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Living the dream

'In each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone.'

John F. Kennedy, 35th US President

This book is for people who want to change their lives irrevocably by creating something valuable out of nothing more than a simple idea. There are many ways to make a living, but few are as satisfying as starting your own business and bringing something new into the world.

I've created three billion-pound businesses from scratch and been chairman of a fourth, which was sold for \$10bn less than a decade after it started. I'm currently working on my fifth business creation and still enjoying every minute.

Have you ever dreamt that you might be able to do the same – make a million from unleashing your idea into the world? Or have you found excuses and listened to all those people who put you down?

Well, at the end of this chapter I'll tell you exactly what to do to start living your dream. But first let me tell you the most important things I've learned about making ideas happen – things that I firmly believe will motivate you into taking those first few steps.



- Your own enthusiasm for an idea is what will bring it to life.
- Everyone struggles to take the first bold step, but once you have, you will stop dreaming and start living.
- You don't need to be superhuman to make a great and successful entrepreneur.
- The expertise and genius of entrepreneurs is not in coming up with complex ideas – most of the time it's down to simple ideas fantastically well implemented.

Enthusiasm conquers all

In May 2002, I found myself arriving by boat at Bill Gates' residence. He was hosting the annual Microsoft dinner for the chief executives of its most important customers. Minutes later I was walking towards his magnificent 50,000 square foot mansion overlooking Lake Washington in Medina, near Seattle. I was full of excitement, mixed with nervous anticipation.

The Microsoft CEO summit is a serious event, with heavy-weight presentations and panel discussions. Despite the networking necessities and obligatory small talk, I was actually really enjoying myself. I'd already had great fun with Jeff Bezos (founder of Amazon), tormenting the technicians by trying to get a prototype of Bill's new enthusiasm, the tablet PC, to work. It turned out the machine we were using was faulty. I had bumped into Warren Buffett, the second richest man in the world and something of a mentor to Bill. Warren asked me how long I'd been married. When I told him I thought it was about 30 years, he responded: 'You must have learned the secret of successful long-term relationships.' When I said not really, he walked away chuckling and turning back towards me muttered, 'Low expectations, that's the secret.'



Later I listened intently as Bill's wife Melinda explained how he was in charge of the network of 40 PCs that ran all of the digital features of their home. It's funny to imagine him doing what an IT administrator in a small company does, but equipping your house with 40 PCs definitely shows an enthusiasm for your own product.

I finally got to shake hands with Bill later that evening.

'Mike Harris, founder of Egg,' I said. 'We're an Internet bank, one of the first in the world and right now the biggest.'

'I know Egg,' Bill replied. 'I gave the keynote at a conference where one of your guys spoke last month.'

I went on to tell Bill that Egg and Microsoft had been working together for a while on some new ideas, and how we seemed to share something of a common philosophy.

The following year Bill was on a platform in front of thousands of people with Egg CIO Tom Iube. He was demonstrating an Internet banking application that Egg and Microsoft had co-developed to show how emerging technologies such as Vista (Microsoft's then new operating system) could transform customers' experience of using the Web. Bill introduced Egg as 'simply the best example of implementing these new technologies'.

So how did a company such as Egg, which was tiny in comparison to other banks and should have been well under Gates' radar, get so much attention? And why was I able to claim Egg and Microsoft seemed to have something of a common philosophy? And what does all this tell you about making ideas happen?

It's the same answer to all three questions: the ability to infect others with your own enthusiasm. Bill himself has said that sharing his enthusiasm is what he does best and he's not alone in this fundamental belief.



'I consider my ability to arouse enthusiasm among men the greatest asset I possess.'

Charles Schwabb, US industrialist

'Flaming enthusiasm, backed up by horse sense and persistence, is the quality that most frequently makes for success.'

Dale Carnegie, developer of famous courses on self-improvement, salesmanship, corporate training, public speaking and interpersonal skills

'People will only want to supply you, finance you and buy from you if you have confidence, faith and passion in your product and idea.'

Karen Bilimoria, founder and chief executive of Cobra Beer (from Sodowick and Watts, 2005)

'Enthusiasm is an unstoppable force and one of the essential ingredients of starting a business successfully.'

