Journal of Product & Brand Management

The Reviewers

Satish K. Nair, Institute of Management, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, India

Caution: *Idea-active* content!

OK, the italicized word is not a coining of this reviewer but of the authors of the book. With a brilliant play on a high-impact scientific term, Boynton and Fischer have laid the premise of their work – that it is meant for the lay reader and that the "general public" should not form any misperception that the book is meant for the creative types only. They cull from their research in the beginning of the book and state: "Brilliance is optional. What we have found in our work and research is that the most successful Idea Hunters are not, as a rule, geniuses. Rather they are just idea-active. They have a voracious appetite for acquiring ideas, and they are skilled at setting those ideas in motion – selling them and making them happen" (p. 4). To drive home the point, the introductory chapter is titled "Brilliance Not Required"!

The authors preface the work with the importance of ideas and use an illustration of a (seemingly mundane) product – a coffee cup lid. They also take inspiration from the back of an iPhone: "Designed by Apple in California; Assembled in China. There's a difference. The idea payoff is greater than the thing payoff for individuals and organizations as well as for societies" (p. xiii).

In a book replete with real-life illustrations to bolster and prove their point upon point, the authors turn to the customer-facing employees at Ritz-Carlton Hotels who exemplify the very meaning of the word "idea", that is culled from the Greek *idein*, meaning "to see" (p. xiii). In other words, the authors diligently go beyond celebrated names such as Apple and Google to the mundane nooks and corners of organizations to stress that ideas matter to everyone, be it hotel workers, people in sales and marketing, teachers, engineers, consultants and "others who get ahead not just by working hard but also by thinking hard" (p. xiv). With the contention that these "idea professionals" compete and collaborate more effectively when they know how to find and handle ideas, the authors are categorical in their observation regarding the one basic strategy of those who do well in the task: they

go Hunting (p. xiv).

All the more reason to join the Hunt, eh?!

The title and sub-title of the book clarify the authors' position that high-value ideas are not the creations of some genius mind but are already out there in the wide world, waiting to be discovered and "shaped into an innovation" (p. 4). What better illustration to prove this point than the techno-marketing success of the iPod? The scroll wheel that marked out Apple's music player-on-the-go from other mp3 ones was the brainwave of a marketing executive, Phil Schiller, who borrowed the feature from a range of electronic products dating back to the 1980s. The words of the great inventor, Thomas Edison, who finds a pride of place in the book, have been appropriated by the authors – he is said to have described his search for solutions as "the Hunt" (p. 4).

The introductory chapter begins with "the intersecting stories of two passionate Idea Hunters. One is legendary; the other may well become so." (p. 1). Walt Disney, the legend, and Puneet Nanda, the president and CEO of California-based dental hygiene company Dr Fresh, are, according to the authors, in the business of "selling happiness". The stories of how they got their inspirations from very unlikely sources set the tone for the book.

One interesting feature of the book that has caught this reviewer's eye is the gleanings of wise sayings. For instance, the authors paraphrase Sam Walton thus: curiosity will take you further toward your goals than cleverness or even brilliance (p. 5). The book is strewn with gems such as this! Take an observation and cull it into a cracker of a one-liner. Memorable quotes of famous persons are rife! For example, Aristotle's "What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing" (p. 73). Or, the people at IDEO who put it very well: "Innovation begins with an eye" (p. 75). We could as well collate a set of quotable quotes from the book!! This, too, could count as its valuable contribution!

The gist of the book is in its I-D-E-A: a set of four principles that help anybody become an Idea Hunter.

The "I" stands for "being *Interested*". Being interested in the world around us is deemed more important than merely being interesting to others (i.e., trying to impress people with our knowledge).

