



Capture Your Imagination

For fun or profit—and maybe even change the world

Come up with a novel idea and the world will beat a path to your door. And then copy it to death. Lucky for us, we weary of the trite, the creative spirit is happiest when it is inventing, not mimicking. It's through this endless process of natural selection that we evolve as a species.

To most creators, the stealing of an idea seems a grave injustice. U.S. law protects creative authorship, doesn't it? Yes, but thank God there are exceptions, ideas being one of them: A world where ideas are totally controlled is also totally stagnant.

It's a crap shoot

Trying to think of something new doesn't necessarily result in something truly new, other than a headache from trying too hard. Besides, how can you trust an untried idea? Doesn't that require a giant leap of faith? In order for most things to take hold, to be truly successful, many people have to "get it" instantly; people with different cultural references and knowledge than yours. How do you guarantee you will connect a lot of people with a new idea?

Films like *Juno* and *Little Miss Sunshine* were risky propositions. Both were the creations of first-time screenwriters with stories based on quirky, controversial ideas, destining these films to be low-budget productions from independent studios.

Nevertheless they both had the right teams and scripts and went on to touch the hearts and minds of millions (and continue to make millions around the globe). The irony of their success was linked to their uniqueness. So while we have to assume that the trash baskets of Hollywood studios are overflowing with perfectly good, first-time, unconventional scripts, we can also assume that taking a risk is essential to success. That risk, like tension and friction (forces quite distasteful to most people), are, in reality, necessary and positive in life.

Unbridled experimentation leads to innovation

Sometime in 1999, Dave Eggers, a 21-year-old, sleep-deprived, young writer wandered around Park Slope, Brooklyn, after pounding the keys into the wee hours (he needs to be really tired and wired to write). He noticed there were lots of other writers out there. That gave him a daring idea that would soon change his life and the lives of thousands.

Eggers had grown up in a well-to-do Chicago suburb and had watched his parents die of cancer within a month of each other, leaving him responsible for the raising of his eight-year-old brother, Christopher. Finding himself "an orphan raising an orphan 'in a world with neither floor nor ceiling,'" they moved to the Bay Area so they could be close to their other brother and sister. There Eggers would become a self-proclaimed

"hack graphic designer," computer techie and publisher. It was about this very difficult time in the life of young Eggers that he wrote his first book, a somewhat fictionalized autobiography—the award-winning innovative novel, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. That's what he was doing in Brooklyn: finishing that book.

Eggers had been very close to his mother, a schoolteacher. The really good kind who relates on a very human level to all children—embodies the easy-going love of learning and fun that truly engages



826 Valencia: (left) Illustrator Chris Ware created the top of 826 Valencia's storefront; (right) Explore your imagination at The Pirate Store. A saltwater tank with exotic fish and three chairs (not pictured) becomes a little theater. Wit is ever present in the design of 826 stores.

“The years just pass by in a blur.”



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The Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co. Web site is all about words because language literacy is what all the 826s are about. 826 NYC products and signage are designed by Sam Potts, who writes most of the copy.

young minds. Eggers says, “She never pandered to kids. She never forgot to connect to her child-self.” Fast-forward to the streets of Brooklyn, 1999: Eggers thought about the number of writers he knew who had time on their hands during the day. He speculated on the large number of kids who need help after school in order to flourish and—bingo—an insight crystallized. An idea was born.

Around this time Eggers moved back to San Francisco, where he also knew hundreds of writers whom he enticed to rent a storefront—826 Valencia Street—to realize his vision: a volunteer-run, free, after-school writing/tutoring program. Upon signing the lease, the landlord said, “The zoning here says you have to sell something.” Undaunted, the volunteers went about renovating the store. One of the volunteers, thinking the store reminded him of a ship, joked, “We could sell supplies for the working buccaneer.” *Voilà!* Hilarious pirate supply ideas cascaded out of these fertile, uncensored minds: spare eyeballs, gangplanks (by the yard), eye patches for special occasions. An entire line of products sprang to life. Serendipitously, this

product line also provided enough income *to pay the rent.*



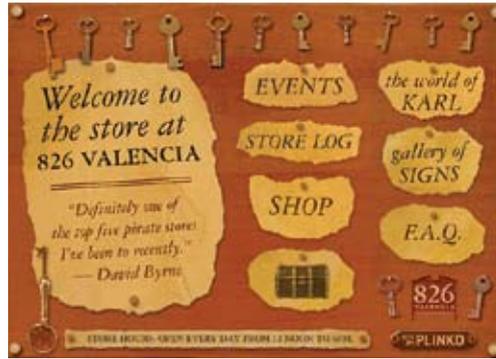
826 Boston has one of the more bizarre, fun tongue-in-cheek stores.

