

## Five Successful Idea-Sales that Made Careers

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Sometimes a single brainstorm can change the course of a career. Here are five people who turned brilliant ideas into big career moves—and the pitches they used to close the deal.

### Microsoft Xbox: Beating Sony at Its Own Game

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**The Product:**

Electronic gaming platform

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**The Genius:**

Game Programmer Seamus Blackley

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**The Story:**



In early 1999, Microsoft hired Blackley to work on software that would make games easier to implement on PCs. At the time, industry analysts were calling the then-new Sony Playstation an "alternative computing platform" and saying it represented a long-term threat to Microsoft's software dominance. Microsoft had recently bought the WebTV set-top box, which was proving to be a huge flop in the market. Blackley took advantage of management's paranoia about WebTV's failure and the threat from Sony and co-wrote a proposal suggesting that Microsoft regain the initiative by producing its own gaming console. Executives bit, and the Xbox is now the mainstay of Microsoft's \$4.6 billion a year Entertainment and Devices division. Blackley later left Microsoft and today represents video game developers at the Creative Artists Agency.

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**Basic Sell:**

"If you don't buy this idea, we'll eventually get screwed."

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**Advantage:**

Fear is a wonderful motivator.

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**Disadvantage:**

There's a fine line between "out of the box" thinking and "out of your mind" thinking. (Hint: If you suspect your idea isn't being bought because of a conspiracy against you, you're probably out of your mind.)

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## MTV's The Real World: Reinventing the Sitcom

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**The Product:**

Reality television

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**The Geniuses:**

Daytime soap producer Mary-Ellis Bunim, TV newsman Jonathan Murray

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**The Story:**



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In the early 1990s, Bunim (Search for Tomorrow, As the World Turns) and Murray (WXIA-TV, Atlanta) observed that production costs for situation comedies and drama were rising, yet the expansion of cable channels meant they were also generating less advertising revenue. MTV was changing formats at the time, moving away from its mainstay music videos. Since the network's more successful VJs had the look and feel of actual college students, Bunim and Murray pitched the idea that young viewers would prefer to watch the dating exploits of real-life peers rather than professional actors. The combination of low production costs and conceptual similarity to MTV's existing "personality" lowered the risk for MTV execs. The network debuted The Real World in 1992, creating a new genre—reality TV—which has become a massive cash-cow for the network television industry. Bunim and Murray went on to a string of hits, including Road Rules and The Simple Life, creating a franchise that generates around \$30 million in yearly revenue, according to Hoovers.

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**Basic Sell:**

"This idea will simultaneously reduce costs and increase revenue."

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**Advantage:**

Appeals to both visionaries and bean-counters.

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**Disadvantage:**

Cheaper and faster doesn't always mean better.

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## Tom Peters: Redefining Management

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**The Product:**

Books and speaking engagements

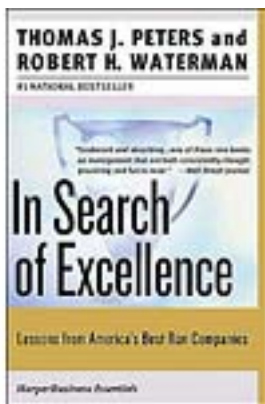
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**The Genius:**

McKinsey consultant Tom Peters

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**The Story:**



In the 1970s and earlier, most business books were dry tomes written with the academic market in mind. In 1981, Peters co-wrote a book that changed all of that. *In Search of Excellence* expressed Peters' observation that successful corporations had eliminated hierarchical decision-making processes in favor of "empowering" decision-making at lower levels of the corporate structure. The idea of a more democratic workplace resonated with the ex-hippie Baby Boomers who were just then entering the executive ranks. When sales of the book spiked, Peters flogged the concept mercilessly, and it was later turned into a series of PBS television specials. In the process, Peters became arguably the world's most popular management guru. Twenty-five years later he still commands speaking fees in the high five figures.

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**Basic Sell:**

"Your intuition and experience tell you that this idea makes sense."

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**Advantage:**

Buyers are already emotionally inclined to your idea.

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**Disadvantage:**

You must be a living example of your idea. For example, if you're selling ideas for financial success, you'd better know how to look and act successful.

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# Heartland Payment Systems: Betting Big Money on Small Business

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**The Product:**

Payment processing for small merchants

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**The Genius:**

Former IT manager Bob Carr

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**The Story:**

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After working as a schoolteacher and bank manager, Carr launched his own credit-card processing company focused on providing a high level of service to small business customers. His idea worked in a small way until, at a wedding in 1997, Carr ran into the chairman of Heartland Bank, whose culture was based upon the notion of good old-fashioned American honesty. During dinner, Carr explained how most credit-card processors were cheating small businesses while Carr's firm was winning by behaving more ethically. Although the conversation was just table chit-chat, it culminated in Heartland's decision to invest \$1 million to expand Carr's business. Ten years later, Heartland Payment Systems has become one of the largest credit-card processors in the United States, with yearly revenues of \$1 billion. A subsequent IPO made CEO Carr a very wealthy man, simultaneously creating 63 millionaire employees.

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**Basic Sell:**

"This idea already works, so let's roll it out big time."

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**Advantage:**

Lower risk makes the sale easier.

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**Disadvantage:**

Idea may be so obvious that others have already proposed it.

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# Enron Trading Schemes: If It Seems Too Good to Be True...

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**The Product:**

Energy-market trading strategy

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**The Genius:**

Enron trader John Forney

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**The Story:**

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In 2000, Forney noticed that his company sometimes played fast and loose with the niceties of financial reporting, so he devised a set of trading maneuvers that would generate profits by exploiting energy shortages in California. To market his techniques internally, Forney gave them hot-shot code names that played into the company's high-tech, tough-guy image. For example, laundering cheap power bought in California for expensive resale back to the state was called, "Ricochet." Pretending to shuffle energy around the grid to relieve congestion became known as "Death Star." When the techniques began generating massive profits, Forney became something of a corporate hero—at least to his immediate bosses. His advancement had a downside, however: After Enron's collapse, Forney was convicted for illegally manipulating energy prices.

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**Basic Sell:**

"This idea is risky, but the potential rewards are astronomical."

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**Advantage:**

If the idea actually works, you'll look like a hero.

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**Disadvantage:**

Your cellmate thinks you look cute in an orange jumpsuit.

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