

## Eureka!

### The power of a great idea

By **Scott Westcott**



When a great idea strikes, it's like an electric shock to your system. Who hasn't savored that delicious moment when your mind races with a winning concept that's full of promise? Maybe you've dreamed up a new product destined to make your life, and the lives of countless others, easier. Or you've been struck by a vision for launching a business that will fill a niche, feed your bank account and fuel your creative fire.

Of course, the challenge lies in that tricky second step—turning the idea into reality. Developing it into a tangible product or service takes guts, tenacity and, according to the dream-chasers you'll soon read about, a deep belief in yourself and your vision.

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### "Moms, Let's Walk!"

On a sunny morning in the spring of 2001, Lisa Druxman was pushing her newborn in a stroller as her mind dwelled on the usual subject—coming up with some way to earn enough money to become a stay-at-home mom. Time was running out. Her maternity leave was ending, and she'd soon have to return to her demanding job as a manager of a high-end fitness club.

As she brainstormed, Lisa picked up the pace. This is a pretty good workout, she thought. Bam! That's when it hit her. Why not blend her two passions, motherhood and fitness? The name, Stroller Strides, flashed into her head. "It was definitely an 'Aha!' moment," says Lisa, 34. "Every new mom wants to lose weight, get in shape and connect with other moms."



By the end of that fateful walk, Lisa had devised the rough outline for what would become the Stroller Strides workout. It's a 50-minute power walk, in which participants stop every few minutes to do toning exercises, including leaning against their stroller to do lunges and stretches. "When I got home I called my husband and said, 'Take this leap of faith with me,'" recalls Lisa, who lives in San Diego. "He did, and it's been a rocket ship ever since."

Soon the pressure was on. She had quit her job and needed to quickly replace the income she had forfeited, and she had also dipped into her family's savings to bankroll the business. Starting small, she created a routine for four moms who lived nearby. Then she got a big break: A local television station did a spot on her new workout. When she returned home from the TV station, she had 75 phone messages and e-mails from interested women.

Lisa relied heavily on "grassroots marketing." Moms who liked the workout brought friends along to the next session. She also handed out flyers everywhere she went—restaurants, grocery stores, even her obstetrician's office. "We were able to grow the business organically," she says.

Today Stroller Strides has more than 100 locations in 26 states with 8,000 moms participating. Lisa sells licenses for the exclusive rights to offer Stroller Strides classes. "I'm amazed how many of my instructors have come up to me and said, 'You know, I came up with the same idea, but just never did anything about it,'" says Lisa, who has had another baby and is writing a book about getting back in shape after giving birth. "Everything I envisioned has come true, and a hundred times more."

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Joan Breiner just has to close her eyes to replay those magical moments during her 1999 vacation in Jamaica. The sun had just risen over the ocean as she settled into a comfortable chair on the beachside deck. The night before, at her 50th birthday party, a friend had given Joan a homemade book with handwritten comments from friends and family. As she read the loving words, her heart raced. A lump formed in her throat. Tears stung her eyes.

"It was the most loving, life-affirming experience I've ever had," says Joan. "I was reading words from my friends that you usually only hear at a funeral. Then it was like I was struck by lightning. I said, 'My God, everyone should have an experience like this.'"

From that moment on, Joan has made it her mission—and business—to see that everyone does. She started CelebrateAHero.com, an Internet business that creates personalized tribute books much like the one she received from her friends. E-mail invitations are sent to family, friends and coworkers asking them to contribute their thoughts and feelings about the person. The pages are automatically assembled and can be downloaded for printing for a small fee or bound in a book for a higher price.

At the time she came up with the idea, Joan had just sold her human resource consulting business in Connecticut and retired to Sarasota, Florida, with her husband, Bruce. To fund the startup, she tapped into their nest egg. And even though she had great faith in her idea, she struggled initially. "My first business model of working with a retail company failed on me," Joan says. "You have to let the business float for a while to see what will work and what won't."

To refine the process of creating the books, she used the expertise of a computer programmer and a printing firm. Then she faced the challenge of breaking through the clutter to get her idea out to the public. "When you first come up with an idea like this, you think everyone in the world is going to want one," says Joan, now 55, with a laugh. "But, no, it takes time."

Joan is making money now. She estimates she has produced more than 50,000 books. "What has sustained me through this process is that I'm bringing value to people by letting them know they are loved and appreciated."

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**Sudden Impact**

Rebecca Powers' inspiration emerged during a low point in her life. She was flying home to Austin, Texas, after visiting her seriously ill brother for what would be the final time. Thumbing through a magazine, she came across a story about a Cincinnati woman who had launched a successful fundraising campaign to help her community simply by asking friends to donate money.

Suddenly Rebecca felt an overwhelming urge to do good, to shine some light in a world that at the moment felt dark and threatening. "After I got home," she says, "I woke up my husband, poor thing, to tell him the idea."