Dame Anita Roddick (from Sodowick and Watts, 2005)



Imagine what it must have been like to be around Bill Gates when he first created Microsoft. He started out with just an idea: to put a PC in every home and on every desk. It must have seemed impossible to everybody at the time, but Bill's enthusiasm would have been infectious. His idea became Microsoft's corporate mission for its first 25 years. It was an idea that was worth tens of billions of dollars to him personally but countless more to the global economy.

The ability to express your enthusiasm and instil it in others is the key to turning your big idea into a reality. The word *enthusiasm* derives from the Greek word *entheos*, which translates as 'the quality displayed by those possessed by a god'. You don't have to believe in one deity, let alone multiple gods to understand what the Greeks meant. A man or a woman possessed by enthusiasm is a truly unstoppable force.

Imagine how Tim Berners-Lee feels now as he sees the World Wide Web sweep all before it in transforming the lives of billions of people. In 1989, the Web existed as merely an idea. It was only given life because of Tim's enthusiasm for it.

'The dream behind the Web is of a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information. Its universality is essential: the fact that a hypertext link can point to anything, be it personal, local or global, be it draft or highly polished. There was a second part of the dream, too, dependent on the Web being so generally used that it became a realistic mirror (or in fact the primary embodiment) of the ways in which we work and play and socialize. That was that once the state of our interactions was online – we could then use computers to help us analyse it, make sense of what we are doing, where we individually fit in, and how we can better work together.'

Tim Berners-Lee



Tim's powerful use of the word dream is a very common way in which entrepreneurs express their ambitions.

Do something

Write down a few sentences about your own dream, whatever it is. It doesn't matter how you express it – nobody else will ever see what you write. Your dream might simply be the act of giving birth to a new idea or it might be the thought of creating your own company.

A good way to think about this is to consider how a journalist might write about your success story in ten years' time. What did you achieve and how? What was the secret of your success?

I often get participants to do this exercise in my workshops. It's a great way for people to be clear about what they want and what really matters to them. Achieving that clarity is extremely important as a source of focus when you are moving forward. It also gives them a taste of what success feels like – there's no greater motivator than that!

First steps

People don't get enthused by your idea, people get enthused by *you* – but only when they are convinced that you are prepared to live your dream. You must therefore prove to them that you are going to take the first step to make it happen, however tentative.

In 1988, I had taken the first step towards making a dream of my own into a reality. I was working as part of a team on a project for Midland Bank (now HSBC). We were creating something new and innovative: a new bank with a new brand. We called it Raincloud at that time but it was ultimately to be Firstdirect – the world's first telephone bank, which would provide outstanding



levels of service to its customers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. By negating branches, recruiting and training only the best staff, and ensuring it was simply the most exciting place to work, we were determined to change the way people banked forever.

While it was easy for me to be enthusiastic about making this happen, it was also easy to be daunted by the prospect of turning it into a profitable business. I was immersed in deep thought about all this one Saturday while walking around the Cotswold town of Chipping Camden with my wife, Sue. She wasn't entirely happy because I was, admittedly, less than exuberant company that day. I followed her into one of the antique shops and began sifting through some old maps when she thrust a wooden frame into my hands. It contained a piece of paper that read:

'Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.'

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

'There you are – there's your answer' she said. 'Stop making a fuss and get on with it.'

That frame has since occupied pride of place on the wall in my office. The words had instantly moved me, although I had no idea who Goethe was at the time. I know now that he was a 19th century German poet and philosopher, and much more besides. His advice to the would-be entrepreneur is excellent.

One small step

Initially, all it takes to get started is enthusiasm, bold commitment and determination. So if you have an idea, why not make the conscious decision to stop dreaming and start it now? If you prefer, the more prosaic 'Stop making a fuss and just get on with it' is also pretty good advice.



The following Monday I decided to do just that. I decided to start the dream that was to become the world's most famous telephone bank, an iconic consumer brand that to this day still stands for the best service you can get from a bank. I called the team together and said, 'Right, we *are* going to make this happen. I have no idea how, but we are going to go for it.' The next thing I knew, we not only had approval from Midland Bank, but we also had the funds and the show had begun.