Subsequently Eggers’s Brooklyn friends were inspired to create The Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co. (“Ever vigilant, ever true”). In Los Angeles, The Echo Park Time Travel Mart opened (“Whenever you are, we’re already then.”), the store in Roxbury is the Greater Boston Bigfoot Research

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Institute (“We exist because he exists”) and, through 826 National (the hub of 826 stores), many other after-school programs around the country, with thousands of volunteers, have begun adapting 826’s tools and methods. It has captured the imaginations of both adults and kids. Because of Eggers’s insight that day, there are thousands and thousands of children being helped around our country—in a truly innovative, fun environment. Because 826 National doesn’t own the idea of 826, everyone is free to employ, in their own way, a unique expression of the original idea that makes each one work.

The proceeds of Eggers’s bestselling first novel funded the startup. And since the volunteers creating 826 Valencia didn’t have to raise funds, they didn’t need to listen to anyone tell them that their wacky idea wouldn’t fly. Most people with an innovative idea have to convince somebody, somewhere, to fund its development. Once it started to establish a track



Pirate fun from the 826 Valencia store’s home page. Read my words, matey! The Pirate Store’s apothecary shelves are stocked with everything a pirate needs. All products (including these bogus pirate elixirs) are full of words that encourage reading and imagination.

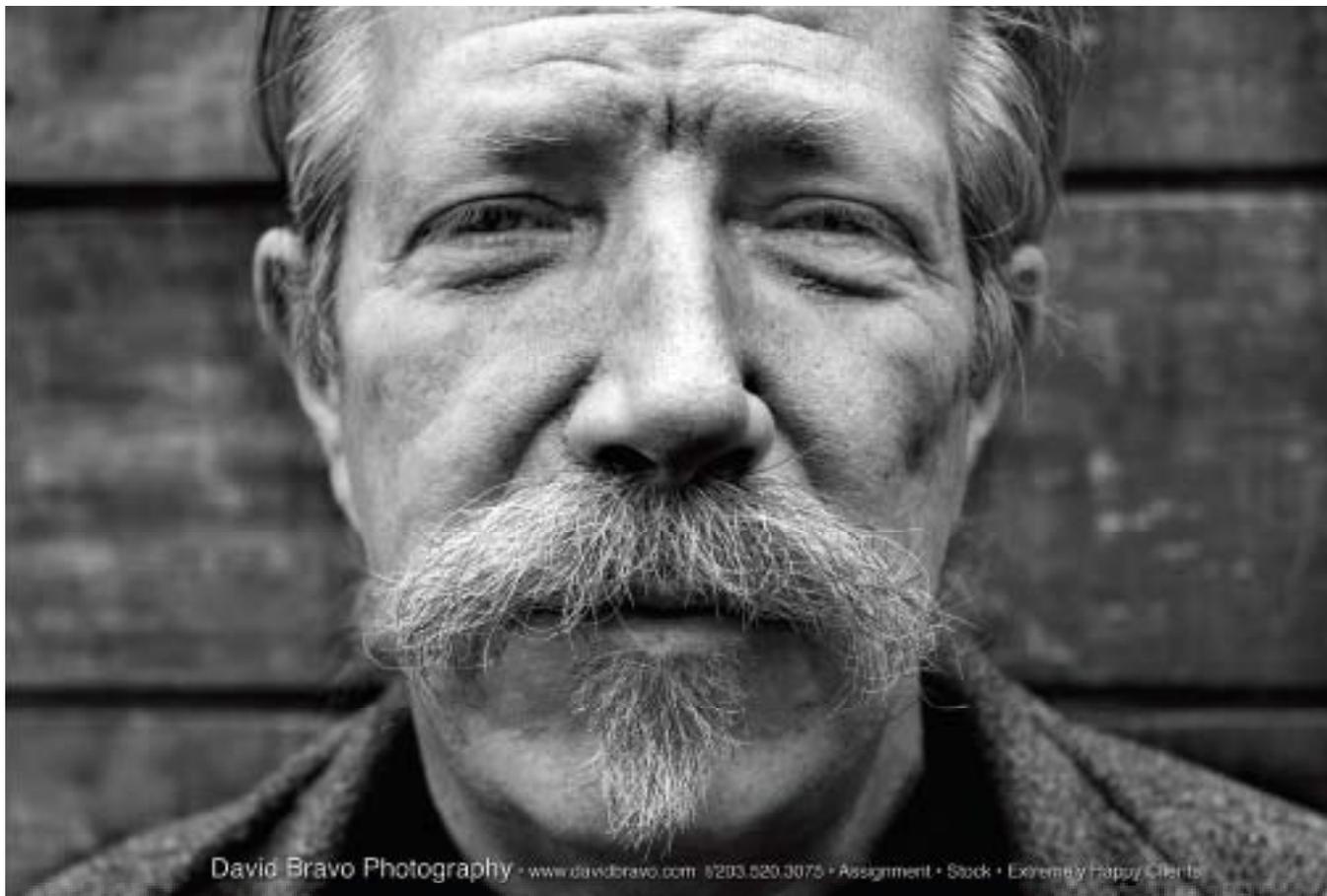


© Anna Ura

record, 826 National attracted dollars. It was granted a quarter of a million—unsolicited—from the Heinz Foundation (foundations now ask 826 to apply for money), and Eggers was the winner of a 2008 TED Prize that has increased the visibility of 826 dramatically.²

The biggest winner was not Eggers, nor was it even 826; it was the world because 826 National is creating environments that will help children grow to be healthier adults. The 826 adult volunteers are also enriched: like Mrs. Eggers, they tap right back into their child-selves.

In 826 programs, much of the focus is on kids writing books



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as a class. Each and every one gets published, some are sold (called benefit books, in the spirit of Eggers's first book, they help fund the program). Eggers says, "We forget how weird—how nonlinear—kids' imaginations are. They come up with the most insane plots with the craziest characters and the adult volunteers don't blink. No short leash. It's transformative for kids, creating permanent change in them. The volunteers are validated very quickly; when they realize they are agents of this change they become addicts. Kids appreciate that at 826 they can relate together with adults and that, 'They won't reject anything I say.' So the give/get is pretty even."

