, inherited authorities, management by diktat.

My brother has worked at Apple for 10 years, first in operations and now in engineering. I asked him what advice he would have given to Polyakov if he'd been called in to consult on the manufacturing. He thought for a minute. "I honestly haven't the faintest idea," he said. This is because, despite all the advances of the maker-revolution age (off-the-shelf, open-source, programmable microcontrollers; rapid prototyping; 3-D printing; "AutoCAD for Dummies"), manufacturing remains a supremely difficult process, the success of which continues to rely on marshaling a lot of resources: development money, an extensive network of trusted vendors, the dedicated personnel to sit in conference rooms in concrete campuses in Shenzhen and Dongguan and refuse to budge until the product is streaming off the assembly line in the right amounts, at the right quality and at the agreed-upon price.

On the fourth day of their campaign, the ZPM team pushed the machine's estimated delivery date back three months, from March 2012 to June. Even if they were willing to spend years crouched in painstaking garage assembly, there was just no way to get the parts they needed off the shelf. It is fiendishly difficult to produce 2,000 of anything, which is the number of machines ZPM ultimately had to come up with. Two thousand units neither brings you to the point where you're realizing the major benefits of economies of scale nor gives you sufficient volume to have any leverage in negotiations over price, schedule and quality. As Polyakov put it, "You sort of have to make 2,000 of something to find out if you can make 2,000 of something."

With small runs, the cost per unit can balloon. ZPM's second manufacturer, San Diego's D&K, told the founders their engineering drawings weren't adequate and presented them with overage fees totaling $100,000. Pending payment, Polyakov

says, D&K is still holding the consigned parts and assembled machines hostage. (D&K declined to comment on the matter.)

If ZPM's backers eventually felt jilted, it was not because the "love" of ZPM's leave-taking was fake but because that love had once been fully requited. In an initial survey conducted at the immediate close of the campaign, 34 percent of backers identified as engineers or computer scientists, and many of them expected to be able to offer their own expertise along the way, and perhaps to learn a little about manufacturing on the side. ZPM's 56 regular updates included pictures and videos, all of them punning and intimate. One of the project's backers commented on three different updates that it was a real treat to receive the founders' "National Geographic tales of the travels to China, and such," and said he looked forward to relating those anecdotes for years over espressos from his machine. Even as the company's struggles began, some backers did provide genuine help. "There was Doug, at the sheet-metal facility," Tambasco recalled, "and Colin, who helped us with the pressure sensors." There was a design professor who flew in for the day to help with the user interface.

Eventually, though, the advice became overwhelming. "They're doing it on their own schedule, nights and weekends, taking up a huge amount of Igor's time when he's got a ton of work to do," she said. "People got insulted because they couldn't be involved as much as they wanted." The ongoing calls for transparency put pressure on ZPM to carry on all of its business in public, but transparency and efficacy can be incommensurable ideals. ZPM couldn't blame its vendors in updates, even for the mistakes they were consistently making, if the company wanted to keep working with them — or with anyone at all. The backers had a hard time understanding this; they continued to operate under the shared assumption that more democracy, more engagement and more transparency lead inexorably to more success.

Furthermore, ZPM had nothing to say when its vendors adjusted their own timelines based on backer support. Each time ZPM announced another delay, most of the backers would respond in a friendly tone. (*No worries, thanks for keeping us up to date!*) The vendors would point to those comments to argue there was no

great rush. ZPM also could not publish a full financial audit, because open books make meaningful cost negotiation impossible. “I just can’t publish our financials, our cost breakdown,” Tambasco said. “If I do that then when I go to get this thing made, then everybody knows how much I have in the bank. Then what they’re going to do is just drain that money.”

Which is exactly what happened. With the momentum from the project’s successful Kickstarter, ZPM sold another $230,000 worth of machines as online preorders; the founders hoped the extra cash would make for a better final product. Then, when they ran low on funds again, they raised another $285,000 from angel investors — which, though the founders saw the action as part of a good-faith effort to deliver on their promises, effectively broke their original covenant with the crowdfunding community. They also hired outside consultants on retainer — paid professionals who were, in spirit, the very opposite of backers, since they had no extramonetary commitment to ZPM’s success. When one of those consultants demanded, in the spring of 2014, that the project act like a “real start-up” and go into what people in Silicon Valley often call “stealth mode,” the updates came to an abrupt halt. The founders hoped that by posting their email addresses and phone numbers, and offering to field queries and complaints in person, they might assuage the backer community, but this plan, in hindsight, seemed misbegotten. It only confirmed for the backers that their one plank of accountability — the public nature of the story on offer — had been withdrawn.