Rebecca started Impact Austin by taking the simple step of telling—make that gushing—her vision to a few trusted friends. Ordinary women would chip in \$1,000, with the hopes of getting 100 women involved by the end of the year. Rebecca, 50, the mother of two teenagers and a former sales representative for IBM,

found she was still pretty good at closing a deal. Before long, friends agreed to pitch in \$1,000 each. And during small get-togethers at their homes, they persuaded others to do so as well.

"We connected with women who are passionate and capable but hadn't been involved," Rebecca says. "It's a whole new pool of philanthropists who have never been tapped before, and there are women like that in every community across the country."

By the end of Impact Austin's first year, in 2003, 126 women had donated \$1,000 each. Together they evaluated applicants seeking the grant money and voted on which project should be chosen. The winning organization, which runs a Ben & Jerry's ice cream store staffed by at-risk youth who are learning job skills, received a check on June 12—the date of Rebecca's late brother's birthday.

Last year more than 200 women got involved, generating \$201,000 that will be distributed in two \$100,500 grants. Next year's goal: 300 women. "I was called to do this," Rebecca says.

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## Selling the Dream

For years, sisters Tag and Catherine Goulet, both successful career women who live in Calgary, Canada, toyed with the prospect of going into business together. One day over lunch more than five years ago they started throwing around ideas. "We were watching people walk by who looked stressed out and miserable, and we said, 'There's got to be something better,'" says Catherine, 43. "That's when it clicked. Why don't we sell books to help people build their dream career?"



Their brainstorm led to the creation of FabJob.com, which produces and sells books and e-books about careers that are in demand but require little formal training, such as an interior designer, wedding planner, professional organizer or celebrity assistant. But the sisters faced a huge learning curve as they tried to develop the idea, so they immediately started networking to find investors, legal help and business-development guidance.

"If we hadn't had the passion and belief in ourselves and our idea, this never would have been such a success," explains Tag, now 45. "People want to jump on board when they can see your enthusiasm and commitment. You have to get other people to buy into the dream—if you don't, your idea won't go anywhere. "

FabJob.com has been a resounding success, with more than 70 career titles published and millions of dollars worth of books sold. Although they wrote the first book themselves, many are now written by experts recruited by the Goulets. "You can be working in a job you love," Tag says. "It takes work to make it happen, but it's worth it."

## Inspiration

1. Jot down as much as you can as fast as you can. Keep index cards, a notebook or a digital recorder handy when you're on the run, suggests Toni Coleman, LCSW, a psychotherapist and relationship coach from McLean, Virginia. "It takes a little extra thought and effort at first, but you'll end up pleasantly surprised at how much good and useful information you gather."
2. List questions that will assist you in moving the idea along, as well as possible resources that might help turn the idea into a reality. Then, create action steps or a to-do list.

3. Keep your ideas organized in a folder and try to review them at least once a day, if only for a few minutes, Coleman says.

4. Picture yourself living your dream, suggests Stacey Mayo, a life coach and author of "I Can't Believe I Get Paid to Do This!" "Once you've scripted out the story, notice what you are inspired to do and act on it," she says.

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### From Eureka to Reality

Take these five steps to make your dreams come true.

**Act fast.** There's nothing like the excitement of a fresh and innovative idea to motivate you to take action. "If you don't act fairly soon, the sense of urgency will start to diminish," says Stacey Mayo, a life coach and author of "I Can't Believe I Get Paid to Do This!" "A month from now, the passion may start to wither, and a year from now you may not remember why on earth you were excited about it in the first place."

**Create a plan.** Reaching your destination will be next to impossible without a road map. Even the most basic plan helps keep people focused on the steps needed to achieve the goal, says psychotherapist Toni Coleman, LCSW. The plan should include specific deadlines to keep the project moving. "It helps break things into manageable pieces," she says. "Whatever we want to do, we get there with small steps. We never get there with giant leaps."

**Avoid naysayers.** A good idea can be a fragile thing. And often it only takes one snide remark to kill it, particularly when an idea is in its infancy. Mayo suggests sharing your idea only with people who are certain to offer unconditional support. "It's easy to get stopped by dream-squashers, especially if they are family members whose opinions and approval you value," she says. "Once you are grounded in your idea and believe it is feasible, you can share it without getting swayed by others' opinions."

**Make it a priority.** All good ideas share one common ingredient: They require a time commitment to become a full-fledged reality. That often means letting go and getting help when you need it. "If it means getting someone to clean your house so you can work on your business, then do it," Mayo says. "That's a good investment in your future."

**Believe in yourself.** Sure it's an old cliché, but it's so true. "Talk as though the reality you want is already in progress," says Gayle Lantz, a certified business coach based in Birmingham, Alabama. "Instead of saying, 'I'm thinking about starting a new business,' say, 'I'm starting a new business.' Using language that commits you to the outcome will help you make it happen more easily."

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