

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KILL THE IDEA

**Choosing which ideas to focus
our time, money and energy on.**



There are some pretty terrible ideas out there that have somehow made it to the shelves, shopping channels and, pretty quickly afterwards, dustbins. Take, for example, the facial exerciser, a small spring device that looks like a deformed rodent skeleton you're supposed to wedge into either side of your mouth and flex to work the muscles of the chin, neck and face. Apparently it gives users a more youthful appearance without the need for surgery and is 'clinically proven' to be safe and effective. It also makes the user look like The Joker from *Batman*. Surely this is an idea that should have been strangled at birth? Or take the pocket fishing rod. No, this is not a euphemism for something else – it really is a pocket fishing rod. It features a telescopic rod to allow you to fish whenever the mood strikes and some of the more intriguing models also double as a pen. Included in the kit are a hook, line and sinker. That's right ... hook, line and sinker.

How do we know which of our own ideas are worth keeping and which are not?

If we've been playing hard enough, and flexed our creative muscles,¹ we should by now have a ton of possibilities. But we have to whittle these down to, first, a shortlist of the strongest contenders, and then ultimately a single idea that we are prepared to focus our energies on and do whatever it takes to bring to life (although, with practice, you might be able to keep a few ideas going at once – see page 192). In the idea creation phase we tried not to be too hampered by practicalities, but now a healthy dose of reality needs to come into play. This is the territory of the left side of our brains. In the playing part of the innovation process, in which we generated the pool of ideas, the right halves were in command and the sensible left halves had to wait it out on the sidelines, but now it's their turn.

¹As opposed to our facial muscles.

IT'S A GAME OF TWO HALVES

The left would have been warming up, jogging on the spot and doing stretching exercises while the more zany other half was on the field in the thick of things. Now the coach (we're not sure where this metaphor's going, but we'll carry on a couple more sentences just to see) beckons to the left side to take off its tracksuit and come on to the field. The right half looks a bit dejected at first, but has had a good game and knows its energy reserves are low. It's time for some fresh blood. The two hemispheres tap hands as they pass one another, passing the metaphorical baton (a metaphor within a metaphor – now this is getting crazy), signalling 'well done' from the left and 'good luck' from the right. Right goes to the bench to get its breath back and recover. Left is already on the field running hard, getting stuck in. We could go on, but we won't.

Left brain's skill is analysing the ideas to see which ones are practical and have a chance of succeeding and it has a few tricks up its sleeve to help. **The simplest method is to categorise the ideas as ones that are feasible now, those that have potential and ones that are just too weird. But even with these weirdos it's important not to discard them outright, however oddball.**

They should be noted down for future reference, maybe for another project, while the ideas that seem feasible right now and those that have potential can be worked on a little further (... the right half of the brain looks up hopefully from the bench realising he might be called on to play a bit more). To get ourselves into the frame of mind of considering how any of the more feasible ideas might be implemented, a handy technique is to start by writing it up as: 'What I see myself doing is ...'. Then jot down things we think are great about our idea, potential spin-offs from it, and practical concerns that we have about it.

So, for example ...



IDEA 1 What I see myself doing is ...

Finding companies to sponsor kitted-out minibuses as an alternative form of transportation to people driving to and from work.

This is great because ...

- People can leave their cars at home so reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.
- They can do work on the way so can spend less time in the office.
- They can connect with new people and swap ideas.

It could also lead to ...

- Additional revenue streams through corporate sponsorships and from selling coffee and snacks on board the bus.
- People can get rid of one of their cars and use the money to pay for a holiday for the family.
- As on a school bus, there will be a feeling of community spirit with commuters getting to know people in their neighbourhoods.

It worries me that ...

- The logistics of finding good pick-up and drop-off points will make the service difficult to operate.
- Everyone starts and finishes work at different times so there'd have to be multiple services throughout the day.
- People are so wedded to driving their own cars it'll take a huge change in attitude to make it work.

Doing an exercise like this one will do more than help us edit down the ideas to the strongest few, it will also enable us to improve upon those suckers.

