



my
light bulb
moment

FOUR SUCCESSFUL
ENTREPRENEURS TELL
SHANE CONROY ABOUT THE
INSPIRATION BEHIND THEIR
MILLION-DOLLAR IDEAS,
AND HELP YOU
FIND YOURS.

Albert Einstein once said, "If at first an idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it." Repeat this quotation to any successful entrepreneur and you'll receive a wry smile and knowing nod. That's because, beyond venture capital and bottom lines, the only real currency for an innovator is the flow of ideas. Whether they found their bright spark at a Singaporean market, at the end of a bad date, on the side of a busy freeway, or even at the kitchen sink, they all share the same ability to see the world not as it is, but as it could be. And therein lies the secret to having your own light bulb moment.

DAVE MILNE :: NOODLE BOX

Ever since a young Dave Milne watched his property developer father building local shopping centres, he knew that he wanted to be his own boss.

"It was always in my head that I'd run my own business," says the 36-year-old co-founder of fast food chain Noodle Box. "But I was very up in the air about what I wanted to do."

After throwing in his university studies, he left Melbourne for London, and, at 21, fell into a job as a roadie on a Jimmy Barnes tour through Europe. When they hit Copenhagen, Milne enjoyed the city so much he decided to stay. Money was tight so to save funds, he ate at local markets where all manner of fast food was served in fold-up cardboard boxes.

"I had seen these boxes on US sitcoms, and after I left Denmark they were still stuck in my mind," he says. "On my way home, I stopped over in Singapore and saw this incredible open-wok cooking at the markets. And that's when it hit me."

Milne put one and one together and came up with a business concept that now hauls in more than \$40 million a year – an open-kitchen noodle bar that would serve its fare in these quirky cardboard boxes. Despite having no hospitality experience, he came home full of enthusiasm and worked on refining his idea with business partner Josh James – who he met through a mutual friend shortly after he returned to Melbourne. Not long later, aged just 23 and 22 respectively, they opened the doors of their first shop in Chapel Street. They plan to open number 100 next year.

"I think when you're young, you're willing to jump in and have a go," he says. "Even if it means getting smacked across the nose every now and again."

DAVE MILNE'S TOP TIP :: YOU CAN'T FAKE IT

"Don't force your idea. Rather, let it come about naturally. I didn't go out looking to start a food business and then force myself to come up with an idea that would suit. I found the idea first and then worked backwards." ▷



Dave Milne has gone from roadie to riches – and all it took was one bright idea.

ERICA FRENCH :: FIT2DATE

More often than not, the only place a bad date leads is into a carton of ice-cream with a helping of self pity. However, for Erica French, the 31-year-old founder of fitness-group-meets-dating-agency Fit2Date, failed romance has led to a whole lot more.

After earning a degree in sports science, she scored a job as the strength and conditioning trainer for former Olympic swimmer Ian Thorpe, and eventually turned her attention to working out the bottom line with her own corporate fitness training business. In the meantime, she had ended a two-year relationship and was back on the dating scene.

“Trying to meet people when I went out to bars was awful,” she says. “Then my friend got all excited about speed dating, which was the single worst experience of my life. It made me feel like a desperate loser.”

French left the event sure that there must be a better way for single people to meet other like-minded people, and when she realised that she had met all of her previous boyfriends through a common interest in sport, the light bulb suddenly switched on.

“Trying to meet people when I went out to bars was awful, and speed dating was the worst experience of my life.”

“It was almost like an out-of-body experience,” she says. “But the first thing that occurred to me was that surely someone was already doing it. So I immediately jumped onto Google and did some research, but I couldn’t find anything else like it out there.”

She mentioned her idea to a business mentor who was so impressed with the concept that he gave her a two-week deadline to get her first group up and running. She got a web page, bought some equipment, roped 16 friends in and got started. That was in 2007. Now, just two years later, she has brought more than 5,000 people together in outdoor fitness groups for singles in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast, and has recently launched in New York City.

“I was just a girl with an idea,” she says. “I wasn’t a business person. But I am now.”

**ERICA FRENCH’S TOP TIP
:: EMBRACE THE DIFFERENT**

“To stimulate creative thinking you need to get out of your comfort zone. Do things that bring out your creativity like writing a poem, taking a photo, cooking without a recipe. I started meditating which gives me great clarity.” ▷



Combining her love for sport and her quest for love, Erica French stumbled upon a brilliant business idea.



