





Being Fearless: How to go against the grain

Self

Business is all about standing out, and in the rapidly moving modern world outside-the-box strategies could be the way forward for your business. We explore the advantages of going against the grain and how you can harness the power of original thinking. **By Clare Diston**

Photographer: [Alex Moldovan](#) | Model: Jayanne Westerman

How we do business is changing, largely due to the staggering progress of technology. According to *Forbes Magazine*, “it’s become clear that technology shifts can radically change time-honoured business principles.” Nowadays information is travelling faster so managers have to make quick decisions, and start-ups are benefiting from access to resources that can quickly catapult them into a global marketplace. All this means is that “we need to experiment more and plan less,” and in an atmosphere like this it’s often the radical thinkers who stand

the best chance of thriving.

The science of psychology typically cites two main routes to success: conformity vs. originality. Conformity is tried and tested, it is doing what other people have done before to maintain the status quo and hopefully provide stability. But originality is about breaking the mould and trying something new, taking a risk that could lead to either failure or success.

In the modern, competitive business world originality often wins the day, and there are plenty of recent examples of businesspeople daring to go against the grain, and succeeding.

In 2009 *The Atlantic* released a list of ‘brave thinkers’, people who are changing the face of business with outside-the-box ideas. The list included Walter E. Hussman Jr., whose pay-for-access strategy has helped his online newspaper to thrive at a time when many major newspapers are still struggling.

The history of business shows us often that fortune favours the brave. When Bill Gates dropped out of college to start Microsoft he wasn’t basing his decision on the



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state of the market at the time; instead he was predicting that personal computers would become big business, but there was no guarantee that he would be right. In his book *Business @ the Speed of Thought*, Gates writes, “At the time most people thought we would fail. To win big, sometimes you have to take big risks.”

And it isn't just men who are willing to take these entrepreneurial gambles. When she was 17 years old, Chinese-born Weili Dai moved to the USA, unable to speak any English. In 1995 she founded the semiconductor company Marvell in the face of financial risk and plenty of criticism. “When we had just started, people looked at the risk,” she says. “But whenever anyone shows me the risk, I ask them to flip the page and take a look at the other side – I read this as opportunity.” Dai is now the only female co-founder of a major semiconductor company, and under her

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leadership Marvell has become one of the world's most prominent companies in its field. But it took Dai's determination to push an idea that others couldn't understand.

So what advantages can going against the grain have for your business? One of the main upsides is that original ideas can make your business stand out from the crowd. Apply this idea to marketing, for example: back in the eighties Mars Incorporated was offered the chance to have their sweet product M&Ms appear in a new movie, Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* They turned down the opportunity and Reese's Pieces stepped in instead, catapulting them from relative obscurity into massive popularity. Although putting your sweets in an alien movie might not *seem* like the most business-savvy idea, throwing your audience a curveball like this can really get you noticed.



Having an original approach to business can also give your brand a recognisable personality. Just think of Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign in the midst of an industry that is all about enhanced

appearances, or the aesthetic of Etsy, which champions the homemade over slick mass production. Looking at your industry in a new light can help your business float to the surface, rather than sink into obscurity.

But where do you start with harnessing the power of original thinking?

One way is to employ original thinkers. These people tend to be naturally curious – they want to find out how things work and why they work that way – and they can also be highly motivated and eloquent. Once you have these people on board, give them the space and the confidence to bring fresh ideas to the table. Many business owners believe that people come up with their best ideas in groups, but this can lead to people holding back for fear of looking silly or being dismissed. To combat this, make sure you have a system in place for individuals to bring their ideas to you outside of brainstorming sessions.

You can also try to nurture original thought in yourself. First, try to be prolific – sheer statistics tell us that the more ideas you come up with, the more chance you have of hitting upon something novel and exciting. You can also play your own

devil's advocate; try to actively pick apart your own ideas, look frankly at the flaws, and then push yourself to come up with even more creative solutions.

Once you have some ideas in front of you, it's important to be able to recognise the good ones. Take each idea and consider whether it is solving a problem, whether people will pay for it, and whether you are able to test it out on an audience first. Ultimately the key to a good idea lies in the execution. If you can see a clear way to implement it then you might be onto something; don't launch into something without knowing you have the ability or the resources to really make it work. It's vital to have a clear vision – the aforementioned entrepreneurs might have taken risks, but they certainly didn't do so blindly.

Going against the grain can be an exciting and successful strategy for modern business, so be fearless and listen to leadership advisor Mike Myatt:

“Don't copy, create. Don't just play the game, change the game.”