We can begin to think through how we'd build enthusiasm for the idea, what resources we'd need to implement it and maybe how we'd test it. We should ask ourselves what other stakeholders would think about the ideas. We might want to do a role-playing exercise to help think about who are key stakeholders that will have an influence on whether the idea is likely to happen. Stakeholders could be a local official, for instance, or a consumer advocate group, a regulatory body, a venture capitalist, a bank, a finance director, a CEO, your husband, wife, the dog, etc. In all likelihood there'll be a bunch of them who can make or break what we're trying to do, the movers and shakers who can make the difference between the idea failing or, hopefully, succeeding.

Now put yourself into their shoes (see Chapter 9, Shoe Swapper). For each one of the stakeholders ask yourself: *What's in it for them? Why would they be interested in helping you do this, or at least not stand in your way? What is it about the idea that they'll see as a negative? Does it conflict with other things they are trying to do? Will it make their life more difficult in any respect?* Unfortunately it's far easier for people to say 'no' to new ideas and to leave things as they are rather than change things (see the section on naysayers in Chapter 1), however much sense change would seem to make – at least to us innovators. Empathising with the key stakeholders can help us understand how they'll look at our ideas and allows us to find ways to eradicate any problems before they are ever even exposed to them. We're not talking 'eradicate' as in 'wipe out' Mafia-style, but after all other avenues have been explored, do consider good old bribes and blackmail as a last resort.²

²We're joking.

People shouldn't be afraid of having many ideas going at the same time. You have an idea, and that might spark another idea, but you don't drop the first idea to do the new one, you keep it spinning like a plate and then you go to the other idea. And the new one might make you think of yet another idea, so now you have three or four. They might all be connected a little bit but they've become their own thing, and then you notice this idea – the fifth one along – is going much faster than the other ones, so you say, that's OK, I'll follow this fifth one but I'll keep the others just spinning along. And then when you see one going really, really wonky and about to fall off you look at it and maybe think, well that's alright, I've got these 32 other ideas and they're going just fine.



What I find is wandering between the different ideas and projects is very inspirational because I haven't been obsessed with the same thing for three months, so I can come in completely fresh to each one. At the end of the time I feel quite worn out but happy that I haven't been stuck in the same problem over and over again. In many businesses they have one thing that they do; there's always got to be at least one person in the company who is not satisfied with the way things are right now. It's interesting to be constantly looking at your business as an ever-evolving thing. If you don't do that in this day and age, where everything changes every 24 hours, you'll be dead.

CAN YOU FEEL IT?

Picking out the one great idea from the pool of good ones you've been working on is not always easy. First, it's difficult to be objective. You've been so involved in creating them that you might find it hard to separate the wheat from the chaff, the men from the boys, the pandas from the squirrels. Second, you're now emotionally invested in the ideas. If they've made it this far, there's something about them you like and it's difficult to let go. But, let go you must, even if it takes cold hard cash. Merck, the research and pharmaceutical giant, has developed a system to kill ideas it's working on if they look like they're not going anywhere. They offer 'kill fees', by handing out options as a reward to scientists who bail out on losing projects.³ They are rewarding the decision to move on. Merck research and development chief Peter Kim said of the scheme, 'You can't change the truth. You can only delay how long it takes to find it out.'⁴

Getting feedback from others, whether consumers or colleagues or lovers, is one way to decide on the one winner. They are more likely to be objective than you. But, buyer beware, we can't rely too heavily on the opinions of others. Their judgement will be only as good as the materials they're given to judge, and in many cases we can't adequately communicate our idea without actually going and doing it. We'll come back to that. Meanwhile, let's not ignore the power of gut. **Even if we can't always put into words why we think one idea is better than another, for some reason the right one often just feels right.**

³'Creativity and the Role of the Leader', Teresa M. Amabile and Mukti Khair, *Harvard Business Review*, October 2008.

⁴'Is Merck Medicine Working?', *Business Week*, 30 July 2007.

Freddie DeMann, a veteran music producer, has an amazing career spanning over three decades and has managed both Michael Jackson and Madonna. 'You know, I'd like to say there's a little bit of an artist in me,' he told Business Playground. 'When I was a kid I took drum lessons and I took tap dance and when I was about 20 I took acting lessons. I thought I wanted to be an artist, but was wise enough to realise I didn't have "the stuff". I'm not in this business by accident, I'm in this business called show business, but it's the arts that I like and being close to artists and I like being close to the creative process. It's what gets my rocks off. It's what gets me up every morning with enthusiasm. When I was a manager I told people I was the bridge between art and commerce. And thank God I have a pretty good business mind. But I always have an artistic mind and I think that gives me some special credentials, and I love what I do so much. God gave me a good ear to recognise a hit song and, by extension, a hit song is a hit script, is a book, is a play, is a show.'