"D" represents Diversification – an openness to as many diverse sources of ideas as possible. In building this point, the authors quote the founder of Boston Beer Company, Jim Koch, who said when interviewed by them: "My sense was that once I started looking for business ideas, they were everywhere. It's sort of like radio frequency. You're surrounded by radio waves, but if you're not tuning into them, you're not going to receive them" (p. 47). This principle also stresses the importance of what sociologists term "weak ties" – relationships with persons in different sets of circles organizationally or professionally. "

"E" calls for Exercising the "idea muscles all the time" (p. 6). Developing the skill of observation and keeping handy a system of recording, filing away various observations for retrieval at the opportune time, the importance of prototyping, or "tangibilizing" an idea, – these are necessary for "mastering the habits of the Hunt" (the title of Chapter Four).

Finally, "A" stands for Agility: keeping the ideas in flow, developing the right ambience to enable this, finding one's "informal bosses" (the ones outside the usual circle of contacts, who can help guide you toward a well-developed idea), collating and killing off ideas periodically.

Two of the most important chapters (in this reviewer's opinion) have not been touched upon yet. The authors do not directly jump into their I-D-E-A concept after the introductory mollification that Idea Hunting is for all and sundry. The introductory chapter ends with the note that the reader should be "ready to unlearn" (p. 7). Before expounding upon the I-D-E-A principles, the authors implore the reader to "know your gig" (Chapter 1, pp. 11-21). They explain the use of the term thus: "Our notion of the gig is much broader. It's closer to one's personal brand or professional identity, even to the sense of vocation that many people seek to nurture. We're talking about your gig in life, or, more specifically, in your professional life." (p. 11). It may be pertinent to quote further as the authors make their position clear: "A gig is not defined by someone's line of work, much less by a job title. It's not even a formal specialization, [...]. A product developer's gig is not product development; rather it might be to encourage the free flow of ideas in a unit or organization, to help build a culture of conversation. A sales associate's gig is not sales; it might instead rest on a capacity for empathy, a talent for getting beneath the surface and understanding a customer's needs" (p. 12). The authors draw lessons from two disparate sources to get to the questions of identifying one's gig:

1. What is it that constantly grabs my interest and sparks my curiosity?

2. What am I good at? And what do I want to be great at?

3. And where's the market for this? (p. 16).

The other important chapter comes in at the very end, just before an epilogue on Henry Thoreau. Chapter Six, *Create Great Conversations*, emphasizes the use of conversations to "get ideas moving", the way Walt Disney did (p. 130). The authors are clear on the role of conversations: "Conversations are building blocks of innovation, ways to move an idea from origination to application. [...] To create successful conversation, make sure you're sending the right signals to your conversation partners, letting them know you're interested in a real exchange of ideas" (p. 132). Differentiating between idea-busters and idea-builders as well as understanding the value of a naïve question are important traits that effective Idea Hunters develop consciously. It would be fitting to end this review with a selection from this chapter that drives home the point about the importance of conversations. "Conversations are complex animals. When you speak with someone, you are encountering the thoughts of not just that person but also, indirectly, those of the untold numbers of people with whom your discussion partner has spoken in the past, people whose words and thoughts have become integrated into her own words and thoughts. In turn, you're also speaking indirectly to the people with whom she will have future conversations. In one exchange, therefore, you could be receiving ideas from many people and influencing the thoughts of many others." (p. 140). No wonder, the "best advice" the authors "offer to someone embarking on the Hunt consists of just three words: begin the conversation" (p. 141).

This academician-reviewer cannot but help compare the book with an article that appeared in the April 2007 issue of *Harvard Business Review*. Written by the then President and CEO of Steelcase, James P. Hackett, "Preparing for the perfect product launch" proposed a four-phase, critical thinking style of product development. These four phases, according to Hackett, are "think", "set the point of view", "plan to implement" and "implement". Hackett had argued for a change from, what he termed, a "merely "doing" culture to a "think-before-doing" culture". This reviewer welcomes academic discussion on how well the two works complement each other. After all, Boynton and Fischer have exhorted us to go … idea hunting!

A short self-test on each facet of the four principles rounds up the book and gives it just that bit more enticement for practitioners! The authors make it a point to clarify that it is not the score that matters since "Idea Hunting isn't a test to be passed. It's a lifetime habit to be developed and practiced — every day" (p. 150).