Why Exploring Absurd Ideas Is Essential to Your Success

By putting mental energy into “ridiculous” notions, we open our minds to real possibilities.

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Consider for a moment this mind-expanding business idea: Our society is increasingly obsessed by what ingredients should be left out of our diet, be it sugar, caffeine, meat, gluten, or milk. So, what if we take this trend to its seemingly logical extreme? It could lead to a whole new way of marketing and consuming food.

The concept is to open a sandwich shop chain that offers a single type of very bland sandwiches, consisting only of bread, lettuce and mustard. However, the sandwiches would be divided and displayed in different, tantalizing categories such as “Sandwich *without* Prosciutto and Parmesan,” “Sandwich *without* Seafood Salad” and “Sandwich *without* Eggplant and Avocado Cream.” This would give customers the option to decide exactly which potentially harmful delicacies they want to be excluded from the sandwich they consume.

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Now imagine the end result: Once customers embrace the concept, they will get to enjoy the experience of visualizing a delicious sandwich of their choosing, without the unhealthy side effects of actually consuming it. The guilt of consumption will be replaced by the empowering joy of

abstention. The dawn of a whole new culinary revolution! And what's more, a very high-margin and highly-scalable business.

Do you find this idea absurd? You most probably do. But then think about how absurd the idea of 'mobile phones' must have sounded in the early 1990s, when phones were still attached to objects and not carried around by people. Yet they proliferated so quickly that less than 25 years later, there were already more mobile phones in the world than people. Or how ridiculous the notion of a circus that replaces live animals with elements of ballet and theatre must have seemed to Barnum & Bailey when Cirque du Soleil first started. But after 146 years, "The Greatest Show on Earth" ceased operations last year, while Cirque du Soleil, founded by two Canadian street performers in 1984, is captivating audiences worldwide with 20 concurrent productions. The same "absurd" label can initially be attributed to an ongoing stream of visionary entrepreneurs and seminal innovations, be it ride sharing, commercial space travel, or urban farming.

Albert Camus, the Nobel Prize-winning French author and philosopher, observed: "The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth." Which is why future-shaping entrepreneurs are not afraid to probe the absurd – in fact, they embrace it. By definition, they are disruptors, agitators, challengers of the status quo and naturally excel at asking tradition-shattering "What if?" questions.

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In the 1990s, I founded and ran a financial software company in Central Europe. The fall of communism created a perfectly fertile environment for entrepreneurship due to the momentous transition of the entire region economically, politically and culturally. As such, my company pioneered a market for analytic solutions that did not previously exist there and was at the forefront of shaping its future.

As a way of challenging myself to continuously push the boundaries of my business, I would make market observations and then mentally stretch them to their humorous extreme. For example, a dominant topic in the late ’90s was Y2K compatibility. Software companies around the world were scrambling to assure clients that their systems would handle the switch to the new millennium without a glitch. Which got me thinking: “What if my company came out with a Y3K compatible software, supported by a 100%, double-your-money-back guarantee? It would be a bold step, but customers would surely appreciate our long-term commitment to excellence.” Of course, in one sense this was just silly musing. But in another sense, it was the very impulse that sparked a deep reflection on how to achieve lasting relevance for my customers.

How about you? To what extent do you explore the realm of the absurd as a way of generating important insights for growing your business or starting new ones? Simply having a sense of humorous curiosity will unlock a continuous burst of stimulating concepts. Let them be outrageous at first, knowing that each is the potential seed of a future-shaping business idea.

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You can use exaggerated observations about prevailing norms or funny takes on customer experiences as your trigger. This should not be a random exercise you do, but rather an integral part of your approach to smart strategy formulation. You can find the absurd on display at StandUpStrategist.com. Launched last year, Stand-Up Strategist is the first rating platform dedicated to recognizing the important role of humor in business and providing a central resource for its purposeful application. Among SUS rating criteria is “Opportunistic Absurdity,” which seeks to capture the extent to which seemingly farfetched concepts actually contain the nucleus of a breakthrough business idea.

Here is one more farcical rumination to inspire you. I find dry-cleaning prices to be obscenely high. If you think about it, you buy a $50 pair of dress pants then pay $7.50 to have it dry-cleaned. In other words, you pay fifteen percent of the purchase price just to have the garment cleaned once. Using the same ratio, you would pay three thousand dollars for every car wash if you owned a $20,000 vehicle. I guess the expression “Getting taken to the cleaners” is no joke. Such a completely disproportionate cleaning-cost/purchase-price ratio seems like a strong justification for introducing a line of eco-friendly, disposable garments. Or self-ironing clothes. Or simply a vastly re-imagined dry-cleaning experience.

In an environment of constant change, standing still is not an option. To be successful, entrepreneurs must continuously shape the future, rather than risk becoming its casualty. Which is where the critical role of exploring the absurd comes in. A pinch of constant, comic inquisitiveness keeps your senses alert, facilitates invaluable insights, and keeps you front and center of what will come next.

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