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Turn On Your Light Bulb **How to Convert an Idea into Reality**

Walt Disney was a creative legend.

by Joe Dinoffer

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To paraphrase Disney, *People are driven to **Create, to Contribute, and to Count.*** Think about these three C's and you'll realize that we are most inspired and satisfied when we are creating something or in a creative environment, contributing something meaningful to someone else, or feeling like we count or are needed.

Of the many creative legends in tennis, I think of visionary leaders like Billie Jean King, Dennis Van Der Meer and Vic Braden. There are numerous others, but each of these individuals has a lifetime track record of thinking outside the box to make tennis more fun and popular for players and coaches alike. Among many other achievements, Billie Jean was breaking gender barriers long before it was in style. Dennis became the coach of coaches and created PTR, by far the most international tennis coaching organization in the world. The ever enlightening and humorous Vic Braden passionately conducted studies, and was the first to paint colorful target zones on tennis courts nearly 40 years ago.

While there are always standouts like these, we all have light bulbs just waiting to be turned on. The purpose of this article is to encourage creativity and provide some practical guidance on how to convert an idea to reality. Ideas fit into many different categories, and each has its own unique set of conditions and requirements for them to see the light of day. For this tennis specific article, I will address the following three categories of ideas:

1. Articles, Books and DVDs
2. Training Aids and Target Systems
3. Court Equipment and Accessories

1. Articles, Books and DVDs

Articles

If you are passionate about a topic related to teaching and coaching tennis, a good arena to test your idea is to write articles for regional or national magazines. To start on a smaller scale, how about a newsletter for your own students or club members? And, if you establish a common thread in your articles, remember that later on you can use them to form the basis of a book or DVD. For example, a script for a one hour DVD, is approximately 8,000-10,000 words. A full page article is usually about 1,000 words. By using a common theme, you may have enough material for a DVD after writing 8-10 articles. Remember self help guru Stephen Covey? One of his principles is to "begin with the end in mind".

Books

In 1993, I decided to write my first book. It was about creating target areas to encourage tennis players through patterns of success, and building confidence to help them improve. At that time, the average teaching pro was using small bull's eye targets, like single cones, that could be hit successfully only a fraction of the time. I was excited about the possibility of making a contribution to tennis teaching. Seeking advice, I called Al Secunda, because he had already published the book *Ultimate Tennis*. His comments proved invaluable. He said, "**You need to know up front that you are writing your book because you are passionate about writing it, not because you think you might make any money selling it.**" I took Al's advice to heart, but combined his guidance with a common-

sense business approach, and packaged the nearly 100 page drill book with a training aid called the Ropezone. It was the launch of my company. There are lessons to be learned here.

First, tennis books in general do not sell well. In my case, I anticipated that I wasn't going to sell that many, and figured it was logical to add value to the book to raise the price tag. But, any way you look at it, **if you really want to write your book to fulfill a dream, just do it!** But remember to proceed with your eyes fully open as you will learn a lot along the way. Chances are you will have to finance the production and printing (known as self-publishing), and you will also have to be your own promoter. Books simply do not sell themselves. The good news is that once you write your first book, subsequent books are much easier to put together. Today there are options to the expense of printing physical copies. Electronic downloads from websites are quite common, although I personally recommend printing 'real' hard copies rather than a 'virtual' book in order to enhance your career and personal sense of accomplishment.

DVDs

Compared to books, DVDs are generally more expensive to produce, but can also be sold for a higher price. Like books, however, think twice and be realistic about the potential sales versus the expense. A well produced book or DVD will usually sell 200-300 copies a year with a middle-of-the-road marketing effort. That marketing effort will incur expenses, such as a website design and maintenance, traveling to coaches' conventions to work a booth, as well as the time and preparation to line up speaking engagements for exposure and to establish your credibility.

Every week, I am contacted by tennis pros who have a product idea, have written a book or produced a DVD. They always have passion, but typically need direction on how to make their idea a reality. Many are simply rehashing old ideas, but some are truly quite innovative. All of them are still challenging to bring to reality and market.

2. Training Aids and Target Systems

If a tennis training aid works really well, a player will only use it 5-10 minutes a day for just a few days! This is why the vast majority of training aid customers are coaches, not players, since coaches can use the product for multiple students. Over the years, we've all seen products suddenly show up on the market and then disappear just as quickly. Many of them were good ideas, but where are they now? There are dozens that come to mind, ranging from \$20,000 ball machines to a new and inexpensive ways to pick up tennis balls.

