



The Man Who Wants to Change the Way Men Get Off

Beijing businessman Brian Sloan reinvented the male sex toy to the tune of \$10 million. Is he the perfect entrepreneur for the digital-sex era?

Meet Ruby Temptations. That's her, spread-eagle and nude from the waist down on a king-size bed in the sun-drenched penthouse of the Berlin Sheraton, surrounded by a roomful of vibrators and dildos. Ruby, a 20-year-old adult-film actress from the United Kingdom with strawberry-blond hair and porcelain skin, is a girl-next-door type—if the girl next door had double-D breasts and had filmed 40-odd scenes in just three months in the porn industry. Ultimately Ruby wants to move her career across the pond to Los Angeles. The scene is “slightly more seedy in the U.K.,” she says.

But first, a mold of Ruby's vulva will be created for a line of adult toys, which she hopes will jump-start her American ambitions. For that to happen, her crotch must be 3-D scanned, and that's why she finds herself in Berlin. A few weeks ago, Ruby entered an online vulva beauty contest organized by sex-toy entrepreneur Brian Sloan,

BY **MITCH
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the brains behind a wildly successful crowd-funded blow-job machine called the Autoblow 2. In all, 182 women submitted close-up photos of their vulvas, and more than 2.7 million votes were cast. Sloan flew the winners and a handful of runners-up, including Ruby, to Germany for the scanning. Likenesses of their privates will be available as removable synthetic sleeves for Sloan's signature Autoblow product sometime this summer, as well as for 3Fap, a new multi-orifice masturbation toy. But first, Sloan is scanning the women himself.

Thirty-five years old with an athletic build, a shaved head, a disarming smile and protruding ears, Sloan was raised in the Chicago suburbs but has lived for the past nine years in China, where he has built a small but rapidly growing sex-toy empire. This year his company, Very Intelligent Ecommerce Inc., is projected to hit \$10 million in sales, up from just \$1.5 million

in 2013—a 567 percent increase. He managed this feat with only one full-time employee, a handful of service providers and subcontractors and no office space. The success has all come on the back of the Autoblow 2, which upon its summer 2014 launch went viral, being featured around the world, from Bosnia to Ivory Coast—Sloan was interviewed by dozens of publications, radio hosts and television presenters. In May 2015 the Autoblow 2 made a cameo on the HBO series *Silicon Valley* in an episode titled “Adult Content.” In the scene, a speaker at an adult-industry convention points to a table of tech-age sex toys, including the Autoblow 2, and says, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future.”

For Sloan, the future includes a plan to dominate the male-sex-toy niche. Part of his strategy includes focusing on clever—some might say gimmicky—internet marketing campaigns, such as the vulva beauty contest, to promote his growing line of toys. He's





planning an anus contest, a mouth contest and a penis contest, and has a balls contest already in the can. (The 3-D-scanned balls are being turned into decorative objects for the home.)

First, however, he has to scan some vulvas. Other than Ruby, none of the participants in Berlin works in the adult-film industry; most entered the contest on a lark, and none of them is quite sure what to make of it all. There's 27-year-old Britney from Liverpool, whose boyfriend, Max, urged her to submit a picture. (Names of contestants, except Ruby, have been changed.) Max snapped the photo himself. "We had some drinks first," Britney says. There's Carmen, a pretty 23-year-

he tells Ruby, "we need to scan you doggy style."

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Americans spend somewhere between \$1 billion and \$2 billion annually on sex toys, experts say, and the market is growing. The success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* books and film sparked a 7.5 percent increase in sales of sex-themed products, including adult toys, which are becoming more varied and sophisticated.

Companies are increasingly exploring how to incorporate tech and robotics into sex toys. OhMiBod, a New Hampshire-based company, offers vibrators that sync with musical beats and others that a partner can manipulate via Bluetooth on a smartphone from across the

upgraded it from two rows of beads to three.) "The idea, in short, was rooted in the fact that robotics are becoming cheaper and more common," Sloan says. "I just brainstormed on how to apply robotics to masturbating."

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A few months before the 3-D scanning in Berlin, I visit Sloan in Beijing to learn the Autoblow origin story. I find him working on his laptop at a Starbucks on the kind of hot, smoggy Beijing day that stings your eyes and weighs down your lungs.

Sloan is in the heat of the vulva beauty contest, the prospects of which excite him greatly. "The appearance of a vulva that I like and one

that you like might be different," he tells me between sips of a double espresso on ice. "Since I'm going to make vagina sleeves—vulva sleeves—I want to make sure I'm including the vaginal appearances that most men prefer." Sloan even hired an actual data scientist to produce what he's dubbed "The Vulva Paper," which examines, with an absurdly academic degree of detail, voters' vulvar preferences. (The contest wasn't without controversy; one critic called it "a veritable manwich of misogynist manure.")

