

FINAL SCORES

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NFL PLAYOFFS



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Guitar fit for a Beatle

\$20K replica includes nicks, dings, copy of IOU from George Harrison, 1D

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Executive Suite

Today: Today's Entrepreneur

Need something? That's a business opportunity

Start-ups grow out of necessity

By Laura Petrecca
USA TODAY

Entrepreneurial inspiration can come from the unlikelyst of places. For Becca Brown, the seeds of a business idea were planted when the heels of her Champagne-hued prom shoes sank into the grass of her parents' front yard in 1996.

A decade later, Brown offered her business school classmate an unusual idea for an entrepreneurship project: "Becca turned to me and said, 'Why is there nothing to stop heels from sinking into the grass?'" recalls Monica Ferguson Murphy.

Murphy, who had wobbled on shoe stems herself, knew Becca was on to something. The two pitched the concept of a high heel stabilizer/protector cap for the class. After graduation, they followed up on the offbeat idea.

"The more we thought about it, the more we thought there is a need for this," Murphy says.

They dived into Internet research and built up resources that enabled them to create a cap prototype, product packaging, and an e-commerce site. "It's been scary and stressful," says Murphy, but also successful.

The duo have sold more than 100,000 pairs of their SoleMates brand cap. Oprah Winfrey's *O* magazine called the concept "ingenious," and the founders just signed a national distribution deal with wedding retailer David's Bridal.

The mother of invention

Whatever label you put on it—the "I need-I want" entrepreneurial impetus, or "necessity is the mother of invention"—scores of businesses have begun from a personal need.

"Entrepreneurial activity starts from desire—someone wants to do something—and there is nothing more powerful than someone who wants to solve their own problem," says Leonard Schlesinger, author of *Action Trumps Everything* and president



K-9 inspiration: Leah Busque, 31, founded TaskRabbit after she ran out of dog food for her Labrador, Kobe. It's become a full-time pursuit.

By Martin E. Klimek, USA TODAY



By Chance Yeh, PatrickMcMullan.com

Shoe savers: SoleMates co-founders Monica Ferguson Murphy, left, and Becca Brown.

of entrepreneurial-focused school Babson College.

Leah Busque thought up the idea for her errand-running firm TaskRabbit after she ran out of dog food for her Labrador retriever, Kobe. Chef Paulette De La Rosa and her mom, Lily, created nut-free treats maker The Whirl-

ing Wisk Baking Co. after Lily was diagnosed with a nut allergy.

And Francesco Clark became an inadvertent entrepreneur following a crippling spinal cord injury from a swimming pool diving accident, after which he suffered from skin problems that left his skin dry and flaky in some

areas, and oily in others. "I didn't look like myself," he says. "I looked like I was aging."

When over-the-counter and prescription products didn't help, he and his father—a doctor—concocted ointments in the family kitchen. After testing dozens of different extracts and formula-



Clark's Botanicals

Healthy skin: Clark's Botanicals founder Francesco Clark developed breakouts after a diving accident.

tions, the two created a product that soothed Clark's skin. Friends, family and others found that it worked for their skin, too. Now Clark's Botanicals are sold at retailers such as Saks Fifth Avenue, Anthropologie and Fred Segal.

"I didn't start it as a business. I started for the selfish reason that I wanted to look good," Clark says. "You can think of beauty as frivolous and shallow, but for me, Clark's Botanicals was about looking the way I felt, which was strong, determined and happy."

The Web makes it possible

While product invention and innovation have been around since the advent of the wheel, it is now easier than ever to transform ideas into marketable products and services, Schlesinger says.

With so many Web-based resources, it just takes a bit of surfing to find free business plan assistance, the perfect online focus group and reliable manufacturers. "The Internet is an amazing resource," Murphy says. "You can Google almost anything, and that's what we did."

The heel-cap creators used the Web to find mechanical engineers and trolled bridal blogs to see what women said about their shoe needs and the SoleMates site.

Tech advances also opened up a whole new avenue for those with some computer know-how:

the creation of problem-solving websites and mobile apps.

In 2000, Charles Best and fellow Bronx, N.Y., high school teachers were shelling out their own cash for student school supplies. In response, Best created a rudimentary site where teachers could post school projects in need of funding—and donors could pick projects that interested them. Word soon spread, and a decade later, the not-for-profit DonorsChoose.org has raised \$75 million and supplied more than 4.1 million kids with supplies.

Still, not an easy task

Yet even with the most advanced technical tools, it still takes time, energy and ambition to follow up on a good idea. And in reality, most folks would rather talk about their fabulous idea than pursue it, Schlesinger says.

"Most people sit around and say, 'It's so complex out there, and it'll be so hard to do this,'" he says. "(They say,) 'I'm just one person, and I can't imagine that the world will value what I have—and I don't have any money anyway.'" His advice is to just take one small step: Research the idea online; talk to a local business counselor; or run the idea past friends on Facebook.

TaskRabbit founder Busque said she initially ran her idea past friends at dinner. Those pals put her in touch with others who could help her, and by 2008, she quit her job at IBM to focus full time on her business idea.

"It just came to the point where I said it's time to make the leap," she says.

Those who don't act could rob themselves of making a small difference in their lives, or perhaps a big difference on the world, Schlesinger says. "The worst that will happen is that they'll learn it's not such a good idea," he says.

Louis Foreman, co-founder of Edison Nation, which connects inventors with companies, says there is no better time than now to start. "It's January, and everyone is making New Year's resolutions to eat healthier and lose weight," he says. "But the resolution that someone should really follow through on is to follow up on some of those ideas."