



How To
SPARK, NURTURE,
AND LAUNCH
*Your Sustainable
Business Idea*

HEART OF WARABA

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So, you want to be a sustainable entrepreneur?

It all starts with an idea.

I got lucky with my first company. While repairing a roof on a sunny day, a couple of friends suggested starting a solar company. That was all the prompting I needed. I went home that night with the flame of creativity burning brightly and laid out the vision and business model of the company. Soon after, the three of us were meeting weekly to plan the business and within six months of the bright idea, we incorporated a solar company.

Sometimes ideas come all at once. Other times, we need to prime the pump to generate a good idea. And sometimes, the well of innovation runs dry.

This guide is for people who want to launch a company to work at the crossroads of sustainability and business. Whether you already have an idea or are starting from scratch, this document offers practical suggestions at each step of the process for ideating and launching a company. It is based on my first-hand experience as a serial entrepreneur and investor in startups, as well as a promoter of sustainable entrepreneurship globally through a nonprofit organization, Heart of Waraba.

I am excited to share my ideas with you and hope this short guide makes a difference for you on your entrepreneurial journey.

STEP #1:

SPARKING YOUR IDEA

Practical Tips to Create a Spark

After selling my first company in the energy sector nearly a decade ago, I was excited to launch another enterprise in the renewable space. I thought I had all the ingredients to conceive my next company - expertise in my field, a network of support, and the experience of having already traveled the entrepreneur's journey. So, I was surprised and frustrated that like a writer with writer's block, business ideas did not flow forth.

So I stepped back and explored where entrepreneurial ideas come from in the first place and how to create that spark that could be developed into a business opportunity. That exploration resulted in the follow suite of practical tips that I have used over the years that also may help your creative juices flow:



1 *Live Your Life and Carry a Pen*

Most good ideas come from living one's life (e.g. working, attending school, cleaning your house, traveling), and simply paying attention. We all come up with fleeting ideas of ways to fulfill unmet needs or opportunities to create a healthier planet. For most of us, however, the brainstorming slips away like a dream after waking up, and a few hours later our brilliant idea is lost forever. The trick of the innovator is to simply write the idea down, no matter how bland or outrageous, as soon as it comes. Some entrepreneurs even carry a journal to capture their good ideas.

2 *Take a Walk*

Or go for a bike ride, do yoga, or whatever brings you into the flow state. It is no secret that clearing one's minds through relaxation and/or physical activity, especially in nature, creates the space for creativity and innovation. Don't try too hard. Ironically, the moment that you stop trying to come up with a sustainable business idea is when the ideas often come.



3 *Inventory Your Strengths*

Working from your strengths can be a platform for business ideation. What are you good at? For example, is your strength social media, math, or physical work? Are you a people person? Inventory your strengths and see what ideas flow forth. The VIA Institute offers a free online strength based character assessment.

5 *Be in Community*

In contrast to the previous ideas, sometimes community can spark our creativity. Talk with others about your dreams, aspirations, and passions, and listen to their dreams as well. In the dialogue and energy between you and your friends, family, or coworkers, the seeds of a business idea might emerge. Some entrepreneurs like to do such sharing and brainstorming with a white board to capture and build on ideas.





Write Down 15 *6 Ideas*

Whether in community or alone, challenge yourself to write down 15 ideas related to an area of interest. Say you are inspired by solar energy and you want to start a business in that field, make a list of ideas (e.g. cleaning solar panels, using drones to photograph houses with solar panels, helping local solar companies with marketing an promotion, etc.) The struggle of coming up with 15 ideas forces one to dig deep and sometimes it can be that very last idea which is the spark of a new business idea.

7 Ordinary & Outrageous

When you are in group, here is a trick to help draw you and your fellow brainstormers out of ordinary thinking and step into a creative mindset. Before starting your typical brainstorming of normal ideas, challenge yourselves to develop 3 outrageous ideas first. The crazier the better, e.g. building a super-suction vacuum attached to the underside of your car to suck up litter on the side of the road or installing a wind turbine atop the Eiffel Tower. Coming up with outrageous ideas can be fun, stimulating, and worth a good laugh. Then, when you move on to brainstorming real business ideas, you may be just a little more creative than usual.

8 Yes And.

Like the previous outrageous exercise, the “yes and” game can promote the inner innovator for you and your partner. Here is how to play: The first person states a business idea, even something mundane. The second person listens to the first person’s idea, and then says, “yes and...” and adds to the idea. Then, back to the first person who ups the stakes again with their own “yes and...” and adds to the snowballing concept.

For example, Person #1 might say, “I am going to collect aluminum cans and sell them to the scrap yard.” Person #2 then might add, “Yes *and* I am going to flatten some of the aluminum cans and creatively tape them together with duct tape to make a funky purse.” Then, Person #1 comes back with, “Yes *and* I am going to start a clothing line made with household recyclable material.” After 4 or 5 turns back and forth, the brainstorm will be so big that the pair of you will be single-handedly solving climate change. In that back and forth, there may be the seed of an idea. Or at the very least, the outrageousness of the exercise can stimulate the creative thinking process.