Each one learned the hard way about tennis training aids. The market is fairly small and the sales price of the product must be very reasonable. Simply put, the inventor's sales expectations were not realistic. They lost money, and could not afford to continue manufacturing, marketing and selling their product.

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A few years ago, a man approached me with a good kinesthetic training aid. The only problem was that his enthusiasm overshadowed his ability to see the marketplace realistically. He invested in a patent, trademarked the name, diligently prepared graphics to package and advertise his product on a retail level. He even wrote and enthusiastically sang a jingle for his invention! He invested in showing the product at trade shows and undoubtedly manufactured hundreds, if not thousands. Today, they are certainly collecting dust in his garage. Was it a good product? Yes. Was the selling price reasonable? Yes. Could he sell enough of them to justify the costs of bringing it to the marketplace? No.

As a PTR Professional, I am 100% passionate about speeding up the learning process for tennis players with visual and kinesthetic tools. Again and again, studies have proven that these tools are 300-400% more effective in teaching the motor skills required in movement sports as compared to just verbal instructions. The conclusion is that if you have an idea, be realistic about your business related expectations, and only move forward after carefully weighing your options. Don't make the common mistake of investing money in product development before carefully researching your marketplace.

3. Court Equipment and Accessories

Nets, windscreens, ball machines, backboards, benches, court rollers, scorekeepers, umpire chairs and more, fit into the category of Court Equipment and Accessories. Like training aids and target systems, this is a very specialized market. However, the items in this category are more essential to clubs and tennis facilities and therefore higher sales can be projected. However, because of the higher sales potential, there is also more competition. The companies that have endured sell not just one item, but a whole product line. If you have an idea for a single product, being aware of the challenges in advance will help you make the right decisions in bringing your idea to the marketplace.

Words of Caution

Sliced Bread Syndrome; almost everyone who has an idea thinks s/he has a new way to slice bread and that everyone in the world will love it. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. You'd probably have a better chance to win the lottery! First of all, if your target customer is a tennis teacher or coach, remember that this is a very limited audience. From my experience, only about 25% of certified teachers invest even a small amount of money each year in training aids, target systems, or improved court equipment. The result is that many inventors end up with a garage full of products that they produced and hoped to sell, but couldn't.

One day I would like to give a seminar highlighting all the ideas that have crossed my desk. Some are actually very creative, some are absolutely impractical, and others are downright silly. The reality is that few are marketable. I could name a dozen seemingly great ideas that ended up frustrating the inventor with dismal sales. The point of sharing this dose of reality is not to make potential inventors pessimistic, but rather to encourage proper research and planning. In carpentry, the adage is "measure twice, cut once." The same holds true when you have an idea and want to bring it into the public domain.

Protecting Your Idea

Patents, Trademarks and Copyrights

(Note: The comments in this section are for general discussion purposes only. The information in this article is not intended as legal advice.) Rather than paraphrase what is readily available online, please visit www.uspto.gov for the full reference website of the United States government on patents, trademarks and copyrights. Obviously, each country has its own applicable governing laws for idea protection. After consulting with numerous patent and intellectual property attorneys over the years, and after obtaining my own patents, getting trademarks for dozens of product names, and copyrighting numerous written works, I can only share my personal philosophy. Keep it simple, protect yourself by registering your products, but keep your costs to a minimum. Generally speaking, it is not worth spending \$10,000 on a patent attorney to get a design or utility patent on a tennis training aid. The vast majority of the time, the sales and profitability simply do not justify that type of expense.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this article has been to share my personal experience with the journey of transforming ideas into reality. Your idea may be to bring a bicycle onto the court, turn it upside down, and have a student brush up on the free wheel to learn spin. Or, you may write a children's tennis story, print 1,000 copies and be happy to sell only 300 and give the rest away over the next five years. Or, you may propose an idea to a major racquet manufacturer that they should put a spot of Velcro on the top of all their recreational tennis racquets to make it easier for senior players to pick up balls instead of bending down. Or, you may work with an electronics research and development company to try to manufacture a tennis ball that beeps when it bounces or is hit to help vision impaired players enjoy tennis.

The marketplace limitations I shared in this article notwithstanding, remember Walt Disney's statement about our inherent desire to be in a creative environment. So, even if your idea does not give you overnight financial freedom, dream on and be innovative. Stand out from the crowd. Don't be afraid of failure. And, most of all, be passionate about your profession. After all, how many people get to "play" and teach a "game" for a living?

For a free two page guide on product development, email joe@oncourtffcourt.com and refer to this article.