Immediately I found myself immersed in chaos – improvising, hustling and loving every minute of it. I found myself thinking alternately 'This is great, we're really on our way' followed by 'Oh my God, I can't do this – how did I ever get into it?'

Back then I relied on instinct and intuition to get things done. But a lifetime spent creating businesses has taught me to do things a bit differently. I now know it takes a lot of courage to take the first step in getting an idea into the world. Everyone is nervous and frightened. I certainly was – panic-stricken might actually be a better description. But what I know now is that while there may be no guarantee of success, you can stack the odds heavily in your favour by learning from others.

I also know that ultimately, win or lose, you will be left with a wealth of memories and fantastic experiences. You will never regret living your dream if you live it full on, holding nothing back. If you don't take some risks you never get anywhere. The rewards can be immense – and I don't just mean financially.

Reap the rewards

In my experience, there is no greater feeling in business than seeing an idea come kicking into the world. I remember feeling this way just before the launch of Firstdirect when I gave my family a tour of the call centre. There was a fantastic buzz about the place – hundreds of highly trained and motivated people bustling around, computers everywhere, systems whirring impressively. Walking around, I felt both immensely proud and



totally astonished that we had managed to pull it all together. Just an idea and a bunch of ordinary people had created all of this. It made me feel as though we had really done something extraordinary. It made me feel extraordinary. My kids were even more astonished that their dad, an ordinary sort of a bloke, had been the cause of all of this.

'A really innovative and exceptional team turned the vision into reality. I still remember the launch party – hundreds of people celebrating months of great cooperation, determined perseverance and clever creativity. I looked back that night on the experience as a real gift in my life and wished that everyone could have that one opportunity, as we did, of trying to build something thoughtful, intelligent and different – and to be able to share it with thousands of people. We were all very exhilarated ...'

Steve Mayers, who came up with the original idea that led to Firstdirect and was the Senior Marketing Manager on the launch team

Everyone can be extraordinary

Ordinary people who are prepared to do extraordinary things – that's what it takes to get big ideas into the world. You don't need superhuman intelligence or superpowers of any description.

Yes, there are a few superhumans around: Gates and Berners-Lee definitely fall into that category. But your normal entrepreneur is just that – normal:

- Seb Pole, who created the exciting Pukka Herbs.
- Terry Rhodes, who was the strategic brains behind the mobile phone company Celtel.



- Alistair Lukies, who created the mobile banking success story MoniLink.
- Stef Calcraft, who created the stunningly innovative advertising agency Mother.
- David Kelley, who created the celebrated design and innovation consultancy, Ideo.
- Barbara Cassani, who created the low-cost airline Go.
- Richard Reed, who created Innocent Drinks.

If you met any of them at party, you wouldn't find them vastly different from yourself. What makes them extraordinary is two things, both of which are easily available to you. Firstly, they had genuine enthusiasm for their dream, which they used to infect others. Secondly, they were bold enough to begin their dream.

Pukka power

I have come across countless examples of ordinary people being extraordinary by choice.

But Sebastian Pole is one of my favourites. He is a young herbalist who had studied the use of Indian herbal remedies and wanted to use them in his UK practice. The problem was that many of the classic Ayurvedic formulae were not reliably available in the UK and many of the Indian herbs were grown by subsistence farmers who relied on pesticides to get a decent crop. The pesticides hardly met the Ayurvedic ideal of natural purity.

Sebastian's problem was shared by many naturopaths and complementary practitioners in the UK, but Sebastian alone had the courage to do something about it. He developed a network of organic suppliers in India and Sri Lanka, imported the herbs, and manufactured traditional Ayurvedic remedies for distribution in Europe. His company Pukka Herbs is the living embodiment of his dream.



'Pukka Herbs is dedicated to promoting an integrated relationship between people and our natural world where the value of what we do is based on sustainability, where the environmental and social impact is considered along with "the price", and where the authenticity of the tradition that we represent is respected throughout all that we do. Ayurveda strives to create the best health for the individual, the community and the environment. At Pukka Herbs we are doing all that we can to make this dream a reality for all of us.'

