

Penguin



Readers



ORIGINALS

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CHAPTER ONE

Creativity

On a cool fall evening in 2008, four students decided to change an industry. They were all deep in debt, and they had all lost or broken their glasses. They were shocked at how much it would cost to replace them. One of them had been wearing the same pair of broken, and repaired, glasses for five years. He refused to pay for an expensive new pair.

Luxottica, the biggest company in the glasses industry, controlled more than 80% of the market. To make glasses cheaper, the four students would need to fight a giant. The four had watched Zappos change the shoe market by selling shoes online, and they wondered if they could do the same with glasses.

They discussed the idea with friends, most of whom were very negative. Nobody would buy glasses over the internet, they said. People needed to try them first. OK, Zappos had done it with shoes, but there were reasons why it wouldn't work with glasses. "If this were a good idea," people said, "someone would have done it already."

None of the students had worked in internet sales or **technology**, and they knew nothing about glasses or fashion. But they agreed to start a company. They decided to sell glasses that would cost \$500 in stores for \$95 online, and they would also give another pair of glasses to someone in the poorer countries in the developing world for each pair that they sold. They called their company Warby Parker.

The most important part of the business would be its website, and their Warby Parker website was ready in February 2010. They expected to sell one or two pairs of glasses a day, but in less than one month they had 20,000 customers on a waiting list.

In 2015, the magazine *Fast Company* published its yearly list of the world's most **innovative** companies. Warby Parker was the first company on that list. In the three previous years, the winners had been Google, Nike, and Apple—companies with over 50,000 **employees**. Warby Parker had just 500 employees, but in five years the company had given more than 1 million free pairs of glasses to the developing world. The company was making \$100 million a year and was worth more than \$1 billion.

Back in 2009, one of those four students asked me to **invest** in Warby Parker. I refused. It was the worst **financial decision** I have ever made. I needed to understand where I went wrong.

Conformity and originality

Years ago, psychologists discovered that there are two roads to success: **conformity** and **originality**. Conformity means following the crowds down the usual paths. Originality means taking unusual roads and developing new ideas that are accepted only by a few people, but that succeed in the end.

Of course, nothing is completely original: our ideas are affected by the world around us. We all borrow thoughts, sometimes by accident, sometimes not. What I mean here by “originality” is introducing and advancing an idea that is quite unusual in a particular area, and may improve that area.

Originality begins with **creativity**: having an idea that is both

new and useful. But it doesn't stop there. **Originals** are people who can make their new idea really work. The Warby Parker people had the originality to think of selling glasses online, but they became originals by taking action to make those glasses cheap and easy to buy.

This book is about how we can all become more original. There's a surprising clue in the **web browser** that you use to search the internet.

The problem with defaults

In a recent research project, Michael Housman was investigating why some people who worked in customer call centers for big companies stayed in their jobs longer than others. He collected information on 30,000 employees who answered phones for banks, airlines, and cell phone companies. He expected to find that their employment histories would give him an answer. He thought people who had changed jobs often in the past would leave their present jobs more quickly. But that wasn't true.

Looking at his research, Housman noticed that his team had collected information about the internet browser that the employees had used when they applied for their job. He didn't think he would find anything interesting there, but the results were amazing. Employees who used Firefox or Chrome stayed in their jobs 15% longer than those who used Internet Explorer or Safari.

Housman thought this was strange, so then he looked at absences from work. Again, Firefox and Chrome users were 19% less **likely** to miss work than Internet Explorer and Safari users.

Then Housman looked at how employees performed in their jobs. The Firefox and Chrome users had higher sales, and their call times were shorter. Their customers were happier, too.

Housman knew it wasn't the web browser that made these people good employees. What made the difference was how they had gotten their browsers. If you buy a PC, Internet Explorer is built into Windows. If you buy a Mac, it comes with Safari. But if you choose to use Firefox or Chrome, you are not accepting the **default**.

It's the same at work. The people who didn't accept the default for their browser did their jobs differently. They didn't always accept the usual answers, and they helped their customers with new ideas.

Accepting the default is easy, but it doesn't ask us to look at new ways of doing things.

Before the four people behind Warby Parker started to think about their company, they knew glasses were expensive, but that had always been true. That was the default; everybody thought there was a good reason why glasses were expensive. After all, these are health products: a doctor is selling them.

Then, Dave Gilboa, one of the four, was buying an Apple iPhone. Why was this phone, a piece of modern technology, cheaper than a simple pair of glasses? Warby Parker decided to look at the glasses industry more closely. One company, Luxottica, was the biggest in the market. Simply, Luxottica could charge what it wanted: twenty **times** the cost of the glasses. And this meant that a different company could do things very differently.

Accepting defaults

We begin to accept defaults when we are very young. When researchers interviewed school teachers, they asked them to list their favorite and least favorite students. They then asked the teachers which students had the most creativity, and these were often the least favorite students. Teachers found that the creative students often made trouble, while most children learned to do what the teacher wanted.

You might think it is the most intelligent children who change the world when they become adults. But that doesn't often happen. They may become excellent doctors, but they don't ask why some people cannot afford healthcare. They may become lawyers who defend people against unfair laws, but they don't question the laws themselves. They may become teachers who teach exciting lessons but without asking what their students really need to learn.

The problem for many intelligent children is that we expect them to **achieve**. It becomes so important for them to achieve that they start to fear **failure**, which can hold back creativity.

Fear of failure held back some of the most original people in history, people who, instead of pushing ahead with **confidence**, held themselves back through fear of failure. They only took action because other people persuaded them to do so.

The men who signed the **American Declaration of Independence** were not natural **revolutionaries**. George Washington just wanted to go back to his farm and only became involved because John Adams asked him to command the army. "I have used everything in my **power** to avoid it," Washington

wrote in a letter to his wife, Martha, in 1766.

Two hundred years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. wanted to work in the church and as a teacher. But, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, some people in Montgomery, Alabama, decided to organize a group to support her. At a meeting, someone suggested King as president of the group. King didn't have time to think, and he accepted. He said afterward that, if he had had time to think, he would probably have refused.

When the Church asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, he wasn't interested. He didn't want to take on such a huge job and ran away to Florence. But he was asked again and again, and after two years he agreed to start work.

Nearly 500 years later, in 1977, an **investor** offered Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak \$250,000 to help them start Apple. But the investor demanded that Wozniak leave his job at Hewlett-Packard. Wozniak was afraid to leave his job, and he only agreed when he was encouraged by Steve Jobs, other friends, and his parents.

We can only wonder how many Kings, Michelangelos, and Wozniaks had original ideas but were never pushed to develop them. Many of us have ideas to improve our workplaces or schools, but we don't give voice to them. Originality can get you into trouble, and most of us prefer to **conform**.

What are the habits of people who are original, and who take action to develop their original ideas?