All it took was an old car and a new way of thinking to inspire Adam Zammit to start his own marketing company.

ADAM ZAMMIT :: PEER GROUP MEDIA

When it comes to music, there is not much that Sydney-based Peer Group Media doesn't do. From signing sponsors for major Australian music events such as Big Day Out and Splendour in the Grass, to creating large-scale branding events such as The Jack Awards for Jack Daniels, and managing hot Australian artists like The Vines.

It may sound complicated, but for founder and CEO Adam Zammit, 35, the \$8-million-a-year company stemmed from an idea that he had on the side of a busy freeway. Coming from a theatrical background, he launched music magazine *Revolver* in 1997 and then went on to become managing director of entertainment website *K-Grind*. Following the dot-com implosion in 2001, the website was on the skids, and Zammit was out of job. To take some time out, he hopped in his American muscle car and headed north.

“ The car was a metaphor for old ideas – no matter how beautiful they are, you need new thinking to stay relevant. ”

“It was the weekend after the website went bust and I was directionless, futureless and basically broke,” he says. “The car ran out of petrol on the freeway, and I was standing there next to this beautiful, but useless, old V8. Then it hit me. The car was a metaphor for old ideas – no matter how sentimental or beautiful they are, you need new thinking to stay relevant, to stay on the road. This meant doing with music what sport started doing in the 1950s – finding new funding, marketing, endorsement and distribution partners for its stars.”

By the next day, Zammit had plotted out his business idea with red and blue markers on sheets of butcher's paper, and eight years later has pioneered a new marketing company for recording artists, and helped a range of brands build their profiles on the back of the music industry's most glamorous events. “Within a month I had signed up Big Day Out and Splendour in the Grass as clients, a month after that we had done two or three brand deals, and within a year we'd created events like the Jack Awards.”

💡 ADAM ZAMMIT'S TOP TIP :: GO WILD!

“One thing I learnt from the theatre was that to create a character, you have to go to extremes, because it's easier to rein an idea in than it is to slowly build it up. Think about outrageous possibilities rather than next-step solutions.” ▶



While trying to get out of doing the dishes, Alex Gransbury stumbled on the idea for a kitchen and homewares business.

ALEX GRANSBURY :: DREAMFARM

Had Alex Gransbury played his cards differently, he'd be sitting in an office right now ploughing through an endless pile of tax returns. Instead, the 27-year-old founder of Brisbane-based company Dreamfarm, abandoned his economics degree in 2004 to start an innovative kitchen and homewares business.

"Halfway through my degree everyone started talking about going to work for PricewaterhouseCoopers and one day handling the big bucks account," he says. "But all I could think was you only get one chance, so why not go for broke and *become* the big bucks account?"

So that's exactly what he did. His eureka moment came at the kitchen sink when he worked out that if you spend around 15 minutes washing the dishes every day, by the time you're 75, you will have spent nearly 10 months of your life up to your elbows in suds. After he worked this out, he knew that his future would lie in changing the way we think about everyday duties.

“ You can't describe how ideas happen... Sometimes it's on a plane, in the shower or in the middle of the night. ”

"It's like learning to touch-type," he says. "The old two-finger typing method gets the job done, but if you take the time to learn to touch-type, you wonder how you used to live without it."

Gransbury's first product was the Grindenstein – a simple disposal unit for the coffee grounds from home espresso machines. He recruited family and friends to help assemble them in his mum's garage and sold them at a local market. They soon came to the attention of a local retailer, and not long after that he began stocking them in stores around Australia. He's since developed a range of seven other products that gross over \$1 million a year in worldwide sales.

"You can't describe how ideas happen. It's quite unpredictable," he says. "Sometimes it's on a plane, in the shower, or you might wake up in the middle of the night. The big hurdle is putting your money – or your loan – where your heart is. And knowing that if this all goes to custard, I'll be going back to doing tax returns."

ALEX GRANSBURY'S TOP TIP :: FIND A PROBLEM – AND SOLVE IT

"The idea isn't really the product, it's figuring out the problem it needs to solve. The spark comes whenever you get annoyed at something and throw your hands in the air. There you have found a problem, and a business idea." 