The graphics and branding of 826 programs have a consistently high level of design, wit and innovative thinking— yet each one has its own, separate volunteer team. Eggers explains,

Timing is
everything in
innovation.

"Many of the designers are also writers (and readers) so they are especially respectful of the written word. When you're opening a new store, you're always looking for the anarchists, the craziest people.

You unleash them in the store creating an environment where you will attract more of them. You don't play it safe. That's death."

Remarkably 826 has never aggressively marketed itself. Similarly, *Good* magazine, founded in 2006 on the premise that Americans today want to do good while having a good life, has never advertised to recruit subscribers. *Good's* content blends high design, entertainment and information, very appealing to its base of pragmatic idealists. The founders of *Good* saw that a huge part of the direct-mail budget of a typical magazine was devoted to reeling in new subscribers. This went against their own eco-based credo ("For People Who Give a Damn"). So *Good* took an innovative approach: Calculating that the money they would spend on luring in a new subscriber would almost equal their \$20 subscription rate, new subscribers were told that 100 percent of their subscription would go to a charity of their choosing. Two years later, *Good* has 60,000 subscribers *and* has donated almost a million dollars to charities while spending zero dollars on recruiting subscribers.

The lesson: Innovation acts like a magnet that pulls your audience to you. "Advertising is the price a company pays for being unoriginal."³

The mother of invention

Paul MacCready was an aeronautics designer. In the mid-seventies, he loaned a friend \$100,000 which the friend failed to repay. MacCready was in a tight bind. The new Kremer Prize came to his attention; coincidentally, the award was \$100,000. The challenge was to design a new kind of air-

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plane—one powered solely by a human pilot. MacCready's submission, *The Gossamer Condor*, took a completely novel approach to flight. Built primarily of lightweight plastic, it was essentially a flying wing with a gondola for the pilot underneath and a canard control surface extended in front. It won the prize (allowing him to pay his debt) and MacCready's career took off. Time and financial pressures had been his allies, forcing him to focus. MacCready was a keen observer of birds in flight and that provided a lot of the knowledge

Our ability to
imagine a
future...is unique
to our species.

and inspiration for his invention, but necessity provided the impetus.

