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CREATING THE IDEA

The Need for Need-Driven Products

*I don't care about the invention. It's the
dimes I'm after.*

—Isaac Singer

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The first thing I learned long ago is that inventing is easy. I can dream up new inventions all day long. You probably can too—ideas just seem to keep popping up. However, what I also learned long ago is that, yes, inventing is easy, but the trick is to uncover what needs to be invented. That's not so easy. It doesn't matter if your idea is for a new kitchen gadget, a new software application, or a new Internet business, if you've not uncovered a need, or not found a problem demanding a solution, then success is difficult to achieve. Inventing a product that's neither wanted nor needed is not the path to success that you should embark on.

For instance, take the inventor Stanley Weston, mentioned in the Preface. As you'll recall, he's the originator of G.I. Joe. Inventing the character itself was the easy part. There was a TV show at the time called *The Lieutenant*, and he just copied that character for his own character. The real brilliance of Weston's idea—and what needed to be invented—was a doll that boys could play with. What Weston noticed that apparently no one else had was that boys like to play with dolls just as girls do, but there were no dolls made expressly for them. There were tin soldiers, but no dolls. And since you can't sell a doll to a little boy, he coined the name "action figure." Now, of course, it would be hard to find any little boy here in America who doesn't have one or more G.I. Joe action figures somewhere in his toy chest. First Weston uncovered the need—a doll that didn't look like a doll or would be called a doll (but still was a doll) for little boys to play with. That's the need to be filled. The invention part, what G.I. Joe himself looks like, was easy; any of us could have done it. First uncover the need, and then create the product. You'd be surprised how many inventors do it the other way around. They have an idea, become enamored with it, develop it, and then create imaginary scenarios where this product is just what's needed. "No home will be without it!" they exclaim. But you look at it, scratch your head, and say, "What are you supposed to do with this thing?"

It's not difficult to find products that folks might like to have to solve one or another of those pesky little problems that seem to plague all

of us, if we have a mind-set to look for them. Picture yourself, about 20 years ago, sitting in an airport waiting for your plane, watching passengers going by, lugging heavy suitcases. You might have said to yourself, “This is so stupid, why doesn’t someone invent little fold-up carts for these folks to use?” That’s the need—something to make lugging luggage through airports easier. Inventing the cart itself was easy once the need was observed. And, of course, someone observing the same thing *did* invent and start manufacturing collapsible little luggage carts and was soon selling them as fast as they could make them.

And then, a few years later, we might again find you sitting in an airport waiting for a flight, and you might again notice passengers pulling their luggage through the aisles, only this time on collapsible metal carts—and you might again have said to yourself, “This is so stupid. Why do they need these dumb carts? Why not just put wheels on the bags themselves?” And, of course, someone did; the carts have virtually disappeared, and now it’s almost impossible to find luggage that doesn’t have built-in wheels. Inventing the cart was easy, as was inventing a way to put wheel on the luggage itself. You or I could have easily done that. The credit, however, goes to the person who noticed the need and did something about it.

WHEN IS AN IMPROVEMENT NOT ONE?

Through my website I offer to evaluate invention ideas from other inventors and I receive them by the boatload. Many are “improvements” on existing products, adding a new feature or two to a standard product, long in the marketplace. While these little tweaks might be fine, they represent the most difficult type of product to license. Since the so-called improved version of an existing product is not likely to attract a new company into the field, the likely licensee candidate would come from the ranks of those already in the business. But what’s in it for them? They already have their own product and probably already know how to do what the inventor is proposing. Why pay out royalty dollars for something that, at best, might switch some sales from product A to product B? All retail products have a perceived value, and if the new features add to cost without adding to value, they’re not worth bothering with. Yes, true, the new features might be enjoyed by consumers, but would they pay extra for them? It’s likely that the prospective licensee has already made that determination and decided not. Otherwise he’d have already done it. My point is that most of these inventors are inventing what doesn’t need to be invented.

I’m not suggesting that these improvements offered by the inventor aren’t intelligently conceived—they may very well be—but a product’s potential for sales and its potential for licensing are not the same thing; each has its own requirements. Companies exist by tweaking their product to make it a little different than the competition’s; that’s what their design departments do all day. However, tweaking is rarely enough for a licensing deal. The licensee might be quite interested in a fresh, new kind of product to bring in new sources of income, not a product in competition to what he’s already selling. What good is that? In order to get a signature on a licensing agreement, the invention has to rise to the level of excitement, exclusivity, and profitability to perhaps make the prospective licensee say, “Wow!” as he rubs his hands together in greedy anticipation. That’s not as difficult as I’m making it sound, but it is important to understand what the prospective licensee is hoping to see when you walk into his office.