Sebastian Pole

It's too early to say how much money Seb will make from Pukka, but he's truly living his dream.

Another notable example is Terry Rhodes. I first met him when he was a young economist in the strategy department at Mercury Communications. One day our attentions turned to the future of telephony.

'What about the Africans?' Terry posed. 'They're going to need phones – mobile phones, probably.'

I thought his idea was interesting, but after debating the merits I soon forgot about the entire conversation. Terry, on the other hand, teamed up with entrepreneur Mo Ibrahim to create Celtel, which built a series of mobile telephone companies across Africa. When Celtel was sold in 2005 for a little over \$3bn, Terry was well rewarded for living his dream.

Big ideas

A lot of people tell me about their big idea, followed by all the reasons they can't make it happen. Humans seem to be uniquely inventive when it comes to finding excuses about why it's not



possible to do something. But by far the most common and destructive excuse is ‘My idea is so simple – I’m not sure it’s worth that much.’

Let me assure you that simple ideas are sometimes the most powerful – they don’t even have to be original. It’s how you implement them that counts.

‘If you never have a single great idea in your life but become skilled at executing the great ideas of others, you can succeed beyond your wildest dreams. Seek them out and make them work. They do not have to be your ideas. Execution is all in this regard.’

Felix Dennis, entrepreneur and author of *How to Get Rich*

Banking by telephone wasn’t a particularly complex idea; it wasn’t even that original. When Firstdirect was conceived, a few US banks had already set up telephone banking centres to provide an additional service channel that supplemented their branch networks. The genius of Firstdirect was that we created a whole new bank out of the idea of telephone banking, removing the need for branches altogether. It was also fantastically well implemented.

Think of ebay – it’s basically the interactive version of small ads in local newspapers. There were Internet search engines before Google, but Google’s implementation was vastly superior. Post-it notes were a simple idea – just bits of paper with glue on the back. Digital music and MP3 players existed before Apple created iTunes and the iPod – Apple transformed an existing simple idea into a multibillion business with great design and great implementation.

So don’t despair if you think your idea isn’t exactly rocket science. Simple ideas are often the best; success lies in implementing them better than anyone else has before.



Do something

There are no excuses left for you now. You don't need to be superhuman – you only need a simple idea and it doesn't even have to be original. So go ahead, start to unleash the power you were born with – the power to introduce a new idea into the world.

It only takes two things, both of which can be achieved in a single first step. You need to be bold enough to begin your dream and you need to learn how to infect others with your enthusiasm for it.

So begin by telling a few people what you intend to do. Speak with commitment and passion, with no apologies or excuses. It's extraordinary how powerful such a statement can be. Keep making your statement of intention until you notice your self-belief and enthusiasm growing and beginning to infect others.

Here's how.

Create a statement, something like one of the following:

- 'I have a new business idea – I'm going to find a way to make it happen and I'm going to make money out of it. Within three months, I'll have the show on the road.' Produce a one-minute pitch on the idea itself.
- 'I've been working on this new idea/business and it's a bit stuck at the moment, but no one should doubt for a minute that I'm going to make it happen. Within three months, everything will be flying.' Produce a one-minute elevator pitch on the idea and a one-minute pitch on the current problems.
- 'I'm going to start a new business that will make me millions. I'm not sure what yet, but I'll have kicked it off in three months' time.' Produce a one-minute pitch on how excited you are at the prospect of finally doing something you always wanted to do.



First of all, practise your statements and pitches in front of a mirror. When you feel ready, move on to your friends and colleagues. I don't recommend your boss, partners or family members at this stage – it's too early for that sort of challenge.

After you've made your pitch, consider just how enthusiastic and genuine you felt and how your audience responded. Mark yourself on a scale of one to ten. It may take several pitches to several people but when you get up to eight out of ten, you're on your way. You have unleashed something really spectacular, the power of a man or woman possessed by enthusiasm – what the ancient Greeks called *the power of the gods*.

You have accessed your raw power. It should help reinforce the lessons of this chapter and make them real for you. If you do choose to start a business of your own, you will find yourself having to express your enthusiasm to many people over and over again. The more skilled and practised you are at infecting others with your enthusiasm, the more successful you are likely to be.