was Ho's instinct. "Deep at heart, I'm a lazy guy," he says. "I'd rather study than work." Ho moved to Toronto in 1983 to enrol in the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, graduating in 1987. After a year working in the field, he discovered that he had a knack for treating headaches, so in 1988, he and a colleague opened the Pain and Headache Clinic in Toronto.

Ho treated people with a range of electronic muscle-stimulating devices that are commonly used by physiotherapists and chiropractors. Some of the machines promote healing in soft tissue, and some strengthen muscles through electrical stimulation. All these machines, including Ho's, operate on the same principle: you send an electric current through a wire, it comes out in a pad and uses gel as a conductor—or, in the case of Ho's machine, gel pads moistened with water. An intermittent current enters the nerve and muscle, stimulating the tissue to contract, then relax.

Ho says he was getting great results with patients, but found the stimulation too repetitive; eventually, nerves adapted and stopped responding. His solution: design a machine that varied the amplitude and frequency of the pulses. Ho developed a prototype for office use, and says his patients were so juiced by the results that they wanted machines of their own. After an informal survey, he determined that, on average, patients would be willing to pay about $100 for the device, so he took a $50 deposit from 100 or so patients and ate the rest of the cost of the second, home-use prototype, which was about $6,000. Dr. Ho's Muscle Massage was born.

To this day, there seems to be no shortage of satisfied customers. Ho eagerly clogs the fax machine at *Canadian Business* with 23 of the hundreds of testimonials he's received. (Unfortunately, he also accidentally faxed a couple of his customers' credit card numbers, which he later asked us to destroy.) The wince-inducing letters come from people across the country, who gleefully recount stories of aching joints, neck pain, herniated discs and pinched nerves. All credit Ho's machine for helping them. (Only two complaints have been filed with the Better Business Bureau, and one has been settled.) Still, Ho knows that if he wants credibility, he can't rely on word of mouth alone. People want scientific proof, and now they have it—sort of. Ho paid Stuart McGill, a professor of spine biomechanics in the University of Waterloo's department of kinesiology, to test the Muscle Massage machine. The study shows it might actually work. As his report states dryly, the device "reduced muscle spasms, on average, in pained patients."

Sideline studies like this are fairly commonplace; the most frequent objective is to help entrepreneurs hone their products. Neither the University of Waterloo nor McGill endorse this product in any way. But Ho simply can't help himself. Ever the consummate pitchman, he sent out the report with his PR material. When I point this out to McGill, he's obviously taken by surprise. His response is clipped: "I'll call him right away."

Mike Bullard turns the massager to the max. "It's not a pleasant experience!" The audience explodes with laughter

"TV doesn't last forever." We're back in the Acura, and Ho is a flurry of hand gestures and opinions. "People get bored of watching you and that medium is expensive, right? Certain seasons the price goes up, and you go, 'What happened? Are more people watching? Did we have a lot of immigrants come in or what?'" He's in the midst of explaining his latest scheme, a new sales model based on getting satisfied customers to perform home demonstrations for friends and family. "That costs us very little," he concludes. But isn't it essentially a pyramid scheme? "No," he says. "In a pyramid scheme, you call your friend, and he doesn't even know what you're selling, and you invite him to a stupid meeting." He says his distributors wouldn't be called distributors. They'd be "registered demonstrators," and they wouldn't buy products to resell them or collect money or be liable for the product. They would simply refer new customers to Ho and collect a commission.

Another distribution channel is Shoppers Home Health Care, a division of Shoppers Drug Mart that sells medical assistance devices. Ho recently began selling the Muscle Massage through the service. "Actually, we're their top seller in our category right now," he boasts. (A call to Shoppers revealed that not only is this true, but that the return rate for his product is a scant 2%.) Though he might be short on ideas for how to distribute his product cheaply and reputably, Ho isn't short on enthusiasm. Since the early days, when he sold the massager out of the back of his car, he's been pitching it to pretty much everyone he meets. On a flight from Florida last year, he met Sue Blackham, an occupational nurse at Kuntz Electroplating Inc. in Kitchener, Ont., a company that polishes and plates steel and aluminum wheels, bumpers and other automotive components. Ho happened to sit next to the nurse and introduced himself after he overheard her friend saying that she had a sore shoulder. He told them about his pain clinic in Toronto and about the Muscle Massage. Blackham was intrigued, as she'd been prescribing physiotherapy to some of the company's 1,000 employees, many of whom suffered from repetitive strain injuries. "Ho wasn't a salesman," says Blackham. "He seemed to be a genuine man." Ho explained to Blackham how the device worked, then offered her several trial units if she would conduct an independent study in her company. Blackham agreed.

She says that in six months last year, the Muscle Massage saved the company more than $12,000 in physiotherapy costs. More importantly, says Blackham, it drastically reduced health-related absenteeism. "Do I question it? No. There are all kinds of alternative therapies out there," she says. "This one works and it saves us money."

It's this kind of endorsement that really fires Ho up. After all, it's tough trying to get a product off the ground—let alone doing it on the cheap. He works seven days a week, and his cell phone rings constantly. There's always something to do, be it going to a trade fair or making an appearance on the Home Shopping Network or even revising the infomercial script. And there's the new therapeutic pillow he's been developing, which, naturally, he mentions at every opportunity, including on the Bullard show. "What does it do, choke you to death?" joked Bullard. Ho says he felt frustrated during the show, as the comic just wasn't taking him seriously. "I said to him, 'Mike, remind me never to come back,'" he recalls. But you can be sure that, given the opporunity, he will. "I believe that when you do something you have to be fully committed," Ho says without a trace of doubt. It's still a long way to the rich, easy life, but he seems to live by his words: even if you're small, you've got to think mighty. CB