How Winners Spot Winners

nyone can have a good idea. Don't let anyone talk you into thinking otherwise. It is just that novelists, inventors, and composers have developed the knack of leaving their creative taps on. Even then, ideas don't exactly gush. They tend to appear when your attention is elsewhere, tiptoeing into consciousness, so to speak. At the germinal stage, they easily vanish. A harsh word or shrug is sometimes all it takes. Even as they disappear, you may sense a loss of some merit. So do not to be too hard on your thoughts, however ungainly. Gather them reverently, and allow them to settle and find a niche. Once you have enough, you are in a position to pick and choose. Sometimes a concept arrives like a scissor blade, useless in itself. Other times, ideas surface in installments. Occasionally, they arrive fully-fledged. When the right one comes, you'll know. Even before friends stop saying "Bah!" and start saying "Oh!" and you begin to get positive reactions, give some thought to your destiny. There's absolutely no point in having an idea if you don't do something about it.

CHAPTER

Where Winners Find Their Ideas

Getting a good idea is one thing. Recognizing it is another. All good ideas come from the crucible of what you know already: your knowledge and experience. Scientists who have studied the formation of ideas say there are two sources:

- ✦ Ideas that appear spontaneously are thought to come from the right side of the brain, your so-called *creative* subconscious.
- ✦ Ideas that are built up logically are thought to come from the conscious, left side of the brain and are described as *synthetic*.

The words psychologists use don't matter. You just have to know that ideas come in two parts. If you know how you did it, it's *synthetic*. If you don't, it's *creative*. It's what Thomas Edison described as "perspiration and inspiration." Edison was strong on perspiration. His invention of the light bulb was completely synthetic. Edison labored 16 hours a day for years at his famous laboratories at Menlo Park. He tried every conceivable physical condition and chemical element until he arrived at a truly illuminating combination.

Note

Edison tried over 6,000 combinations before he perfected the incandescent light bulb. He used to joke that he *had* to succeed, as he'd tried everything else that had failed.

In contrast, Archimedes, the ancient Greek mathematician and inventor, got a onestep solution. His idea for the Principle of Displacement came when he leaped into his bath. That idea is held to be creative.

Most marketable ideas are a combination of spontaneous thoughts that have been optimized by polishing. Gene Roddenberry did just this. His inspiration came from a 1961 movie called *Master of the World*, in which Vincent Price as "Robur" went around the Earth in a giant airship to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and civilizations. The perspiration was drawn from Roddenberry's experiences as a bomber pilot, policeman, and his consummate plot and script-writing ability. The result was *Star Trek*.

How to Bottle Eureka

As previously mentioned, ideas that materialize in a flash can evaporate just as quickly. If you've ever awakened from a vivid dream from which you can remember the feeling, but you just can't recall the substance, you will know what I'm talking about.

Creative ideas come from the subconscious part of the brain. Unless they are copied onto the conscious brain, they are prone to submerge and may not resurface.

Take a tip from people who make their living from ideas: keep a pencil and paper by your bed, in your car, wherever. When you get an idea, jot it down immediately. Use just enough key words to help you recall the notion, but nothing too detailed; there may be other thoughts to come.

Step 1 – Sit Down

The early green pasture days of IT, if they ever existed, are over. You will want to avoid the pitfalls that have snared so many of your predecessors. History hasn't recorded how many promising ideas fizzled out for poor presentation. Thinking things through is now the only way to win. Keep the following in mind:

- ✦ Bosses want solutions, not problems.
- Investors can't afford half-baked ideas.
- The public won't tolerate software that doesn't work properly the first time.

To succeed you must develop a successful idea. So the last thing you want to do is rush in on your boss. Imagine being the person who dreamed up the concept of the Web browser and dashing into your vice president's office saying, "Hey, I've got this idea of viewing Web pages through a software program!"

What do you think the likely response would have been? He'd probably have looked up from his desk and growled, "What's a Web page?"

If you had thought the idea through in advance, you might have explained that you had come up with a unique idea that would supersede print, which would allow total global information to be accessed from anywhere.

