

Put yourself in this picture:

We were on Mo'orea, in French Polynesia (often known as the Tahitian Islands), at a luxury resort where the bungalows are suspended over the water with a hatch in the floor so you can feed the fish underneath. There were ten of us seated around a conference table loaded with tropical fruit, fresh-squeezed juice, and coffee. The morning sun was streaming in, the weather was sublime, and the environment was perfect for a brilliant brainstorming session.

The other nine people had paid \$15,000 each and flown thousands of miles to have a three-day mastermind retreat with me. I began the session by going around the table, asking everyone to summarize the one big concept they would like to strategize during the retreat.

The first guy said he wanted to do a complete makeover of his website. The second person said she needed help with a title for her next book. The third person mentioned that he wanted some input on his next direct-mail campaign. It went on like this until it came back around to me. But before we go any further, if you really were around that table in Mo'orea right now—what would *you* say? Take a minute and really think about it.

*Because here's what happened next.*

I closed my eyes, took a slow, deep breath, and said, "I'm going to the fucking pool now. When you guys decide you want to actually have a mastermind and go after a *big* idea, then somebody come and get me."

Not sure what was said next, but after about ten minutes, one sheepish attendee came out and asked if I would rejoin the group.

*So what happened?*

Herd thinking happened. Like so often occurs in many situations, the person going first set the tone and everyone who followed unthinkingly shadowed the pattern. Of course, the interesting dynamic in this case was that these nine people were not random souls picked up at the bus stop. They were

all hypersuccessful, multimillionaire entrepreneurs who had invested a lot of money and time to be there to discover their next breakthrough.

You probably think they wouldn't fall prey to such disempowering thinking. But how did you reply to the question above? Was your answer really a big, bold, and breathtaking concept you wanted to mastermind on—or did you also default to some mundane tactic?

Even high achievers are not immune to being infected with herd thinking when they're members of a group. You'll see the same scenario if you start a meeting by asking people to go around the room giving their name and title, so everyone knows who's who. If the first person says, "Aldo Gonzalez, VP of quality control," everyone follows suit, your objective is accomplished, and you get down to work.

However, if the first person says, "Thanks, it's so great to be here. My name is Mary Marcus and I flew here from the Toronto division. My hobbies are embroidery and stamp collecting, and I'm really excited to be at this conference because I was just telling my sister last week that . . ."—you immediately know you're screwed. The intros you budgeted for five minutes will actually eat up twenty-five minutes of the ninety minutes you have.

### **The herd doesn't always follow the leader. Sometimes they simply follow whoever speaks first.**

These examples illustrate a very important lesson about our thought processes, showing how we often go on autopilot and waste the amazing brainpower we possess.

In the case of the South Pacific retreat, the first person made a mistake in his thinking—a mistake many other entrepreneurs fall prey to: believing success to be about the tactics. But the genuinely important stuff is never about the tactics—it's actually about the big idea. When you get the big idea right, the tactics become readily apparent.

To truly harness your Mad Genius, you have to resist the urge to begin with tactics. You must first step back and do some critical thinking: What is the desired outcome here? Who is the real target market? What are the actual benefits for the people in the target group? What's the big idea? What is the story that will communicate the big idea?

Very few entrepreneurs and, shockingly, even very few large, successful companies take the time to really do this. For evidence, look no further than

the literally billions of examples of horrible marketing we churn out, week after week.

No matter what kind of business you're in—sales and marketing are the engines that drive it. Every entrepreneur (and every manager who wants to think like an entrepreneur) has to at least be cognizant of what good marketing is and isn't. Yet it's alarming how many entrepreneurs—many of whom are bright, bold, and innovative—lose their ability for critical thinking, discernment, and even rationality when it comes to marketing. Many are totally ignorant of the subject, fobbing it off on someone else in their organization, if they are able to, or else an outside ad agency, hoping for the best.

The amount of dull, ineffective, and just plain ridiculous advertising out there is mind-numbing. Even worse, the biggest offenders are some of the largest brands in the world. You would think with huge creative teams and even bigger budgets, they'd be delivering a compelling, benefit-centered message, targeted to their best prospects. But if I have learned one universal truth about marketing, it is this:

**The bigger the budget, the more stupid shit will be green-lighted.**

A perfect example of this is beer advertising. A massive market, with billions of dollars spent in this category. Which means you'll see some of the most insipid, off-target, and downright wasteful advertising anywhere. (Although you have to give Anheuser-Busch creative points for having the chutzpah to promote themselves as "America's local brewery," since these days the multibillion-dollar conglomerate is actually owned by Belgian company InBev.)

We don't want to scan a code to see who was working on the assembly line the day our beer was bottled. And if your unique selling proposition is a wide hole in the top of the can—you probably should go back to the well and try again. Likewise if you think the most exciting thing about your beer is that I can punch an extra hole in the can with a can opener so the beer flows faster. Seriously? Can you imagine sitting in on the creative meeting where the big idea for the campaign was one of these?

Or how about the meeting where they had the brilliant concept to shape the can like a keg? And how many beer drinkers do you think were lying

awake at night, wishing their beer can would change colors to tell them if it was cold? Can't you tell that when you're holding it?

All of these multimillion- and multibillion-dollar campaigns miss the mark because they were created with a tactical approach instead of first finding the big idea. And, of course, when you're really brilliant, the big idea will be centered not around the amazing features of your product or service but around the amazing benefits it provides the customer.

