Innovation goes for a ride

Before I've had a chance to unbuckle my seatbelt, Mark Groenenboom is jogging toward my truck.

"Follow me around the block," the 43-year-old Groenenboom says from inside of his red crash helmet, which is scraped with the telltale signs from spills past. He jogs back to his garage, fastens a leash to his dog, Lexi, clutches his G-Bomb longboard and slides it in place. With a push of his black Vans (shoes), he's off – a blur of khaki pants and a button-down shirt, Lexi jogging next to him at the end of her leash.

Groenenboom clocks 10 miles per hour during his round-the-block trek. With shifts of his knees and feet, he zigs and zags with the agility of a 12-year-old. But this is not thrasher skating, with flips, leaps or other show-off tricks that are bound to hurt the 40-something-year-old more than anything else.

"Most of my customers tend to be like me: Older guys who want it for distance," Groenenboom said, catching his breath after the ride.

It was 2002 when Groenenboom took to skateboarding. It was something he'd done as a kid, but as an adult, hadn't put much thought into. As he tells it, Lexi entered the family and she liked to pull during her walks. Rather than taking the scolding route or obedience training to quell the dog's leash-pulling ways, Groenenboom , a mechanical engineer for Sigma Designs, engineered a solution: He bought a skateboard and let her pull to her heart's content. Then he bought another.

"I was surprised at how different the rides were," he said.

All of that got the Vancouver resident thinking about design. Before long, he was applying his mechanical engineering training to skateboard design: Enter a low-deck model with adjustable wheels on a smooth bracket.

"My wife looked at it and said, 'It looks cool,'" Groenenboom recalled.

With that, Groenenboom set out to patent his design, a process that he describes as more tedious than engineering, and started his business: G-Bomb Longboards.

Groenenboom's boards sell for about $375, with decks (the long part that a rider stands on) crafted out of Portland. He fills one or two orders each week for clients that span the globe. Many of his customers, also 40-somethings, use their longboards for commuting. By pushing up and down on the board with knees in a pumping action (no pushing the pavement required), a rider can easily travel 10 to 15 miles per hour. During our interview, Groenenboom had a friend traveling via longboard from Seattle. Groenenboom estimated the 150-mile journey would take his friend about two days.

Groenenboom figures one of his boards should last its rider a lifetime. And while some parts may need replacements from time to time, a longboard rider never has to worry about a flat tire like a bicyclist does. The portability of the board – riders carry them inside after a commute – means no locks and less chance for theft.

When it comes to product marketing, Groenenboom's engineering background shows: His website, gbomblongboards.com, is heavy on specs and light on sales pitch. Most of Groenenboom's customers find him through word of mouth or from specification searches. Now that his bracket patent is in place, he figures it's time for a little marketing.

Still, Groenenboom said his soul is in tinkering – and taking Lexi for runs with his longboards.

"I'm out to make the best skateboard I can," he said.