Then he might have been more likely to have said, "Pull up a chair and tell me more!" If he had any sense, he'd be counting the dollars before you'd even finished and asking how to patent it.

Step 2 – Stretch Your Idea

Latex, the main constituent of rubber, had been known to the South American Mayan Indians since 1600 B.C. It was naturally sticky in summer and brittle in winter. No one knew quite what to do with the stuff. Then in 1839 Charles Goodyear accidentally spilled some sulphur into a vat and averaged the attributes. With a second stroke of luck he found that heat was the missing ingredient and vulcanized rubber was born.

New ideas not only need to be cultivated, but exercised as well. Having half an idea is less than half the battle. Whether your bottle is half full or half empty, customers will only buy a full one. You have to find the key extra ingredient to fill it up and turn your idea into a complete winner. So stretch your idea, tease it this way and that, chop out elements, turn it on its head, try it as expensive, try it as cheap. And remember McDonalds.

The humble hamburger had been served by German immigrants in North America for well over a century before Maurice and Richard McDonald (in 1948) began to give the recipe thought. Here's what they came up with:

- ✦ Get rid of waitresses.
- Persuade customers to eat standing up.
- ✦ Severely restrict menus.
- ✦ Fire specialist chefs.
- Develop cooking machinery that any employee can operate.

None of these ideas were winners in and of themselves. Yet together they built a worldwide, fast-food industry.

Even operating systems were nothing new when IBM commissioned Bill Gates to write the Disk Operating System (DOS) in 1980.

DOS was designed to be ported to other computers easily (remember there were many different types at the time and it took years before the IBM PC became the standard it is today). This appealed to the manufacturers, as it allowed them all to start from the same playing field. Bill didn't know who would be the eventual winner, but he knew that if he backed them all he couldn't lose.

Most new ideas are not entirely new. They are old ones with a twist. When the Gates, Goodyears, and McDonalds of this world are asked how they came across their ideas, they typically say, "'It was just under my nose."

Note

The thought that turns a leaden idea into gold is often surprisingly close at hand. So scrabble, search, and twist.

Step 3 – Make Sure Your Idea Is Well Defined

If an idea is sound enough to persuade outsiders to back you, you have got to be able to explain it over the telephone or on the back of a postcard. All great inventors or developers can make the complex sound simple. Einstein said, "If you can't explain an idea to an eight-year-old child you probably don't understand it yourself."

Whether your idea is simple or complex, you are going to have to communicate it simply if you want anyone to finance you. If you can't explain it to a potential backer, they won't be able to explain the idea to their colleagues. And, if collectively they don't understand it, they will never allow the money to be risked in the first place. Backers have to be confident that you have a clear vision and direction.

The exercise of trying to encapsulate your idea, who will use it, and why in 30 words or less is salutary. You will either discover that it just can't be done, in which case your idea is almost certainly too complex to ever sell efficiently, or by trial and error with friends and relatives you will arrive at an explanation that everyone can understand. Your explanation should raise few questions and most people should find it satisfactory as far as it goes. Marketing people call this explanation *the concept*.

Step 4 – Open Up Your Concept

A good friend who runs a major U.S. corporation had a competition with another director to see which could make more money selling something they could get for nothing. His colleague thought he had struck gold when he started to sell pressurized water as a cosmetic product. My friend went one better and sold pressurized air as a cleaning agent for medical, hi-tech, and photographic equipment.

The idea of making your concept more attractive to more people is usually possible. Initially, think laterally from other points of view. A mosquito might be a pest to you, but you're a midnight feast to it. Consider all possibilities, no matter how bizarre.

The larger the audience a product can attract the better its chances. Could you, for instance, incorporate your embryo product inside another? Could it be part of a more significant package? Could it be sold on the back of other products? This is exactly what Mr. Dunlop and Mr. Gates did.

Mr. Dunlop took Mr. Goodyear's vulcanized rubber, which had been around for over 40 years by then, and turned it into an indispensable product—the pneumatic tire. Mr. Gates got his operating system incorporated into every IBM PC. We take many of these very smart moves so much for granted that we forget that they began as clever ideas.

