

I have an idea

We are creative people. We have ideas all the time. We want to sell our idea and see it materialize, gain customers, and conquer the world .. or even some small corner of it. How do we go about it? Here are a couple of check points for you - the idea creator - to meet in order to increase clarity about your idea for yourself, better communicate it to others, and improve its chances of success.

1. Prepare a "five sentence abstract" that you can use as an elevator pitch for your idea to whoever you meet.
2. Work out your idea on the Business Model Canvas.
3. If you're not satisfied, go to step 1.

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The five sentence abstract

The purpose behind the five sentence abstract is to help you define what problem your idea is solving in a communicable form. Below you'll find a prescription for each of these five sentences. You should imagine yourself repeating these five sentences hundreds of times to other people, with your enthusiasm and belief in your idea only growing with each iteration. If that is not happening, you need to re-examine your idea.

Here I use a hypothetical elevator pitch for Dropbox as an illustration of what to do and what not to do. This doesn't describe the entire space of problems solved by Dropbox, but is an important problem that Drew Houston began with (<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/27532820/app.html>).

Sentence 1 - Introduction

The first sentence of your abstract introduces your domain. You talk about the rough area your idea lurks in. You use this sentence to lead into the core of your idea. For example, "People organize their documents on computers today using ad hoc schemes built on filing systems."

Sentence 2 - Related work

In this, you capture the work that you consider as related to your idea's presentation - i.e. work that is trying to solve the same problem area. You need to have done sufficient research to come up with this framework. If upon reading this you think "there is nothing like what I'm proposing", you're most likely wrong. Try again.

For example, "To keep track of a document's history, people use techniques with different degrees of sophistication from date and time stamps in file names at one end of the spectrum, to revision control systems such as CVS, SVN and GIT at the other end." would be ok.

If your idea is about software, avoid listing features of what you think is your competition in this sentence. This sentence is supposed to be about related work **without** criticizing it.

If your idea is about a new approach to solve a known problem, you can use this sentence to cover all the ways in which people currently solve this problem.

What won't be ok is to say something like "Even modern operating systems do not provide any means to transparently track revisions to documents." This is bad because if your problem is real enough, people are already trying to solve it in some way, even if it is inefficient. If people are not solving it, then your problem may be totally imagined. Furthermore, this would ignore work like the automatic version control that existed even in systems of 25 years ago such as VAX/VMS, and which exist now in MacOSX. So be warned that declaring "no competitors" is a statement of one's ignorance.

Sentence 3 - Problem statement

In this, you describe the problem that your idea is about as a gap in the related work you just wrote about. It is an absolute must that this sentence should be relatable to the "related work" sentence. It should not stand in isolation.

For example, "Most normal computer users either do not have the discipline to organize their files with date and time stamps, or do not have the technical knowhow to operate systems designed for software engineers such as CVS, SVN and GIT, thereby losing out on the benefits of having the edit history of all their documents." would be ok whereas "We need an intuitive interface for people to track document history and collaborate with others." would not be ok. The latter is not ok because it is trying to describe a solution and not the problem, besides failing even at that task, while not referencing all the interesting things specified in the previous related work sentence. It would also not be desirable to write something like this - "File systems make it tedious to date and time stamp files and CVS/SVN/GIT work well only with text files.", because this focuses on features of these approaches. So do not talk about features in your problem statement. To reiterate, "Feature XYZ is not present in systems A, B, C and D." is not a problem statement.

Tip: If you use the word "intuitive" anywhere, find and replace it with "familiar" and you'll be more clearly stating what you mean (<http://www.asktog.com/papers/raskinintuit.html>).

Sentence 4 - Solution or proposal

In this, you describe your proposed solution to tackle the problem you just identified. For example, "Using techniques of Operational Transformation, we propose to maintain an online continuously tracked copy of a user's chosen documents whenever they hit "save", without requiring the user to think about versioning at all." works. It hints at a real technique that folks can google and find out about. It provides a clear mechanism about how that technique can help simplify a user's life. What won't work is - "We use modern sophisticated algorithms to simplify the task of version management for a user" ... because it won't give me any faith that you know what you're up against. Recently, you can find statements like "We apply machine learning techniques to do blah blah blah for our users." If you're planning to write that, you might as well write "We plan to wave a magic wand to wish that our users' problems will go away." It is important to be specific about how your proposal can be seen to solve the stated problem.

Sentence 5 - Validation

In this, you describe how you'll know if you've succeeded in solving your user's problem that you've identified. For example, "OT techniques for tracking changes to a stream of bytes have been mathematically proven to correctly preserve and reproduce a document's edit history, thereby ensuring that users can always revert to an earlier saved version of their document." In other situations, you may have to determine some parameters that you're going to measure that are **known** indicators of whether your problem is solved by your proposal.

The Business Model Canvas

This is a chart developed by Prof. Steven Blank to take his students through the process he describes as "customer development model" in his excellent book Four Steps to Epiphany (http://web.stanford.edu/group/e145/cgi-bin/winter/drupal/upload/handouts/Four_Steps.pdf).

With the previous "five sentence abstract" done right, you'll likely have clearly articulated your problem and proposed solution to your audience. When you then work through the business model canvas, you gain an understanding of whether your problem is real enough and viable enough as a business to warrant substantial investment of time and money into developing your solution.

When working through the BMC, remember that the first version is not your final version. You'll likely see gaps in your understanding of your market pop out when you first fill out the empty spaces in the chart. You're expected to get out of your building and go talk to lots of your potential customers and related parties to understand the reality and magnitude of your customers' problem that you intended to solve. In all possibility, you'll end up revising your BMC several times before it starts to feel real and viable as a business. While the purpose of the abstract is to describe the problem, the purpose of the BMC is to show how you can possibly make money by solving that problem for your customers.

If the problem you described so well in the abstract did not turn out to be real enough or viable enough when you explore it via the BMC, give a bow to it for having saved your valuable time and other people's money, tweak your problem statement to something that stands a better chance and try again.

Tip: During your customer research, you do not go around asking people whether they'll use and pay for the solution that intend to build for them. They may tell you that they might just to get rid of you. They may tell you that they won't because they don't realize that this is a problem that they're wasting their lives on. In short, people are bad predictors of their own behaviour. To correct for this, ask people about their past - for example, "how did you save multiple versions of a document the last time you needed to do that?".

Note: While the BMC is intended to be used to evaluate viability of a business around a solution, you can substitute proxies for money such as "number of users adopting the solution", "person hours saved within the organization per month" or whatever it is that you're going to measure the utility of your solution by.

Why bother with the abstract and the BMC?

(by Sri)

I ask people to work through these two steps before considering them further. There are several reasons to do this -

1. It sets clear expectations of what sort of commitment from the idea originator is required to have other people from the company pitch in. If the idea originator is not willing to bother doing even this much (I expect this to take up to 2 weeks max), then there is very little chance that the person will be willing to stick with the idea through execution.
2. It helps cull bad ideas. I can't promise it'll help good ideas surface, but bad ideas just become plain obvious once they're put through these two filters. To help improve the chances of good ideas surfacing and potentially taking a hit due to the skill level of the originator, I'm happy to guide people through these two steps.

3. It saves a **lot** of peoples' time! In the end, you'll have a clear picture of your proposal, a clear elevator pitch you can confidently repeat to other people, and a clear answer to "how are you going to make money" or whatever proxy you choose to measure success of your idea by. This is already well above average for most ideas that bounce around. It saves your audience's time. It helps attract others to your work. It helps your project survive its main nemesis - *you-the-originator* - in case you change your mind and move on to other things.

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