Of course, someone far more famous than MacCready had already designed a man-powered plane, 500 years earlier. Alas, Leonardo da

Vinci didn't have access to the lightweight materials or the knowledge that allowed MacCready to keep his plane aloft. Timing is everything in innovation.

Crisis creates opportunity

If Eggers' parents hadn't died so tragically, would 826 *National* exist? Often unbearable personal grief, in its downward spiral, grasps onto altruistic activism in order to reverse its desperate free-fall. Designers Greg and Pat Samata turned excruciating pain into pleasurable productivity: The senseless, accidental death of their very young son Evan inspired the Evan's Life Foundation in 1992 which aids children at risk.

Kelly and Stephanie Kinnunen (he an industrial designer; she a caterer) were traveling through Eastern Europe a few years ago when they were deeply affected by the suffering of the people and decided to do something about it. They came back home to Minneapolis, sold everything and maxed out their credit cards to start *NEED* magazine. Their motto: "We aren't out to change the world but to tell the stories of those who are."

NEED features stories of nonprofits making a difference: one provides a safe, loving place for street kids in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta); another removes hideously deforming facial tumors from the youth of Africa; and another rehabilitates visually impaired orphans in China. These stories are all compassionately, beautifully illustrated. The *NEED* hallmarks are breathtakingly moving, large-format, full-color photo essays (Steve McCurry and Ron Haviv are just two who have donated world-class photography). The magazine's format complements the images with an elegantly simple design system developed by Fusion Design.

The Kinnunens see *NEED* as a funnel for nonprofit

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Urban Forest banners, designed by (from left) Rob Alexander, Goodesign, Rodrigo Corral and John Pirman.

organizations to get the word about their work out there. Kasey Worrell Hatzung, a design partner at Fusion says, “Kelly and Stephanie visualized *NEED* as a portfolio—a printed gallery. We are mindful not to manipulate readers’ emotions, but rather to engage people in the visual story being told.”

“The content can be hard to look at when first viewing,” Hatzung says, “Our designers digest the photos, get over the shock and deal with it emotionally. Then they lay out the articles.”

Although committed to being a for-profit company, *NEED*, like many nonprofits, has a staff driven by their dedication to their cause and working for next to nothing. The Kinnunens have learned to do without, risking their futures for the vision of how *NEED* can help the world. One very encouraging reward: *NEED* has been raking in many awards for its innovative approach.

Good magazine, also innovative in its design and content, has attracted big advertisers; alternatively, *NEED* is hard for advertisers to understand. For one, they have a rule that advertising cannot break a feature, which limits the location of advertising pages. With almost no advertising support, *NEED* has created a serious vulnerability for itself.

With four issues out and a fifth ready to go, *NEED*’s offices were burglarized last year, entirely wiped out (fortunately, the designers had back-up files in their studio). As a result of their devastating loss and shoe string financing, *NEED* was on the verge of going under for most of the year. At the eleventh hour the Kinnunens found business partners and funding. *NEED* is back on firm footing, ready to roll out its long-awaited fifth issue.

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Brainstorms

Most people prefer structure and predictability to chaos and ambiguity. Since creativity is messy, if you have too much of an investment in maintaining a comfort level, will your ideas be innovative?

Sometimes, when two great ideas collide in a perfect storm of circumstance, people create a gentle push and open up new thinking. Graphic designer Mark Randall of Worldstudio is, like Dave Eggers, a creatively facile person with many connections and a generous community-minded spirit.