9 *Bad to Good*

This is another good exercise to do in pairs. As a first step, each person thinks of a bad but practical business idea that would harm the environment. For example, here is a terrible idea for the environment: battery-powered, heated pizza boxes to keep the food warm during delivery, with the box and batteries all to be thrown away after delivery. After each person has their bad idea, then swap the ideas. Take 10 minutes to identify ways to improve the other person’s idea to make their business model more sustainable. For example, for the battery-powered pizza box, there could be a deposit and take back program so the batteries can be reclaimed and reused and the boxes recycled. This exercise shows that even with small tweaks, bad ideas can become good.

Sometimes ideation is a struggle while other times new ideas can flow like a river. Either way, embrace wherever you are in the process and have faith that the right idea will come to you just when it will be most useful.





The Idea Factory

Another way that can help you stimulate your ideas is to reflect on your motivation for innovation. In the spirit that we are all brilliant and have something to contribute, here is a tool, which I call the “Idea Factory” that may be useful to cultivate your own eureka moment for business ideas to help solve climate change and create a healthy planet.

Eureka is Greek for “I found it.” It is what Greek mathematician Archimedes said 2000 years ago, when he stepped into a tub of water and realized for the first time that the volume of water displaced equals the volume of the object submerged.

We all have had “eureka” moments, as surely as we have experienced a dry spell of creativity. Although we cannot necessarily use pressure to force out new ideas, it may be helpful to consider our perspectives as innovators to help prime the creative pump. In observing entrepreneurs, I have noticed four types of people in the factory of creating new ideas. Some innovations are motivated by passion for people, while others are driven by passion for technology and products. Meanwhile, some people see what is wrong with the world and try to fix it, while others innately build on what is already working. Using these two parameters, see the four different styles of innovation below: What is your job at the Idea Factory? Are you a Visionary, Hero, Dreamer, or Fixer? Can thinking about your style as an innovator help you be more creative?

The Fixer: The Fixer sees what is wrong with the world and is passionate about creating products to solve problems.

The Hero: The Hero sees what is wrong with the world, and is inspired to help people.

The Dreamer: The Dreamer appreciates what is working in the world and loves improving products to make them even better.

The Visionary: The Visionary’s idea is born from what is right with the world and her passion for people.

STEP #2:

NURTURING YOUR IDEA

Why-Who-What

Once the lightning bolt of innovation has struck, what happens next?

An idea is like a seed. It needs to be nurtured if it is to successfully germinate into something that can bear fruit. My strong recommendation is that you begin the nurturing process right away or no more than 48 hours after coming up with the initial idea, while the context of where the idea came from is still fresh. If you wait too long, a few words in your journal or note-taking software may lose their meaning and vibrancy.

To nurture the seed of your idea, ask yourself the Why-Who-What questions related to your idea:

- **Why** does this idea inspire me?
- **Who** are the customers and how can my idea make a difference for them?
- **What** is the product or service that I may create from this idea?



Your responses to these three questions may eventually evolve into a company mission, value proposition, and business model. For now, simply use these questions to flesh out the idea, capturing the responses in a couple of paragraphs. Once you have done this initial nurturing work, you can take the next steps now or set the idea aside so it lays fallow until you have the time and/or resources to pursue it.

For example, several years ago, I was struck with the idea to train sustainable entrepreneurs in launching and growing companies. I wrote the idea down, and I brainstormed the following answers to the questions above:

Why? I am inspired because I believe empowering sustainable entrepreneurs to be successful is critical to solving climate change.

Who? The difference that I can make for the potential clients to navigate the challenging and sometimes lonely path of being an entrepreneur.

What? The service would be highly interactive, be accessible by video conference, and be accompanied by a written curriculum.



As it happens, consumed with other endeavors, I have not pursued this business opportunity. If I decide at some point in the future that the time is right, the idea is defined enough for me to pick up and pursue it.

In addition to answering the Why-Who-What questions above, another useful tool that I recommend to help during this phase of idea development is the Idea Napkin developed by the Straight Up Business Institute. See <https://www.straightupbusiness.institute/tools/idea-napkin/>.

Talk to Customers

After reflecting on the Why-Who-What questions, an often overlooked step in nurturing a sustainable business idea is to talk to potential customers. It is critical to test your theories on what customers may want by getting their feedback and insight early in the process. For example, if you plan to open up a storefront that sells clothes made from organic cotton, interview people near the potential shop location to learn about their desires and suggestions for such a store.

If you want to launch a consulting firm to advise companies on reducing waste, take a few potential clients out to lunch to solicit their ideas without the intention of selling them anything. Or, if you are hoping to create sustainably-sourced toys for a mass market, use social media to get reactions and input from the “crowd”.



I promise that talking with potential clients early will offer a big payback. Your business ideas will be better after the effort. Or, if your idea was not on the mark, it is invaluable to learn about its deficiencies early on before significant investments of time, money, and your personal reputation.