If at this stage you are feeling held back by not having a finalized, killer name for your idea, just do what they do in Hollywood—give it a working title, something that's good for the time being and indicative of what you aspire to, such as "Project Everest."

Step 5 – Check the Concept against Your Own Experience

Right at the start, you have to face up to common-sense questions and have some idea of what is involved. Don't concern yourself too much about whether your idea is unique. Few good ideas are. They just have to be unique enough.

Pioneers who have "First Mover Advantage" are often able to charge a premium, however, this notional bonus is almost always swallowed by their promotional and educational costs.

Note

Software is rarely copied by stealing the source code; that's illegal and too easy to spot. What competitors do is look at your finished product and re-create something that is functionally similar and improve upon it.

Some ideas are brilliant but the development is staggering. The Internet would never be the universal IT backbone it is but for U.S. government funding of the ARPANET project since 1967. Not only did Uncle Sam give the developers money, he indirectly taught hundreds of thousands of people how to use it and gave major corporations and universities the incentive to adopt it as well. Bear thoughts like these in mind as you subject your concept to private and personal scrutiny:

- ✦ Has anyone had the idea in this form before you? Quickly check the Internet.
- ◆ Is it too far ahead of its market? Are you inventing the pneumatic tire before the automobile?

- ◆ Is it too easy for competitors to learn from? Get some kind of ballpark on secure coding and patents.
- ✦ Is it too difficult to explain? Take an educated guess.
- Can it be distributed efficiently? Could it be sold off the Web?
- ◆ Is the cost of development likely to be in any way unusual? Is the project likely to be small, medium, or large?
- ✦ How long could the coding take? Extrapolate from projects of similar scale.
- Have you got a moneymaking proposition? Is there a prima facie case for profit?

If the answers are satisfactory, give yourself a green light. If they are not, it isn't all doom and disaster. You just have to do a little more thinking. Go back a stage or two and consider how you can transform a limitation into a decided advantage.

Step 6 – Gather Your Inner Sanctum

So you've got your idea, expanded it, articulated it, and checked it with yourself. Now you need to pass it by a few close friends or colleagues. Try to pick a time when they are relaxed and receptive. At work this is much easier said than done; so it is probably best scheduled after hours.

For your sounding board, select people with relevant experience, potential users, and programmers.

Explain your concept briefly, cite its advantages, outline the way it fits with existing products. Then sit back, listen very carefully to what they say, and take notes. You will probably want to embody some of their ideas. Try not to interrupt until they have finished; otherwise you'll be tampering with the evidence.

If your previous surmises are sound, your quorum will probably confirm them, though almost certainly you will want to make some beneficial adjustments.

People with new ideas are a lot more secretive than they probably needed to be with hindsight. However, at this stage this is the smart policy. You can always let the genie out of the bottle later, but you can never put him back. Only discuss your idea with close, trusted friends and colleagues on a strictly confidential basis. If you do need to show the idea to people outside your inner sanctum, such as technical specialists for appraisal purposes, get them to sign a confidentiality agreement first. You only want your idea to enter the public domain when you're ready to put it there.

Step 7 – You Are Only Human

As you soar to paradise, remember, human error is the last thing to fall away.

However flattering people are about your idea, you are always prone to error. You can't even predict what your best friend will choose on a restaurant menu. They may always start the meal with shrimp cocktails. But don't bet on it. He or she is bound to eventually crave something else.

The only person whose actions you can begin to gauge in advance (and then not always) is yourself, and if you rely entirely on your own evaluation of your product's possibilities, you could end up with a market of one. The path to Silicon Valley is paved with self-declared geniuses who never amounted to more than road kill on the Internet Super-Highway. Your future, your time, your whole style of life deserves better than that. So don't skelter out with your golden idea. Be objective. Test the water, one toe first. You are only just coming out of the conceptual stage. It's time to do some proper research.

Why Development Pays

There is no copyright on having ideas. It is not uncommon for two people to have similar ideas, circumstances being what they are, often at about the same time. The idea that wins is invariably the one that has been thought through the best. That's why developing the idea matters, and the thought you put in now will pay dividends as you progress.

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