Actively involved in the AIGA for many years, he heads his own foundation, Worldstudio Foundation. Randall says, “Around three years ago there was talk at the AIGA about getting designers involved in igniting change, but this idea was not

design issues

gaining traction.” At the same time, one of Worldstudio’s clients, the Times Square BID, wanted to introduce public art in the 42nd Street area. Randall recalls, “These two goals were in different parts of my brain, and neither was going

anywhere, which was frustrating. Suddenly I realized how Times Square could jumpstart its public art project *through* AIGA. The pieces of the puzzle came together.” Urban Forest became Randall’s newest campaign: Designers from 21 countries, through the AIGA/NY, were asked to design a visual statement using the metaphor of a tree. Their 185 unique interpretations resulted (some ironic and witty about the lack of trees on 42nd Street, some just very beautiful) and were made into 3' x 8' banners and hung all over the surreal streetscape that is Times Square creating a “green” exhibition in the sky.



The Urban Forest Project logo designed by Alan Dye and Omnivore; hangtag designed by Worldstudio; and the tote bag designed by Jack Spade from a banner designed by Rob Alexander.



© Mark Dye

The idea that the banners would be discarded after they were taken down was anathema to Randall’s own values, as well as the green concept of Urban Forest. He envisioned the banners made into some kind of useful objects, solving the dilemma. “Changing the banners into tote bags was the most important part of the project because it completed the idea of sustainability,” he says. So Randall called on one of his many contacts, high-end fashion accessory designer/manufacturer Jack Spade. The bags were auctioned off for \$100 each. Randall adds, “The auction was complete before the bags were even ready, raising nearly \$15,000 for the Worldstudio/AIGA scholarship program/youth mentoring program that encourages diversity in

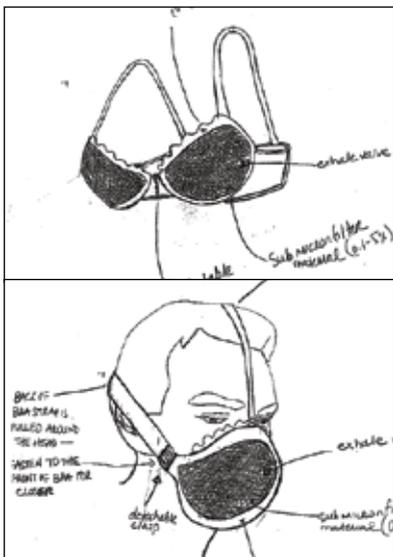
design.” The Urban Forest is growing: other municipalities around the country have contacted Randall, having heard about Times Square’s Urban Forest project.

The two ideas—to create Urban Forest and to manufacture the bags—may have been very specific mental acts in Randall’s head. Cognitive neuroscientists have focused on the right hemispheres of people while working on puzzles, particularly just before they were to reach a solution. They found that, although ideas may seem to appear out of thin air, the mind unconsciously and carefully prepares for its breakthrough with a burst of brain activity just before the insight (referred to as an “insight experience”) is recognized by the person. During this unusual amount of activity, the brain cells acknowledge all the information that may be useful in the person’s brain stores—information that the conscious mind is unable to access. The prefrontal cortex, which controls the rest of the human brain, then receives the information for processing. And bingo, the solution gels.⁴

Our ability to imagine a future, one that includes things that don’t yet exist, is unique to our species. But the future is just a concept, a fantasy. While America has a long history of innovation, tens of thousands of projects (just check the U.S. patents and trademarks registries) contain unique ideas that are sometimes irrelevant or bizarre. Perhaps because our similarities far outweigh our differences, it’s projects that delve into the areas we mutually care about that truly energize us. In that way, the quality of our collective future depends on the initiative of the few to innovate in ways that capture the imagination of the many. And so we evolve. **CA**

Notes

1. Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Simon & Schuster, 2000.
2. Dave Eggers, TED Prize talk, www.ted.com.
3. Yves Béhar, www.ted.com.
4. Jonah Lehrer, *Annals of Science*, “The Eureka Hunt,” *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2008, p. 40.



D-Day Bra: This innovative product was inspired by the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. At The University of Chicago, Dr Elena Bodnar, Dr. Raphael Lee and Sandra Marijan designed a bra that women should wear at all times (patent drawings above) in anticipation that a terrorist attack or accident that releases airborne poisons. Pull off your bras, ladies, one cup is for you, another could save a stranger’s life. The patent, awarded in August of 2007, is held by Avocet Polymer Technologies of Chicago.