It's just human nature that when we're asked to market something, we default to listing its features. If I give you a widget to sell, it seems logical to describe its color, its size, and the materials it's made of. But do that and you've fallen prey to herd thinking. No one really cares about the features of your drill bit; they just want a hole in their wall.

You have to go the next step and think about exactly what the widget will do for the prospect: the delightful joy it will bring her when she gets it or the cataclysmic consequences she will suffer if she doesn't buy it.

**The big idea should be the thing that grabs attention, attracts the tribe, or speaks directly to the prospect, but in the context of the benefit to her.**

It should be the mechanism in the copy platform that pulls things together, creates the story arc, and pulls the prospect through the message to reach the desired conclusion.

It's great if you have Kevin Durant in your Sprint commercial. But with no big idea, it's just him talking to a goofy kid in a tree house dream sequence and has no relation to the message of the campaign. It's almost as pointless as the millions of dollars that beef jerky company spent on their nonsensical "messing with Sasquatch" commercials.

The fact your car has a push-button start is not a big idea to base a campaign on. Neither is the fact that your minivan has a foot-activated hatch. These hint at potential benefits, but they're still just minor features and certainly not important enough to base entire campaigns on, which several automakers have done.

Going back to Sprint, over the last few years they've had some of the craziest and questionable advertisements as any major brand. Remember those commercials with James Earl Jones and Malcolm McDowell dramatizing text messages? The first one was clever and showed some potential. But then they got downright creepy. And *creepy* is way too kind a

word to describe the “family” campaign they were running as I was writing this, featuring a family with a French-speaking daughter and a father played by a gerbil in a fishbowl with a Yiddish accent. WTF! What I wouldn’t have given to be in that creative meeting and hear the logic behind that.

*Sometimes the big idea is little.*

I was working out at my gym the other day when I noticed one of the physical therapists there had set up his massage table in the middle of the gym and leaned a whiteboard against it, where he had written simply:

## **TELL ME WHAT HURTS**

How’s that for intriguing the prospect, grabbing attention, and creating a compelling headline?

Turns out his name is Ryan and he specializes in assisted myofascial release. I asked what it could do for my herniated disc, hoping to prolong my legendary (in my own mind at least) softball career. Ryan suggested he might be able to release some tension around the disc that was causing pain to radiate down my legs and offered to test some techniques on me. He did a ten-minute treatment, after which I immediately signed up for a series of five sessions at \$95 each.

You may be thinking that Ryan’s whiteboard and free sample idea won’t scale for a big business like yours. But I bet with a little critical thinking you could find a way to adapt something similar. (And I’ll wager Ryan booked more real business as a result of his zero-cost, two-hour campaign than Sprint booked with \$5 million worth of their talking gerbil commercials.) Even if you can’t replicate what Ryan did, you can build your marketing around a prospect-centered, benefit-driven platform. And you can have a big idea or theme that pulls everything together.

Of course, marketing is just one of many areas in which you can fall victim to herd thinking. It’s just as easy to disengage your critical thinking gear when evaluating potential markets, assessing new opportunities, and developing innovative products and in lots of other areas. The good news is once you really develop your Mad Genius, you’ll stop falling into habitual thinking and always approach every situation as a critical thinker, seeing possibilities instead of believing in . . .

## **THE BIG LIE**

Ask any hundred people what the opposite of success is, and ninety-nine will probably answer, “Failure.” But that’s the big lie.

The real opposite of success is not failure but mediocrity.

Not only is failure *not* the opposite of success, *it is actually an integral and necessary element of success*. There has never been a goal worthy of achieving that didn’t warrant some failures along the way. In fact, the greater the chance and degree of failure, the more astonishing any potential achievement can ultimately be.

Failures are not dead-end outcomes. (Unless you quit, and then you’ve ended the story.) The entrepreneur who doesn’t make mistakes doesn’t make anything. The fastest way to a disruptive breakthrough today is experimentation and failing fast.

Failures are simply momentary challenges. When you persevere through them, these challenges become the stepping-stones to your success. They allow you to learn lessons, modify strategies, and develop the necessary character to become a successful entrepreneur.

The other big misconception about entrepreneurial success concerns money. Or more precisely, the lack of it. Many studies show the biggest cause of business failure is undercapitalization. And most entrepreneurs bemoan their inability to get financing and attract investors. But in reality, no one has a money shortage. *What they really suffer from is an idea shortage*.

**There are billions of dollars, pounds, pesos, euros, and rubles all over the world desperately looking for projects to invest in, causes to support, and solutions to buy. The only thing between you and the money you’re seeking or the outcome you wish to create is the right idea.**

So this is a manifesto about ideas. Big ideas, small ideas, and outlandish ideas. Ideas that innovate, ideas that disrupt markets, and especially ideas that irritate.

Deeper than ideas, though, this book is about how ideas are born and the role they play in entrepreneurial thinking. And the kinds of thinking that will be required from both you and me, as we enter the most exciting time in human history. We’ll explore conventional thinking, logical thinking, lateral thinking, and creative thinking and how we mix them all together to create Mad Genius.

This is a manifesto for managers who want to become leaders and leaders prepared to lead in an age of exponential disruption. Because whether you work in a traditional business, run a nonprofit service organization, or are a government official managing a department, the best way to create fresh and innovative solutions is to think like an entrepreneur. Which is where we will begin.