“MOMMY, WHERE DO IDEAS COME FROM?”

There’s a widely held misconception that creativity flourishes best in an unstructured environment. However, interviews with creative people show that their environments and work habits tend to be quite regulated. Ask some author about all he does before he starts writing; how every pencil has to be in a certain order, and how he has to be in a certain place at a certain time of day, and you’ll start to think this guy is from another planet. But it’s precisely this self-discipline that lets him do his job. It’s his way of notifying his brain that it’s time to get down to work. People who rely on the creation of new ideas as a profession have always known this. If there was no system, how could they stay in business? Systems are like the banks of a river; without them the river of creativity wanders all over the place, eventually disappearing.

In analyzing my own creativity process and breaking it down into steps—and in reading about creativity in general—I came to learn a few things. First, I learned that my system of creating ideas is the same system that has been identified and proved since classical times, so I wasn’t doing anything new. Second, I learned that all of us have more creative ability than we could possibly imagine. Apparently, with all the research on the subject of creativity that has been conducted, no correlation exists between an exceptionally high IQ and creativity. Few of us are geniuses, but, lucky for us, that’s not a requirement. What we need and what we can all acquire is the proper mind-set and a degree of discipline. The third thing I learned is to write everything down!

What works best for me, and just about everyone I know, is simple doodling. Nothing concentrates the mind more than putting a pencil to paper. I always have a notebook and a pen in my pocket. Always. I'm not alone; creative people have been doing that for centuries. In his diaries, Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps the most creative person in history, noted that his best ideas came while doodling, which he called "scribbling."

In truth, I confess, half the stuff I scribble in my notebooks is gibberish—I either can't understand what I wrote or I don't know why I wrote it—but the other half is what keeps me in business. It's like John Wanamaker, the famous department store founder, who once noted that he knows that half of his advertising is wasted but he doesn't know which half.

INTRODUCING THE FAMOUS REESE I.C.I.C.L.E. SYSTEM OF CREATIVITY

Here are the six steps to creativity, and if you told them to Aristotle back around 350 B.C., he'd probably say, "That old stuff? I knew that ages ago." As a mnemonic device, here's my six-step I.C.I.C.L.E. method for remembering what the steps to creativity are:

- I. Identify your general goal or objective. Define the general problem.
- C. Concentrate on developing a solution. Fill your head with research.
- I. Identify your goal again—but this time narrow it down to its most basic element.
- C. Concentrate again—really hard—this time on the narrowly defined objective.
- L. Let it go. Go to sleep, go to a party—let your subconscious go to work.
- E. Eureka! Suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, the idea just seems to pop into your head. That's not by accident; it's because you gave your brain an assignment and it's ready to deliver the goods. There's no saying how long this might take—seconds or weeks—and there's no promise that you won't have to repeat the process, but it does work. You can take that to the bank.

You know how you meet someone you know on the street, chat for a moment, then each of you goes his own way—and for the life of you, you can't think of his name? And you think, and you think as hard as you can, but it just doesn't come. Chester? Charles? Something beginning with a C, you're sure, but your mind draws a blank. And then, hours later, while in the middle of taking your tango dance lesson, suddenly it pops into your head. Frank! Good old Frank! How could you forget? And suddenly you remember everything about Frank that you ever knew, and maybe some things you wish you didn't. That's just the I.C.I.C.L.E process at work. You identified the problem in the most basic way ("What's that guy's name?"), concentrated on it as hard as you could, let your subconscious do its work, and suddenly your wonderful brain delivered the goods.



Brilliant ideas don't pop into your head by accident.

THIS IS A TEST

Just now, while I'm writing this, for the fun of it, I decided to give myself a little test.

- I. I identified my problem: To come up with an Internet business for myself.

- C. I concentrated on that goal, thinking about other Internet businesses I'm familiar with.
- I. I decided I don't want a business that involves investing in inventory, so it has to be some sort of service business. That's my narrow objective: an Internet business with no inventory investment. And so I concentrated again, now on the narrow objective.
- C.L.E. All three of these steps happened in a jumble. I thought about what kind of service business might interest me that lends itself to the Internet, and the idea for one immediately popped into my head. All of this took less than a minute—but it could have taken an hour or a week—that's not the point. The point is that it's a process, and when you're conscious that it is a process and you apply it, it does produce results.

The Internet business my little test produced is to offer hand-painted portraits in oil of children, loved ones, pets, the purchaser himself, or the dearly departed. All the customer needs to do is send me a photo of the subject and his or her credit card information. Half of the cost would be charged upon acceptance of the assignment and the other half after the customer saw a photo of the finished portrait and gives an approval.