Sloan's path to becoming a sex-toy mogul in China was a winding one. Born in Skokie, Illinois, he studied philosophy and political science at the University of Missouri before entering law school at Penn State. He had a summer internship with the Cook County Homicide Task Force and was a summer associate at a downtown Chicago law firm, but he dreaded the work. "The first thing I would do when I would go into the office," he says, "was put a sticky note covering the time on the computer, so I wouldn't have to see what fucking time it was all day."

While in law school Sloan began to drive to estate sales and antiques auctions in rural Pennsylvania, buying whatever he thought had hidden value. On one of his early trips he purchased a vintage Monopoly board game for \$30, which he sold on eBay for \$100. The sale "set me off on a whirlwind of going to local auctions," he recalls. Once, Sloan found a restaurant that was going out of business and borrowed \$8,000 from his father to buy the antique signs decorating the walls; he later sold them for \$30,000.

By the time he graduated Sloan had lost interest in the law entirely, but his parents urged him to take the bar exam anyway. Relieved when he failed by two points, he dove headfirst into his eBay business.

"ROBOTICS ARE BECOMING CHEAPER AND MORE COMMON. I JUST BRAINSTORMED ON HOW TO APPLY ROBOTICS TO MASTURBATING."

old from Bavaria who will soon graduate from law school. She saw the contest on 9GAG.com. "There were already 15 or so pictures, and I thought, Meh. So I sent my own," she says. Carmen finished second behind Nancy, a slightly manic 27-year-old multimedia designer who lives in Scotland. Nancy plans to buy a used motorcycle with her \$5,500 winnings (\$5,000 for the first-place winner's vaginal scans plus a \$500 bonus for optional mouth and anus scans).

In the penthouse suite, Sloan is accompanied by a jovial German I'll call Dirk, who owns one of the few 3-D-scanning companies in the country. He's here to help out in case Sloan botches the scans.

Ruby waits patiently on the bed, taking a few selfies for her Twitter followers. The room has the air of an awkward visit to the gynecologist. As Sloan slowly guides the scanner—a \$20,000-plus instrument that looks like a clothing iron—a few inches from Ruby's exposed groin, an image assembles on a nearby laptop. The room is silent except for the beeping of the machine, the hum of the laptop and Dirk repeatedly telling Sloan he's doing it all wrong.

Finally Sloan has the image he needs. "Now,"

globe. It also offers an app that allows users to track orgasms. "My first intimate moment with a chick was in a movie theater, with my hand on her thigh," says Brian Dunham, who founded OhMiBod with his wife, Suki, in 2007. "When I look at the generation growing up now, those intimate moments are happening digitally."

Matt McMullen, creator of the ultra-high-end sex toy RealDoll, is working on a kind of artificial-intelligence technology that will allow a doll to develop a personality curated by the user, not unlike the operating system in the Spike Jonze film *Her*. An app will connect wirelessly to an animatronic head that features lifelike expressions and movements. That product is still a couple of years away, and McMullen says a fully functioning sex robot that looks and feels like the real thing—a "machine that blows your mind"—isn't on the horizon yet.

The problem is cost. Based on today's technology, such a product would retail for tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars. So the mass-market sex-toy robotics revolution may just start with Sloan's blow-job machine, which currently retails online for a relatively affordable \$160 under the name Autoblow 2+. (The plus sign was added when Sloan



SIM CHU-YIN

Brian Sloan left Chicago (and a law degree) behind for Beijing. Now his sex-toy company is projected to hit \$10 million in sales this year, a 567 percent increase from 2013.



Sloan stored his bounty in his parents' garage in Skokie, focusing on rare and unusual items—horn-rimmed glasses, vintage police handcuffs, cricket-fighting cages—many of which were sourced from China, where he began to make frequent trips. He made a profit of \$80,000 in his first full year as an internet vendor.

One of the strangest items Sloan sold landed him in the media spotlight—for all the wrong reasons. One morning in 2007 he received a frantic phone call from his landlord. Why, the landlord wanted to know, were police and news crews swarming Sloan's apartment? It turned out the cops were, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, investigating a tip from a well-known "local artist and part-time drag queen" called Jojo Baby, who had dropped by Sloan's apartment to buy vintage mannequins and instead saw a human skull boiling on the stove top.