STEP #3:

LAUNCHING A SUSTAINABLE COMPANY

Two Common Challenges

There is endless excellent advice on the internet on how to launch a company, if you google “launch” or “start-up” a business. I encourage you to research and read a lot to learn from many different perspectives. Also, talk with entrepreneurs face to face in your own community so you can learn their stories, hear what worked and benefit from understanding their pitfalls. Better yet, join a local entrepreneurial community, such as Million Cups, to get the opportunity to meet active entrepreneurs and even hear their pitches.

For this quick guide, I am focusing my contribution on the topic of launching a company to two common areas of challenge:



1 Finding a Partner or Flying Solo

I am an advocate of going into business with a partner or even two. Granted, there are many advantages of being the sole proprietor of your enterprise: you get to define the vision, make the decisions, and control the cash.

For some, flying solo is the best way to go. However, if you are hoping to build a significant or scalable company that could include hiring a large staff, raising capital, or managing multiple divisions to service customers, there are strong advantages to working with a partner, especially if you are launching your first company.

Partners can be crucially helpful in developing the company strategy, bringing an array of skills to the undertaking, and divvying up the execution workload. There are two additional benefits of partners that I find especially valuable. One is that entrepreneurs often must make profound and even existential decisions that involve significant amounts of money, and it lightens the load to share such decision-making with others. Second, many CEO's of young companies report that it can be lonely to be the leader of an entrepreneurial company, and being in business with partners can be an antidote to a feeling of isolation.

2 *Minimum Viable Product (MVP)*

What is the least cost, smallest version of your product or service that you can offer into the marketplace? By creating an MVP, you provide a viable version of your product or service to your customer even though it may be short of the full envisioned product with all its bells and whistles. There are two key advantages of creating an MVP:

Frugality:

Unless you are starting off with personal monetary wealth or a deep-pocket backer, chances are you need to use your financial resources frugally. Even if you plan to raise capital from friends and family, angels, or professional investors, such funds never seem to be invested in the hoped-for timeline. An MVP allows you to test market your product or service early in the arc of your entrepreneurial journey, before you blow through more money than necessary designing every last detail. Also, you may be able to sell your MVP to customers, providing early revenue to the company.

Learnings:

Product and service development for an early-stage company is often an interactive process between the company and your customer. Creating an MVP allows you to get invaluable feedback from customers that can be used to refine your offering or pivot all together.





COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

of Sustainable Entrepreneurship

It can be a challenge to create a company that is both profitable and helps heal the planet. As you launch your company, I encourage you to see your commitment to these twin goals as an asset, not a burden.

In fact, there are competitive advantages associated with sustainable entrepreneurship, and although not a scientific assessment, over the years I have observed three bottom-line benefits to sustainable enterprises:

Awareness

Team

Customers

1. Awareness

Self-awareness is the first competitive advantage of sustainable entrepreneurship. Being driven by a purpose greater than one's fame or fortune can bring self-awareness, clarity, and focus to the entrepreneur. A self-aware CEO is more innovative, visionary, and a better leader than those without a higher purpose. These traits can empower leaders to guide their companies at every stage of development and navigate past pitfalls that would be the undoing of less visionary competitors.

Adapting Albert Einstein's famous quote, stemming global warming and other environmental challenges cannot be solved by the same thinking that created our current challenges. The sustainable entrepreneur is inherently working in an innovative space that requires out of the box thinking, and the demand for creativity.



2. Team

The second benefit to the entrepreneur is a strengthened sense of team. Pride is the term for a company of lions. A pride also means a feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction as a result of one's achievements or those of someone with whom one is closely associated. People, especially younger folks, want to feel a sense of pride about working at companies that align with their values.

An alignment of company mission and individual values can motivate employees to be loyal and hardworking. Also, belief in a company's mission can help equip employees to manage the inevitable roller coaster (or as one renewable entrepreneur calls it, a "solar coaster") of launching and growing a company. A strong, motivated team is critical to creating a durable, profitable enterprise.

3. Customers

The third benefit is customer loyalty. There is a growing global marketplace of customers who value sustainability and want to buy products and services from sustainable companies. A sustainable business creates instant admiration and connection with customers. In the Internet era, a company's good reputation is a foundation for expanding into new markets and growing the company. Customers who have both a good experience with a company and share their values of sustainability will roar for more. In fact, the customers of mission-oriented companies can create passionately loyal and vocal customers who become the driving force for growth.



Conclusion

Welcome to the ranks of sustainability entrepreneurship. Not long ago, using some broad assumptions, I estimated that there are more than 8 million sustainable entrepreneurs across the planet. Eight million people like you who want to use the power of entrepreneurship to not only create great companies, but contribute to solving our environmental challenges such as climate change. With 8 million of us, sustainable entrepreneurship is not just the tip of the spear that brings innovative ideas to market; we are a global economic force in our own right.

My hope is that the practical set of ideas in this quick guide helps you to spark, nurture, and launch your sustainable idea into a thriving business. I welcome your feedback and ideas.

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