As I discuss later in this book, in order to license an Internet business, there has to be something unique about it to give the licensee an advantage. The unique advantage that I would give to my licensee is my personal connection to some talented artists in China who can turn out beautiful portraits and who work at much lower rates than here in the United States. I'd submit the customer's photo to one of my artist friends who'd do the portrait. When the portrait was complete I'd post a picture of it on a website for the customer to visit and give his approval. The portrait would be shipped to the customer, the artist would be paid for his work, and I'd add my profit and charge the customer's credit card. Simple! The only investment would be in creating and promoting the website. Since I'm an artist, I tend to think in those directions, but so what? All of us have talents and interests that might push in one direction or another. You might be an avid fisherman and so your Internet business idea might involve fishing products. If you involve yourself in a field that you like, success is a lot easier to achieve.

Now, perhaps when I do the numbers I'll find that my portrait idea is not such a great idea after all—but I have the confidence that if I repeat the process, I can come up with something else—and that might be just what I'm looking for. But I'm no smarter than you are.

If I can do it, I'm sure you can too. It all has to do with the process. If you want to start an Internet business, you can; I'm sure of it. Let me know when you've done it; maybe I'll become a customer.

This thinking process works for anything. Suppose you, like many of us, watch reality TV shows and think, "This program is so stupid. I know I could come up with something better." The TV networks love reality shows because they're cheaper to make than dramas and some of them rack up huge audiences. So if you have a brilliant idea for a new show, why not give it a shot? Maybe you'll be a hero to one of these networks.

So, again, let's follow the process:

- I. You've identified the general objective: to create a new reality show.
- C. Next you're going to concentrate on this general objective by researching all the different kinds of reality shows there are. Let's see, there are documentary shows that show real people doing their jobs, such as cops arresting people; there are all sorts of dating reality shows that match prospective mates; there are hidden camera shows where people do dumb things; there are adventure shows where men and women are placed in exotic jungle locations; there are singing and dancing talent shows; there are contests where professional cooks or dress designers compete—and on and on.

It's your job to look at all these types of shows to determine what makes them tick and then to select a category that you want to focus on.

- I. Let's say you've identified talent as your category. That's the narrow goal that you've decided to focus on—talented people competing against one another.
- C. Now that you have identified your narrow objective, a reality show involving talented people competing against one another, it's time to focus again. Let's see: singing has been done and dancing has been done and cooking has been done and baking has been done and dress designing has been done and hair designing has been done—what's left? You think and think as hard as you can until you just can think any more. Bummer! Everything's been taken!
- L. To heck with it, you let it go. You and your pals go out to the movies.

E. You're sitting in the darkened theater; the movie is half over, and the hero is chained to the table and the buzz saw is getting closer and closer—and suddenly, eureka! Country music! Nobody has done country music! Suppose you have a group of country music writers and every week they're given a scenario ("My boyfriend's in jail and his cute buddy keeps coming over") and they have to write and sing a song that fits. The judges are famous country and western stars. The person who writes and sings the worst song goes home and the final winner gets a Nashville appearance, a recording contract, money, and so on. Wow! "Excuse me guys, I gotta go!" You jump out of your seat to rush home to fill in the details. It's the I.C.I.C.L.E. system—it never lets you down.



Give your brain a rest for the eureka moment.

INSIDE JOBS, HEAD STARTS, LEG UPS, AND STUFF LIKE THAT

Perhaps you already have worked out your new invention, but if not, then I should tell you that it has been my experience that the most successful inventors are those who invent products for industries in

which they're already professionally involved. Since we know that the trick in this business is to invent what needs to be invented, it's easy to see why those folks have a clear head start or a leg up over the rest of us. By virtue of their personal industry involvement and experience, they can see opportunities that probably would elude the rest of us. They know what's been done and tried and what the industry is looking for, and they can therefore invent to that goal. It's very hard for an inventor to simply pop into an unknown industry with a product idea that's so refreshingly new that it'll be greeted with enthusiasm by those who have spent entire careers in the business. Yes, that does sometimes happen, but much more often the proposed product turns out to be something that already exists, or has been tried in the past, or has long been known to industry insiders.

So if you're just starting out—first, please, start within your own profession. A chef is more likely to come up with a great new kitchen gadget than an accountant who likes to dabble in the kitchen once in a while. If you're searching for a great new software idea, you're much more likely to find one that can help you and your professional colleagues than those in some other industry.

