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Getting ideas across the border

By Michelle Hammond
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A trip overseas might not sound like an obvious springboard for business ideas, but the rise of holiday-inspired start-ups certainly suggests a link between jet-setting and entrepreneurialism.

Monica Liebenow and her husband Phil Barham are one of the many examples of Australian entrepreneurs who started a business based on an idea sourced overseas.

Their business centres around the [“My Family” stickers](#), displayed in the rear windows of cars, which became an overnight sensation in Australia.

The idea came to Barham while on a work trip in California, where he noticed a cartoon family displayed on a car. On returning to Australia, he met Liebenow, a graphic artist.

After explaining his idea to Liebenow, she started doodling her own figures, giving them a distinct Australian flavour. “Barbecue dad” is a favourite among customers.

More than two million My Family stickers have been sold in two years. But this isn’t the only success story that came about after an overseas stint.

Dwayne Martens is the founder of NSW-based business [Amazonia](#), which recently became one of the first fair trade sources of the Açaí berry; a superfood found in the Amazon Rainforest.

Martens started his business after travelling around the world and returning to Australia “refreshed and determined” to put his energies into a project he was passionate about.

“I was definitely on the lookout for getting into business. I knew I wanted to do something – I just didn’t know what,” he says.

Martens is responsible for introducing the Açaí berry to the Australian market, despite his initial uncertainty.

Other holiday heroes include Australian noodle chain [Noodle Box](#), created by Melbournites Josh James and David Milne after a trip to South East Asia.

The two entrepreneurs were on a world trip when they discovered ice cream being served in a convenient and classy box. They were also impressed with the exotic cuisine of South East Asia.

On their return to Melbourne, they decided the time was right to combine the two. The first Noodle Box flavours were served in the flagship store on Melbourne’s much-loved Chapel Street.

Similarly, [sass & bide](#) founders Heidi Middleton and Sarah-Jane Clarke, both from Brisbane, decided to go into business together after selling customised jeans at a market in London.

After a brief taste of success, Clarke and Middleton returned to Australia, where they developed an underground following that has since culminated into an international fan base.

Another well-known Australian entrepreneur, who became inspired to start a business after spending time abroad, is [Boost Juice Bars founder Janine Allis](#).

While holidaying in the United States with her husband, Allis noticed the popularity of juice bars.

She decided to bring the idea back to Australia, opening her first Boost Juice Bar in 2000.

And while Allis insists her success is the result of sheer hard work, she attributes her can-do attitude to her earlier years spent travelling around the world.

Her foreign adventures range from sunning herself in the Canary Islands and nannying in France to managing a cinema in Singapore and working as a stewardess on David Bowie's private yacht.

"Travelling and working abroad taught me that you have to be a problem-solver," Allis has said.

"Whether it's the problem-solving skills I learnt from travelling or the patience I developed from living in France and not knowing the language, to the leadership skills I honed while managing a cinema, they've all taught me something."

Does this suggest that being on holiday is a good time to come up with ideas? If so, how do you then apply your idea back in Australia?

StartupSmart spoke to four small business owners, who sourced their ideas from different parts of the world, about how to turn your holiday idea into a successful operation.

Exploring the Amazon

Martens says it took him awhile to realise which direction he wanted to take, but he got there in the end.

"It was always going to be something related to the health industry because this is what I'm passionate about, so my business needed to align with my values."

"I did a stint distributing frozen fruits to cafés and local stores in Brazil and then I bought a portable juice bar, which worked, but I had to be there all the time."

During this time, Martens noticed how popular Açaí was among consumers – it's "as common as drinking milk" – yet it wasn't well known or widely used in Australia.

It was this realisation that prompted Martens to introduce Açaí to the Australian market. However, he knew he would have to tailor the product to appeal to Australian consumers.

"In Brazil, it's all about frozen Açaí – they don't have the same health food stores [as Australia]. Acai is eaten frozen as a healthy drink on a day-to-day basis," Martens says.

"Australia is very focused on health, so we wanted to target this market, and we did this by creating a more concentrated form of Açaí in a freeze-dried form so that people could consume it as a health product."

Martens says it's important to know your market, understand what works in different cultures and why, and then channel that into your own market.

"Everything is respective of what your market wants. If we had begun importing frozen Açaí before we launched the brand as a health product, it is likely we would have failed."