He told Business Playground about how gut instinct has helped him recognise potential hits. **'You just know it,' he said. 'It's like when somebody plays a song for you and you hear eight bars and you know it's a smash.'** Often the artists themselves don't know which of their work is just good and which is so great that it will take the charts by storm. 'It takes someone else to say *this*, this is the smash, and not this.' He gives an example: 'I've had a lot of experience with that. I was managing The Jacksons way back in 1978 and at that time they had left Motown and gone to Epic and they weren't hot, they were kind of cold, they were ice cold, and they were also in disarray and they were fighting amongst themselves. I told them there's one hit on this album and *that's* what we're putting out. It's called 'Shake Your Body Down To The Ground'. I was right, it sold two million singles and caused the album to go platinum⁵ and that was the rebirth of

⁵In fact it made double-platinum status from the Recording Industry Association of America.

The Jacksons, which led to Quincy Jones producing Michael and having those two incredible albums, *Off The Wall* and *Thriller*.'

We asked Freddie if he had a process or technique for recognising the winning ideas, the ones that would be hits. He said, 'I hate to disappoint you, but I don't know the answer to that. Very often I have myriad thoughts that are kind of rushing through and it's very distracting. But if something is really, really good and it grabs you by the throat, those thoughts stay away and you're completely engulfed in what you're hearing.' He adds, 'When you were playing 'Hole in the Fence',⁶ I was already thinking what theatre it should open in New York. I was already thinking who I'm going to get on the production team, who should be augmenting what you've done. So, yes, I do tend to race ahead when I'm enthusiastic about something.'

The role of gut instinct in picking the winner is confirmed by Evan Williams, co-founder and CEO of online social networking tool Twitter.

Prior to launching Twitter, Evan had launched a blog publishing system called Blogger, which his team had developed as a by-product to another project. Evan told Business Playground, 'It wasn't at all what our company was planning to do, it was very much just an idea on the side which seemed like a very small idea compared to what we were working on.' But, he says, 'I just couldn't get rid of the Blogger idea, it kept nagging me.' Evan and his team pursued with Blogger and it eventually became a huge success.⁷

Christian Audigier, creative genius behind clothing labels Von Dutch and Ed Hardy, describes 'just knowing' when an idea has the potential to be big. In 2000 he was brought in as the head designer for Von Dutch. The clothing label is named after car and motorbike 'pinstriper'⁸ Kenneth Graeme Howar, who had often signed his work

⁶The title song Dave wrote for a stage musical.

⁷They sold their company, Pyra, to Google in 2003.

⁸Pinstriping is the application of very thin lines of paint.



‘Von Dutch’. ‘Von Dutch was the Pope of the pinstripe,’ Christian told Business Playground. **He wanted to create a lifestyle brand that conjured up images of garages, custom cars and bikes. ‘It would make you feel like someone else,’ he says.** Despite having no formal training in branding or marketing, Christian has a great instinct for what will work and as soon as he saw the iconic Von Dutch signature he thought, ‘If I do that big I’m going to be the new Abercrombie and Fitch.’ His initial idea was to put the name on T-shirts and to give them to celebrities, but in a remarkable use of ‘the answer is in the question’ (see Chapter 4), Christian looked from the other end of the telescope and thought, if a celebrity is going to be all over magazines and newspapers, it’s usually their head and shoulders that will be guaranteed to be in the picture so, boom, he decided to use trucker hats instead, with plenty of room to have Von Dutch sprawled across their high fronts!