I don't mean that it's impossible to create profitable ideas for inventions or businesses or software programs outside of your professional life—only that it's a more difficult route. However, certainly other opportunities exist. Other than the work environment, the logical places to look for new invention opportunities are in familiar areas like home, or in familiar activities like your hobbies. Just as pearls come from irritated oysters, product ideas can often come from common, daily annoyances. Mommies with new infants are famous for dreaming up ideas for baby-care products. Taking care of a baby is so time consuming and on occasion so exasperating, that any product that makes it easier can be a welcome one. There are even some Internet companies dedicated to marketing mommy ideas. Anything that's an irritation to you might be an irritation to millions of others—and that's how simple but great ideas are born.

Take this simple irritation: trying to hold a leaf bag open when your hands are full. This irritation happens all the time since one hand must hold the rake and the other hand holds the leaves to the rake. Someone I know, many years ago, came up with a simple metal bag frame to keep the leaf bag open, and now everyone sells them. That's not some brilliant cancer-curing invention, but most of us aren't in the cancer-curing business. All we need is a simple idea that performs a function perceived as useful enough that a person would buy one.

I know a mother in Texas who became exasperated with using poster board to help her child with school projects. She mentioned it to her sister, and together they invented “Ghost Lines,” a barely visible printed grid on poster board that helps a person print or cut in straight lines. They licensed the idea to one of the major paper companies and now I see their product wherever poster board is sold.

“Hey! Why didn’t someone think of that before?” Those are the words successful inventors long to hear. Einstein, the genius, once said that he had only one original idea in his career, and it was just a theory at that. Maybe one great idea is all you need—but if you exploit it properly, it could change your life.

CAVEATS, WARNINGS, CAUTIONS, AND PLACES NOT TO GO

The last thing I want to do is discourage you. I want you to invent whatever you care to, be it a new product, a new software application, or whatever—I’m behind you 110 percent.

You can count on me. However, I feel duty-bound to mention a few categories of product that are extremely difficult to license—not impossible, but really, really hard. All things being equal, I’d rather see you focus your talents in other directions.

The first category I’d like to see you avoid is board games. I know they’re fun to create for lots of clever folks, men and women alike, but the world just doesn’t need all the cute, clever, and perfectly intelligent games that these folks can produce. If you count yourself among that group, I’m sorry, but those are the facts. Electronic games have so taken over the industry that the traditional type of board game is barely holding on by its fingertips.

The days when the family sat around the dining room table in the evening and played one of these nice board games is a memory, something that Norman Rockwell might have painted. One game executive is quoted as remarking that even Monopoly, if it was introduced today, would have a tough time finding a company to produce it.

The hard truth is most of the major game companies won’t even look at a board game idea from an outside source unless it has a famous name or popular TV show or movie attached to it. These companies

have the staff to make all the generic board games they need themselves, without paying royalties to anyone. Licensing is rare, but even when it does occur, it's usually for a game that is being self-marketed by the inventor and exhibits a proven consumer audience. Scrabble is a perfect example. For a number of years in the 1940s, a married couple from Connecticut, the Brunots, having been turned down by all the game companies, manufactured the game in their living room, selling a few thousand sets every year. By pure chance, in 1952, the owner of Macy's happened to play the game while on vacation and ordered it placed into all of Macy's toy departments. Macy's promoted the game, sales took off, and then, of course, all the game companies that previously turned it down were now happy to sign a licensing deal. Finally the licensing rights wound up with Mattel, and the game continues to be one of the world's bestsellers. If you insist on being a game inventor, your best chance are young children's games if they have a physical component that involves a little skill or dexterity, or a party game with some kind of physical fun or harmless sexual component. Those are a bit easier to license.

Statistics say there are more than 26 million golfers in the United States. You can double that, I suppose, if you include the rest of the world. If there are 50 million in total, my guess is that 40 million of them have invented a golf product to make a player's game better or easier. Okay, a slight exaggeration—but so many golfers have invented so many new training techniques or tools or devices or gadgets to make the stroll around the course easier or to turn that poor duffer into an amazing player with drives straight and true and putts that never miss, that I sort of groan when an inventor sends me a new one. I don't mean that these are stupid ideas—lots of them perhaps have merit—but there are so many golf inventions floating around, with the patent office files bulging, that finding a licensing partner is really, really difficult. If you're a golfer reading this—tell the truth—in the back of your head you have a fantastic new golf product idea that you're preparing to spring on the world. Right? Okay, maybe your idea really is what everyone has been waiting for. I hope so—but don't say you weren't warned.

