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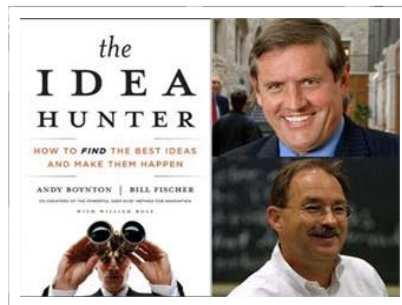
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Guru Review: The Idea Hunter

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Apr 26, 2011 - Riddle me this: What do Cornflakes, the microwave oven, Post-Its, the Walkman, Teflon, Scotchgard, Aspartame, Rogaine, Kitty Litter, Ivory soap, Velcro, Rayon and Skateboards all have in common?

8 4

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Answer: None were planned! All were unexpected treasures found by observant individuals paying attention to what was right in front of them. While trying to get one thing right...the thing turned left, and they followed it.

Jim Jenks liked surfing, and he liked pizza. What he didn't like was the flimsy trunks for surfing and the "blah" shorts sold in stores for going out to eat. One day, at a pizza joint in Encinitas, California, he looked down and said, "Look at this tablecloth. This print would make a great pair of trunks." That was the day multi-million dollar Ocean Pacific Sunwear was formed.

When Harley-Davidson sales dropped in the mid 1980s, CEO Vaughn Beals required all senior managers to make cross-country trips on Harleys, go to biker rallies, and even socialize with the Hell's Angels. Willie Davidson, grandson of the founder and VP of Styling, noticed almost every Harley had been modified and customized. He adopted the best ideas he saw and incorporated them into future designs: chopping the chassis, adding chrome, painting flames and sculpting gas tanks.

That's the power of observation. That's the role of a key skill I honed in the eight years I spent with Toyota—called *genchi genbutsu* and meaning "go look, go see"—in innovation. That's how both the Lexus and Scion brands were born.

And that's the concept at the heart of *The Idea Hunter: How to Find the Best Ideas and Make Them Happen*, by Andy Boynton and Bill Fischer, with William Bole.

Big Idea:

Great business ideas do not spring from innate creativity, or necessarily from the minds of brilliant people. Rather, they come to those who are in the habit of looking for such ideas—all around them, all the time.

Key Takeaways:

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Idea hunters don't buy into the notion that the only great idea is a purely original one; they understand that game-changing ideas are "already out there, waiting to be spotted and then shaped into an innovation." The authors identify four key principles needed to become a great hunter.

Interested

Intellectual curiosity, together with an awareness that game-changing ideas can hit you at any time, is essential to the hunt. Clarence Birdseye, the "father of frozen foods," was on a fur-trading expedition in Canada when he discovered the concept of preserving foods by freezing them. Birdseye saw how freshly caught fish and duck, frozen quickly in the snow, retained their taste and texture. Because of his curiosity, Birdseye revolutionized the way we preserve and sell food in the United States. An industry was born.

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Diverse

Great ideas can be found everywhere, but the big payoffs are frequently found in the sources usually ignored by colleagues and competitors. The best hunters make a point of broadening their intellectual bandwidth and scouting a wider array of sources, industries and specialties. Jack Hughes, founder of the global software company TopCoder, looked to the tournament structure of the NCAA to figure out a system of organizing software competitions, in which coders compete to come up with creative designs and solutions. These competitions have produced a new way of identifying the best coders in the country, and many prestigious software firms now ask prospective employees to get a TopCoder rating before applying for a job.

Exercised







Ideas are all around us, but they remain untapped unless we engage fully with the world around us. Good hunters don't wait for a problem to arise or for the monthly brainstorming session to seek out ideas; they search habitually and continually. One key to being exercised is to hone your observation skills. Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton constantly prowled through the stores of his competitors, taking notes on how frequently the retailer ordered a certain kind of merchandise.

Agile

Ideas are worth little unless they're in motion, shifting in response to fresh data and conversation, evolving through stages of reflection and routine prototyping. For that reason, agility is required. In the early 1950s, Mary Kay Ash was in the business of selling mops and other household cleaning products at house parties, but at one party, she noticed the remarkably smooth complexions on the faces of the women there, which they owed to a homemade facial cream offered by their friend, the hostess. Ash's agility and willingness to keep an idea in flow, to let it stretch and ripen in combination with other ideas, spawned a new market for home-based sales. The result: a cosmetics empire of more than two million sales people worldwide.

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Liked Best:


The Idea Hunter has great case studies, from Walt Disney to Jim Koch, founder of the Boston Beer Company. I also like the "IdeaWork" sections throughout the book, with specific recommendations on how to become an idea hunter, such as "selling the best hour of the day to yourself" for continued learning, "how to take on the characteristics of a generalist" rather than a specialist, "developing and maintaining a portfolio of idea sources" and "how to launch a fully developed idea."











What Others Are Saying:


"Hunting is an apt metaphor. Ideas exist everywhere. The trick is knowing where to look for them and how to capture them. Boynton and Fischer tell us how." -Ron Sargent, *Chairman & CEO, Staples, Inc.*


Tags: *william bole, guru review, the idea hunter, creativity, matthew e. may, andy boynton, innovation, bill fischer*

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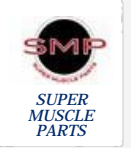
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