He managed to persuade Britney Spears when at the peak of her fame to wear Von Dutch clothing, although it wasn’t easy. ‘In the beginning when you try to see Britney Spears you are a stupid 45-year old man talking to a 16-year-old girl and you don’t even know any of her songs,’ he says. But he managed to convince her and then boyfriend Justin Timberlake. A week later the couple split up and pictures of them were splashed across the cover of *People* magazine, both wearing Von Dutch trucker caps. The brand took off overnight and the craze for trucker caps was born. Christian left Von Dutch a little while later to start his own clothing line, Ed Hardy (it sounds like ‘Edardee’ when Christian says it in his strong French accent), a high-end clothing line inspired by the work of American tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy (‘the godfather of tattoo’). Christian wanted to make it into a lifestyle brand with the vibe of being in a gang and, again, his gut instinct told him this was a winning idea. He now sells the line in retailers around the world including a string of Ed Hardy shops in major cities, has over 200 licensees, and sales are approaching a billion dollars a year.

So now you have a plate full of ideas, a knife and fork and a fresh pot of coffee. Which ideas look the most appetising and which ones just look like a mess of spaghetti? Or, if you have no clue, dig in and see which one hangs on to your fork! It’s fairly easy to dig away and spot the no-hopers and throw them in the trash, but when it gets down to the last pieces of linguini you may have three or four that stick right on that plate or twist around your fork and it’s very difficult to then just choose the one to play with.

What I do is write down two or three words on each idea like: ‘fit ’n’ green’. This idea is about turning fitness centres into generators that give the members rewards based on the amount of electricity they generate. This would lead to home applications on fitness bikes and a brand that can make anything from fitness games to walking phone chargers, etc. I don’t need to write all the stuff describing it, I just write ‘fit ’n’ green’ and if I can’t remember what it’s all about in a week’s time then it can’t have been that good, so I kill it.

It’s exactly the same as songwriting. If you can’t remember the melody that you wrote a week earlier, then it’s not a good one. Sometimes when I give talks to big companies I get them to compose a song on the spot about their company mission. It’s good fun having the whole company trying



to explain what they are about by writing a song or a chorus. It forces them to break the whole thing down into a few words and a hook (meaning a catchy melody). During the talk I record it and at the end of the session play it back sounding like a finished record, and 24 hours later it has often been posted up on their website!

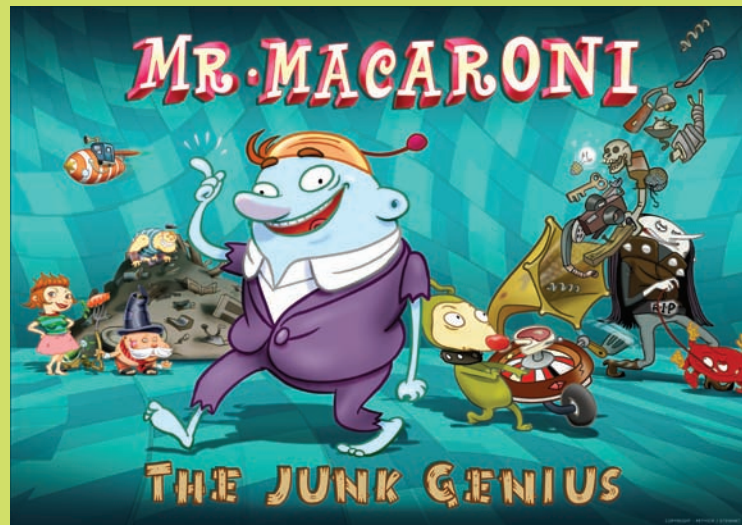
Killing ideas is very painful and sometimes they come back to haunt you. You think fit ’n’ green is dead in the water then you walk past a new gym on your way back from Starbucks and you see lots of women in leotards through the window peddling furiously alongside a few heavyweight middle-aged men fast-walking, frantically clutching on to the side rails. You look up and see it’s called ‘The Powerhouse’ and it says that it’s the first green-energy producing gym franchise, and you choke on your doughnut.

Ideas come back to haunt you in other ways. You thought you killed the idea about the cartoon character called Mr Macaroni and Noodles (his dog), but in the middle of the night you wake up singing his theme song and can’t help seeing him happy as Larry in

his junkyard on Nickelodeon!⁹ This is when it becomes impossible to kill the idea but it keeps popping up in your head wherever you look. You are at dinner and you look over your vodka martini and you see the maître d' and he looks very like Mr Macaroni. By your second martini you are scribbling Macaroni notes on the tablecloth and offering to pay for damages.