Another category that I suggest you avoid is products that depend on a license for their consumer interest. If you have an idea, say, for a pen desk set shaped like a car that has NASCAR printed on it, and if it would just be an ordinary desk set without the logo, then, my friend, you'll have a tough row to hoe while looking for a licensee. First, you can't license what you don't own (the NASCAR license)

and you can't guarantee the desk set manufacturer would get a license even if he applied. And even if the desk set manufacturer did get the license, he'd then presumably be obligated to pay out two royalties—one to NASCAR and one to you for the suggestion. That's not likely to happen.

The exception is if the invented product does have merit on its own and that the addition of a popular licensed logo or character might make it even better. That has happened to me. I licensed a special kind of bedtime dolls to a bedding manufacture and they decided to fashion these dolls as licensed characters instead of the generic ones I had designed. I had to agree to reduce my royalties in half to partially compensate them for the other licensing fees, and I did so on the premise that sales would more than double in this manner. However, the fact that my product could be (and was) licensed on its own merits is what made that deal possible.

And finally, if I were king, I'd decree that you not look for a licensee based on your exclamation that you have the next Pet Rock! The bankruptcy graveyard is filled with companies and individuals who think they have the next Pet Rock. I personally am a real sucker for nutty fad items, and I have created more than my share. I'm the guy who invented inflatable furniture, and I'm the guy who invented those reindeer antlers that folks put on their dogs every Christmas (among other nutty items that I'm too embarrassed to mention). However, I know how hard it is to license stuff like that.

The problem is that nobody knows for sure what item is suddenly going to take off and become a big national seller. And even when items do, the manufacturer is usually just as amazed as everyone else. I've made a study of fad items, trying to discover if there is a common thread among the winners that could be duplicated—and there isn't. There just doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it—hit fad items have a life of their own, and they are the right product at precisely the right time. Since there is no predictability, companies are reluctant to take on the legal and financial obligations of a licensing agreement just to find out. The failures are so many and the successes so few, that it's not a risk most companies are willing to take. They might do it for a product they've developed themselves, figuring that one hit can make up for lots of losers, but taking on the costs and obligations of a licensing agreement is a whole different matter. Again, as with board games and golf items, licensing is not impossible, just difficult.

*"A DREAM IS A WISH YOUR HEART MAKES"
(BUT YOU CAN'T LICENSE IT)*

I've come to realize that when folks complain about "their idea" being marketed by someone else, they don't mean that someone crept into their workshop to steal the secret plans that they toiled over; they just mean that one time they had a dream, an idle notion, that there should be a product to do something or other, and one day saw something similar in a store. No one beat them to it; they were never in the race.

First of all, an inventor should have an understanding of what the licensee is willing to pay for. If the licensee is a manufacturer, every day he or she arises and thinks about his or her arch competitor. "What's that lousy bum doing? What rotten plans is that jerk hatching to get me pushed out of my biggest customers?" The competitor is doing the same thing—it's a battle that never ends. If you, as an inventor, come along with a new weapon to give one of these warriors an edge, presumably in the form of a terrific new product invention, you'll be rewarded with cash advances and royalties. However, this prospective licensee expects you to put a fully developed and proven product in his hands, not just some suggestion for one. He wants to receive a shining new sword to go out and do battle with, not a lump of steel and a pencil sketch. It is the fully fashioned sword itself, a kind of sword that has never been seen before, that might earn the rewards, not simply the suggestion for one.

An inventor sent me an idea. "Hey Harvey, I have this great idea for a new toy! It's a teddy bear with green fur I call Flippo. When you squeeze Flippo's paw, he jumps in the air, does a double flip, lands on his behind and sings 'God Bless America.'"

"Wow!" I say, "How does it work?"

"I told you," comes the exasperated reply, "you squeeze his paw."

Okay, I confess, I made that up, but it's not far from the truth. Here's another example that is true. There's a popular, common household product that comes in 6-oz. and 12-oz. sizes. The inventor believed that sales for this product would greatly increase if it was also made in a 2-oz. travel size. She wanted me to make the suggestion to the company and arrange for her to receive a royalty on every 2-oz. package they sold. This inventor is not stupid—the 2-oz. suggestion might be perfectly sensible—but folks like this, or the person with the flipping teddy bear, just don't understand what

has to be placed on a manufacturer's desk in order to make him reach for his checkbook.

Whether you have a software idea that you want someone to license, or a reality show idea, or an Internet business idea, or an idea for a new gardening tool, you have to deliver the goods. Companies license inventions or fully formed and proven concepts, not simply observations that a product to do a certain thing or a piece of software to accomplish a certain result might be popular. As they say, the devil is in the details.

So, now that you've thought up your brilliant idea, what's next? An author named E. L. Simpson once said, "Getting an idea should be like sitting on a tack. It should make you jump up and do something," which is just what we're going to do in the next chapter.