The skull had come from a supplier in China, and Sloan was cleaning it to sell on eBay. (While admittedly bizarre, the sale of human remains online isn't unheard of.) Jojo Baby phoned a friend—an anthropologist—who advised calling the police. Within a day, the story blew up. News crews from NBC, ABC, Fox and Telemundo camped outside Sloan's apartment; the *Tribune* headline read

4 SKULLS PLUS 1 POT ADD UP TO HOT WATER. The police initially believed Sloan had murdered people and cooked their corpses; even after he explained the situation they threatened to charge him with dismemberment. In the end the cops couldn't find any broken laws, and Sloan was let off with a warning. "Not my proudest moment," he says.

By then Sloan was tiring of his eBay business, believing it to have limited growth potential. Not long after the skull episode, he decamped for the greener (though smoggier) pastures of Beijing, where he would seek his fortune in a decidedly different industry.

In 2007, Beijing was one of the world's biggest boomtowns, with a soaring economy, an ascending middle class and the summer Olympics not far off. It was also drawing foreigners from across the globe who were looking for easy opportunities. Beijing became home to a thriving entrepreneurial culture in which Sloan was soon immersed.

In China he focused on selling a single product: latex fetish wear. (Sloan had not actually sold his products in China until recently.) He'd already become one of the internet's main suppliers of blow-up rubber suits, which he sold to inflation fetishists, a term he uses to describe people who become aroused

1. Sloan often works from cafés; his one full-time employee, a 24-year-old Romanian, handles the technology side. 2. The type of small motor used in Sloan's signature product is the same kind used to dispense cash at ATMs. 3. Sloan cofounded the Autoblow 2 with a modest goal of \$45,000; within two months he had raised \$275,000.

from being inflated or deflated, including those who can achieve orgasm by reenacting the famous Violet Beauregarde blueberry scene in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. Operating under the brand name Kinky King Latex, Sloan sourced from a factory in China's Hunan province and sold the products online for a fraction of the price of those offered by bigger brands.

But Sloan wondered how many millions of dollars' worth of latex he could sell. The latex-suit market was small, and he had bigger ambitions. With his newly developed expertise in the adult industry, he decided to expand. He noticed that sex-toy companies enjoyed unusually high profit margins but displayed poor knowledge of e-commerce. And Sloan was in the right place: China produces 70 percent of the world's sex toys, generating some \$2 billion in sales globally. He realized that if he bought from



factories in China, rebranded the products and sold directly to consumers on sites like Amazon, he could eliminate two sets of middlemen—distributors and retailers—and drastically cut the sale price while still making a handsome profit. He believed competitors were too focused on brick-and-mortar sales. “The companies were operating in the world of the 1980s and 1990s,” Sloan says.

In other words, the sex-toy industry was ripe for disruption.

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Sloan’s new venture initially sold garden-variety sex toys—vibrators and dildos. But he saw an opportunity in the male-customer niche. The enormously successful Fleshlight, an artificial vagina, had already become a game changer, but with it and other masturbation toys the user still had to do all the work—it wasn’t something being performed on you.

Mechanical masturbation devices called “strokers” already existed, but they were mostly battery-powered and ineffectual. In 2008 Sloan found a factory in China that was making an oddly branded stroker called the World Master 2000. He had an epiphany. “I saw it and thought, That’s a blow-job machine!”

And so the first incarnation of the Autoblow was born. The machine looked like a large coffee mug with a rubber orifice shaped like a mouth on one end. Inside was a small battery-powered motor that moved two circular rows of beads up and down beneath a rubber sleeve. Sloan ordered shipments of the Chinese stroker and built a website focused solely on selling it. (He also launched Mangasm.com, which sells other items for men, such as fake vaginas, anal toys and cock rings.)

Sloan made a video demonstrating the Autoblow that starred...Brian Sloan. In his apartment in Beijing he hung a bedsheet for a backdrop and positioned the camera so his head was out of frame. He used the product until he reached orgasm, sent the video to India to be edited and added a techno music soundtrack. “I don’t know how many people came to the website—friends, family or whatever—and said, ‘Please tell us that’s not you!’”

The first version of the Autoblow sold relatively well. The problem was, it wasn’t very good. It broke down regularly; the weak motor couldn’t power through bigger or curved penises. Sloan envisioned something much better. “If we just fixed everything that was wrong with it and made a totally new product,” he says, “it would rock the male-toys niche.”

The Autoblow 2 took three years to develop.

Sloan was worried about the machine being copied if he manufactured it in China, so he worked with a factory in Taiwan that made air conditioner controller units. The factory created a prototype, and it was a disaster; it broke down as soon as it was powered on. Sloan hired a boutique U.S. design firm to help with the concept, which he then took to a factory in Dongguan, an industrial city in southern China. The redesigned Autoblow used a small industrial-strength motor—the kind used to dispense cash in ATM machines—and featured removable, easy-to-clean sleeves, offered in three different sizes.