ZPM’s silence drove the backers into a tizzy. Despite the deranged conspiracy-mongering ideas to which some of them ultimately clung, the reality of ZPM’s failure was pretty banal: The founders were naïve and inexperienced, well intentioned but clumsy, and they serially trusted and paid the wrong people for ineffective help. Even when this was explained to the backers, they couldn’t bring themselves to believe it. There were calls for Polyakov to go back to Russia, for him to rot in a Mexican prison. One backer continued to leave angry comments for more than a year after he received a refund. Other backers were gratified to find a Facebook picture that seemed to them incontrovertible proof that Polyakov and Tambasco were, or had been, carrying on a romantic relationship. It was as if the

secrets withheld were taking place behind the keyhole of a parental bedroom. One backer "discovered" that Polyakov's father must be Alexander Polyakov, a physicist at Princeton, and that this connection had to have something or other to do with his and Tambasco's hidden relationship. (Alexander Polyakov has no relation to Gleb Polyakov; Gleb's father, Mark Polyakov, was a computer programmer in the Soviet Union. Gleb and his mother left Russia in 1994, when Mark was murdered in a mugging on their doorstep.)

The virtual family having broken up, there was a scramble to claim the household items. Woodhouse himself, who frequently described his crusade as one of solidarity with those who shelled out money they couldn't spare on a luxury item that was only ever theoretical in the first place, emailed Polyakov right after Update 57, to say: "Do you still have the development or beta machines? If so, is there any way we could work something out to get one to me?" He concluded mildly, "I'm sorry the project came to this, but I understand the complexities." (Woodhouse claims he was just trying to get Polyakov's attention.)

When a crowdfunded project comes together — as, after all, a vast majority of these campaigns do — a great sense of collective achievement swells. People talk about their first-generation Pebble watches the way they talk about a hometown sweetheart who made it big in pictures. Pebble watches and Oculus Rifts are, of course, the outliers, but even the minor wins remind us that there are times when we all prove capable of rising to an Internet occasion. There's a form of enchantment that results when a diverse community, materializing from nothing, gets behind an act of creation that no other institution would support.

But in ZPM's case, the enchantment was long ago irretrievably dispelled. Once the money was finally gone, and the project's consultant had bolted with engineers in tow, the founders' only option was to hope somebody might buy what remained of the company and deliver them from their moral (and, possibly, legal) commitments. They knew it would be a tough sell: They had a technology at last viable for mass production, but they were also lugging around hundreds of thousands of dollars in liabilities. Their backers, sending comments and emails into

the void, had always felt a lack of leverage, but now Polyakov and Tambasco were in something of the same position. They walked into rooms with their backs already against the wall.

In early March 2015, Tambasco posted a brief new update, No. 58, to the effect that the founders were in negotiations to sell ZPM. Their suitor was John Buckman, a 45-year-old serial entrepreneur and the outgoing chairman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation; he had himself been expecting a ZPM machine for some years now and was a member of Woodhouse's private group.

I joined Polyakov on a trip to Buckman's home in San Rafael, about half an hour north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Buckman lives on a narrow private road up a large hill, with floor-to-ceiling windows and nobody to see from them. He greeted us as though he'd just been tugged gently back to earth from a low-grade levitation session. The walls of his aerie were cream-colored and without adornment, except for five Renaissance lutes hanging in formation on a faux-Egyptian tapestry.

Buckman was drawn to ZPM because he "hadn't yet seen someone marrying computers and espresso powerfully." He uses a state-of-the-art VacMaster VP215 Chamber Vacuum Sealer to cache his meals; his fridge, packed with rows of baggied tuber, legume and flesh, resembles an evidence locker in an organ-theft investigation. In the garage, beside his matching Segways, he has a freezer that goes to minus 6 degrees — regular freezers don't keep his fish sufficiently gelid — and a steel sous-vide basin that heats his VacMastered bags to temperatures accurate to one-tenth of a degree. His pantry countertop has a line of 13 power outlets. Polyakov set up his machine, and, once he got the calibration right, we sampled a series of amphetaminic shots.

At the end of our day, Buckman sat loosely lotus-legged under the algaelike jasmine on his deck, the setting sun at his back. The light was in Polyakov's face, and he had to squint into the jasmine. There was not a whole lot to discuss. The backers suspected that Polyakov would try to sell the intellectual property and pocket the proceeds, but in fact Polyakov's total asking price for the company was

$35,000 to settle the founders' legal and professional debts, equity consideration for their angel investors and, most important, a guarantee that Buckman would honor ZPM's commitment to its backers.

Buckman, understandably, did not want to accept liabilities that might put his home at risk, but he had spent a lot of time on the phone with such "trolls" as Woodhouse, he said, and thought he had found a way forward: He would issue each backer a coupon for a credit toward the final machine, at the value of the backer's initial pledge. He would make a thin margin on the first 2,000 machines the company owed, but he would also have an attractive redemption story, and 2,000 evangelists for his new venture. Woodhouse, who was enlisted as an adviser, was fine with the whole idea. Buckman and Polyakov agreed broadly on terms, and ZPM would soon turn over all of the engineering files needed to reproduce the machine.

In April, though, even this shot at deliverance seemed to drain away. Buckman was airing many of the same grievances that the backers had: Polyakov was disorganized and confusing and opaque in his communications. Unlike the backers, Buckman had the resources to move forward on his own, and unlike Polyakov, he had no one to hold him to account. He was going to start his own company to build a home espresso machine. His new company, he told Polyakov at one point, would be called Decent Coffee.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of "A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful." He last wrote about the director Christopher Nolan.

Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 61 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Backed Into a Corner