So in the end I had to let Mr Macaroni live and I put him back in the spaghetti bowl. Now Paul Pethick, a brilliant animator and writer, and I have partnered on it and we have a wonderful animated presentation, as well as booklets and Macaroni inventions of

old musical shoes and other products based on Mr Macaroni and his pooch. In fact, it became an idea chosen by Nickelodeon to be developed, along with two other ideas, as a series they might potentially launch. Alas, they mistakenly chose Mr Meaty¹⁰ over our brilliant work, but Macaroni still lives on and, because this idea has survived both my attempt at murder and the cruel treatment of Nickelodeon, he and Noodles are well prepared for survival. They are now just playing around the junkyard, biding their time, waiting to see if we are part of a bouquet of kids' shows in a subscription world on mobile phones or whether we will just 'Club Penguin'¹¹ them into superstardom!



⁹Nickelodeon is a TV network aimed at kids and owned by Viacom.

¹⁰Oddly-shaped puppets working at the fast-food *Mr Meaty* restaurant.

¹¹www.clubpenguin.com is a very successful online virtual world for kids that's raking in the fish ... er, we mean cash.

MOVE ONE SPACE FORWARD TO THE NEXT CHAPTER ... OR ROLL THE DICE

Once we've created a bunch of ideas using the techniques we've outlined in the book, we need to find out which ones are worth focusing serious time, effort and resources on, and which should be killed off. Some companies, recognising the need to move on from ideas that don't have enough potential, will actually pay their scientists to kill them. This next stage is where the analytical left half of the brain takes over from the more creative right half. A sort of exercise that will help determine which ones are feasible and what we could do to improve them and make them work.

As Freddie DeMann, Evan Williams and Christian Audigier explained, when all is said and done gut instinct plays a big role in deciding whether an idea is a BIG idea.

As for the crazy ideas that we can't find a place for now, they should be put aside; but we should not lose them as sometimes they will come back to haunt us. Now, in the last chapter let's add some rocket fuel and find out what it takes in an organisation to put ideas into orbit!



BOARD GAME: KILL THE IDEA

How it works: Sometimes we instinctively know when an idea is worth keeping and when another isn't, but we need a little push to make that difficult choice. Being made to choose helps us realise which one of them really matters.

How to play: Write down 19 of the strongest ideas for the problem you are trying to solve and number them 1–19. Now close your eyes and plonk a finger randomly down on to the board. The number it lands on determines which one of the ideas will be killed. But, don't despair quite yet, you have three 'saves' to give an idea that has been killed the chance to live again. By forcing yourself to murder your ideas, but with a chance to give them a stay of execution, you'll soon realise which one feels like the one idea worth fighting for.

The three saves can be used on only two different ideas, and so the winning idea is the one on which two of the three saves have been used. For example, say you are working on ideas for getting publicity for your new venture and included in the 19 ideas you've shortlisted are: get the CEO to 'do a Branson' and appear in public just in his underpants; donate time and services to

people who need help in the community and tell the local paper; or get a celebrity to use one of your products and hope they'll be photographed doing so. If having plonked a finger on the Branson idea as one to kill you might decide it's worth saving and so use a life. But, then only two lives are left. Then the community work idea comes up – is it worth saving or not, knowing that if you do save it, because the saves can only be used on two different ideas, you cannot save any of the others? You decide, nah, it isn't worth saving – kill it! The needy can fend for themselves. After a few more finger plonks on the board and some more deaths (we're talking about the ideas we've killed here, not the needy) the celebrity photo op idea comes up and you decide this one is worth saving. Two lives used up and one to go, and now it's decision time. The only two ideas left in the running are the ones you've saved (which is why you always have to choose the two ideas you use those two lives on very carefully) and it's going to be sudden death between them. Toss a coin to find out which must die, and use your last life if your gut tells you that the one that comes up is the one idea you cannot live without.

Instructions

1. When you have a bunch of ideas to choose from, pick 19 and number them.
2. Now close your eyes and randomly plonk a finger down on the board.
3. Kill the idea that you pick ... or give it one of the three lives you have.
4. The three lives can only be used on two different ideas.
5. The winning idea is the one on which you've used two of the three lives. All the others die.