Once the prototype was finished, Sloan needed cash. He didn’t want to accept outside investments and give up a stake in his company, and adult businesses can rarely get bank loans. Instead he launched a crowdfunding campaign on the website Indiegogo. He filmed a video that again featured himself as the pitchman. The stated goal was \$45,000; within two months he’d raised \$275,000.

The Autoblow 2 was something the industry hadn’t yet seen, and it soon became an internet phenomenon. “There’s a huge difference between masturbating and having somebody else get you off,” says RealDoll’s McMullen, who has made a lifelike mouth sleeve for the Autoblow 2+, which has just been released (pictured on page 85). “And that device that he’s got is accomplishing that simulation. I think it’s really cool.”

Even as the Autoblow 2 blew up, the company remained minuscule. Sloan has one em-

Brian first started his business, it took me two or three years to tell my friends,” says his mother, Cindy. These days, however, it makes for great stories at parties.

Influenced by brand pitchmen he watched on TV as a kid—including Ron Popeil, inventor of the Ronco Showtime Rotisserie (“Set it and forget it!”) and Billy Mays of OxiClean fame—Sloan has become a shameless self-promoter by design. By posting videos online of himself shilling the Autoblow or by inviting women to participate in a vulva beauty contest, he’s able to directly reach his target consumer. “Everybody has websites, but in terms of direct marketing on the internet like Brian does, I’m not really seeing it,” says Sara Ramirez, associate publisher for retailing at *XBIZ*, an adult-entertainment trade magazine.

In Beijing, Sloan invites me to his apartment, a penthouse in a luxury development with 20-foot-tall windows that offer an incredible view of the smog-shrouded skyline. But Sloan isn’t ostentatious—he’s more of a T-shirt and jeans kind of guy. He flies first or business class and stays in five-star hotels when he travels, but those perks don’t cost him anything because he runs his entire business on credit cards to collect points. His biggest indulgence is travel, which he does extensively—including two jaunts to North Korea and an epic road trip from Zambia to Uganda a few years ago. Later this year, he plans to relocate to Berlin with his girlfriend, a 27-year-old Chinese woman he met on OkCupid. He’s also looking to buy property in Montenegro.

“LOOK AT THE GENERATION GROWING UP NOW—THOSE INTIMATE MOMENTS ARE HAPPENING DIGITALLY.”

ployee, a 24-year-old in Romania who focuses on the technology side and whom Sloan considers a business partner, but otherwise he relies on a small team of mostly part-timers scattered around the globe. Mail from his various brands is still delivered to his parents’ address in Skokie. “We’re very supportive,” says his father, Ben Sloan, with a laugh. Once, his parents helped Sloan film a promotional video that featured him walking around a mall wearing a full-body latex suit. “When

Sloan’s apartment is decorated with sex toys and the full jaw of a woolly mammoth that once lived in northern China. Just inside the front door stands a two-foot-tall rubber penis, complete with veins and an astonishingly realistic-looking scrotum, which he bought for \$100 from a sex-toy shop in China. “This is my prize possession,” he says.

On a table is a prototype of the Autoblow 2+. (Sloan’s pitch: “It strokes 33 percent more of your dick!”) “You can try this one later,” he



says, handing it to me. (Back home in New York, I do try it. Lacking the, let's say, improvisation of the real thing, using the Autoblow 2+ feels exactly like what the name suggests: robotic head.)

Stacked around the living room are boxes of sex toys—large dildos, small vibrators, Autoblow sleeves and a 17-pound fake vagina and ass—sold through Sloan's many websites.

"Check this out," he says, reaching into a cardboard box and pulling out a pair of silicone breasts with a vagina conveniently placed between them. "It's tits with a pussy built in! How's that! I mean, that's not a bad idea for nature to take note."

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A few days later Sloan and I fly to Dongguan, in Guangdong province, where the Autoblow is manufactured. Dongguan, sometimes called the "world's factory," was once notorious for its sex industry, with thousands of prostitutes catering to the legions of workers who flooded there during China's boom. In recent years, however, the city has been cleaned up in Chinese president Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign.

In the morning we pay a visit to Sloan's Autoblow collaborator, a Chinese-owned, U.S.-managed company. In a tote bag he's carrying a new stroker, made by a company in Japan, that he wants the engineers to examine. "There are a lot of nice sex toys in Japan, but they have no fucking clue how to market them to Westerners," Sloan tells me on the walk over from our hotel. "I mean, it's called the A10 Piston. It's not a fucking car!"