Having a euro vision

Dean Ramler is the co-founder of online furniture retailer [Milan Direct](#), which he formed with tech entrepreneur Ruslan Kogan in 2007.

While travelling through Italy, Ramler noticed a strong consumer desire for replica designer furniture, which set in motion the idea for his business.

"I graduated from uni and took a gap year to travel around Europe. I was travelling through Italy,

where I was impressed by all this fantastic furniture. I saw an opportunity," he says.

"Being on holiday opens up your eyes to new ideas. In your home town, you see the same thing day in, day out. Overseas, everything is completely different. That's the advantage of travelling."

"Milan Direct's market – the online furniture market – was relatively new when Milan Direct was created. The key challenge to exploiting any new market is to actually create that market."

Asian influences

Online retailer [Shoes of Prey](#) is another business that was born from an idea sourced overseas.

Founded by Michael and Jodie Fox, and Mike Knapp, Shoes of Prey lets consumers design their own shoes. According to Fox, the business idea came about after various trips to Asia.

"Jodie and I came back from our honeymoon with custom suits, dresses, jackets, shirts and of course shoes," Michael Fox says.

"They quickly became our favourite items of clothing, and we'd bought them at such reasonable prices. Naturally, this immediately sparked our entrepreneurial minds."

"We knew we wanted to start a business together and we were tossing around a whole range of different ideas."

"When we saw the quality of custom products available in Asia, and how reasonably they were priced, we figured that would be a fantastic concept to market globally as there was really nothing similar in any Western markets."

While the founders knew their idea would stand up in the local market, they were also realistic about the cost of operating a bricks-and-mortar network, hence the decision to go online.

"The customisation concept worked in Asian stores because rent and labour are not too expensive, and they were able to operate without a strong fashion brand," Fox explains.

"Most of the concept translated easily to Australia. However, we had to adjust the distribution model because rents and retail wages are much more expensive in Australia."

Fox says start-ups should never be tempted to copy a concept without making any changes.

"The reason something works overseas may not necessarily apply to Australia," he says.

"Try to understand all the reasons why the concept works so well in the market you see it operating in – review which of those reasons will and won't work in Australia."

Born in the USA

Paul Lin is the founder of [Buuna](#), a mobile-based travel social network that connects users to each other, and to location-based mini reviews and social networking.

Lin decided to start his business after living and studying in the San Francisco Bay Area. His experience as a "fish out of water" inspired him to create Buuna.

"I vividly remember a weekend in winter, 2007, when I was travelling alone to Seattle," he says.

"Without knowing where the busy and cool bars were and, more importantly, people to go out with, I spent the nights inside the hotel, eating room service and watching movies."

"[I thought,] there must be a better way to travel and meet other travelers without relying on outdated guidebooks and hostel common rooms."

Upon making this realisation, Lin returned to Australia to turn his idea into a business, which

ultimately led to the launch of Buuna.

"I wanted to do the start-up experience in Australia because I feel like Australia is not lacking in ideas or capable software engineers – it's just not enough people actually *do* it," Lin says.

"[However,] living in San Francisco, and seeing other people building successful start-ups out of dreams and ideas, has taught me that making these ideas into reality *is* possible," Lin says.

"[Being overseas] puts you in a different environment, which forces you to think differently about how to solve the same problem at home."

"You can also contrast and compare how you do things a lot more, which is essential in coming up with good user experiences for software."

Unlike other categories, Lin says software is unique in that it transcends cultural barriers without too much effort.

"It's about believing in it enough to get started in the first place. Once you do that, executing it is no different to executing it anywhere else, since software is a global language," he says.

Always use protection

Brian Goldberg, a partner at intellectual property firm [EKM](#), believes the best business ideas are often conceived on holiday.

"Holiday time allows you to get away from your daily tasks and let your mind escape," he says.

"Whether you are on a beach, at a barbeque, a pub or camping, there is a chance you have been inspired and potentially thought of your next winning business idea."

However, Goldberg says entrepreneurs often make the mistake of sharing their ideas with others too early, particularly in social settings where conversation flows more freely.

Rather than discussing their idea with everyone, Goldberg says they should write it down in order to "take the idea from the mind into a presence" and date it.

"Research is the next important phase. People who don't know how [to conduct market research] should visit an intellectual property firm to discuss the merit of their ideas in relation to IP protection," he says.

"Then they probably need to look at [the idea] and say, I'm going to give this a go."

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