Inside the modern, well-air-conditioned office we meet sales director John Hui. Hui is a genial 39-year-old Taiwanese American sporting a short Mohawk and wearing shorts, shower sandals and a baggy T-shirt featuring a stylized skull; he looks a bit like the Buddha. Sex toys of all varieties clutter his office, and a hologram on the wall features the face of former Chinese leaders Mao Tse-tung or Deng Xiaoping, depending on the angle.

Sloan and Hui discuss the new 3Fap toy they're working on (*fap*, according to Urban Dictionary, is the sound one makes while masturbating) and manufacturing details of the Autoblow 2+. Sloan worked closely with Hui on the development of the Autoblow 2, and he travels here every two or three months to discuss product development—one of the main ad-

vantages of living in China. The engineers and design team were tasked with taking Sloan's original vision and making a product that both worked effectively and "wasn't too crazy so that you wouldn't stick your dick in," Hui says.

Later we drive to the nearby sex-toy factory where the Autoblow is made. Riding in a company SUV, Hui reflects on the debauched city Dongguan once was. "You know they say Vegas is Sin City? Well, this city would make Vegas look like Martha Stewart's home," he says.

The factory is clean and sterile and smells of glue and cleaning products—a high-tech factory for high-tech sex toys. In a glassed-off room are two configurable lines where workers in white lab coats and caps sit on baby blue stools and work under bright neon lights. Before entering we put on coats and hats of our own and slip little booties over our shoes.

CHINA PRODUCES 70 PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S SEX TOYS, GEN- ERATING \$2 BIL- LION IN SALES.

Inside, the room is silent other than faint mechanical squeaks and clicks and an air-pumping sound similar to Darth Vader's breathing. They're not manufacturing Autoblow today. Instead, workers on one line are assembling a vibrator called the Tracey Cox Super-Sex Bullet Vibrator; on the other, they put together tiny motors for a cock ring. (Neither the vibrator nor the cock ring is a Sloan product.)

We exit the workroom into a large storage facility where a dozen crates of Autoblow and another dozen crates of Autoblow sleeves await shipment.

"I've never actually seen so many Autoblow in one place. It's kind of cool," Sloan says.

"Your jerk-off robot," says Hui.

"I actually did a calculation once based on how many we've sold so far, and if every man used it once, how much semen that would create," Sloan says. According to his mental math, all the Autoblow sold would have theoretically filled six and

a half 10-gallon coolers with ejaculate. "That's a lot of semen," he says, "and I'm proud of that."

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Back in Berlin, Ruby Temptations has been successfully scanned and Britney, the Liverpudlian, is up next. She's accompanied by her boyfriend, Max, and they're both nervous. Britney is on the bed on her hands and knees, with Max spreading her butt cheeks apart as Dirk mans the scanner.

Sloan tries to cut through the tension. "Are you going to enter my balls contest?" he asks Max.

"My balls are a bit wonky."

"All balls are beautiful. I want to see your balls in my balls contest!"

Britney is followed by Carmen from Bavaria, Anna from Hungary and Giulia from Italy. The last to be scanned is Nancy, the winner. She wears a black long-sleeve top, ankle socks and a Pussy Riot-inspired face mask with the slogan

#KEEPITCOOL printed on the front.

When the scanning is finished, Sloan reaches into a safe in a cabinet under the television. As Nancy looks on, arms folded and wearing the balaclava, he counts out \$5,500 in crisp greenbacks.

"Congratulations on winning first place in the world's most beautiful vagina contest," he says, handing Nancy the cash.

Dirk claps quietly off to the side.

The next evening, Sloan and I grab dinner in Kreuzberg, Berlin's version of Brooklyn. He's happy with the contest; there were no major disasters. A few of the women were upset that a free breakfast

wasn't included with the hotel room, and Britney and Max charged five hotel-priced Cokes to Sloan's room. But it could have been worse. "I thought we'd get a crier, I thought we'd get an alcoholic, I thought we'd get a girl who changed her mind at the last minute." In the end, he says, "a group of pretty well-adjusted, intelligent women showed up to make a little bit of money."

The contest cost him \$30,000 in all, but he figures he's already made that back in Autoblow sales. But most important, it was another campaign that went viral, gaining Sloan and the Autoblow more exposure (and notoriety).

He's excited to get the scans made into sleeves. They'll also be used on his next big development: the Autoblow 3. Features Sloan is considering include movements that will sync with those of an actual adult star—say, Ruby Temptations—as they play out on internet porn.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future. ■