



The start-up storyboard

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Any new venture is a story. It starts with an idea – something which will be valued by somebody. Maybe it's a new thing, maybe a new service but it has to mean something to somebody otherwise it's just a lonely idea.

As soon as you start thinking about who is it for you have your first characters in the story. Think about them, who they are, what they do, why they will value your new thing. Paint the picture, make the sketch, bring them to life.

And as you think about them go back to your idea and make that a little more detailed – how can it be made attractive to your new characters? Bring it to life not just as your dream but as something which they might find valuable.

And, unless your idea is for something the world has never seen before, why is your idea better than someone else's? Why will your characters choose it rather than something else? Think about them and how it fits with their lifestyle, why it would matter to them. Most important, why would they pay for it and how much? Answering that question means you need to think about the value they would place on it once again. If it is a well-made, nicely served cup of coffee, why would they pay you more than the coffee they can get next door? If it is a hand-made chair, beautifully crafted out of old polished wood, why would they pay twice the price of a simple chair they can buy from IKEA?

As your story develops you can think about how can you reach them – where do they meet you and your idea? Do they come to the market square and find you and your idea at a stall? Do they go online and find it via the internet? Do they learn about it from friends and come knocking at your door? Do you have a shop? What does it look like? Bring the different ways to life, develop the sketches of how they encounter you and your idea?

Of course you are interested in more than one person taking up your idea, so repeat the above adding more characters to your story. Maybe they are all versions of the same person, maybe there are different characters who find you through different channels.

Now step back for a moment and look at what you've been doing. You've begun to tell a story – it looks like an early sketch or draft of a film script or a piece of theatre, maybe the outline of a novel. Try telling it as a story out loud, or even better, to someone else. And as you tell it go back and fill in more detail.

We need to add some more to this simple tale. The idea doesn't just happen – it is created by someone (maybe you, maybe you and others).

What's involved in making your idea real so that your user can value it and buy it? What things have to happen to bring it to life? Think of this as a sub-plot in your story – maybe it is about buying the wood, cutting the pieces, assembling them into a beautiful chair, polishing and finishing it with care and pride. Where is the workshop, what does it look like? What tools are you using and where did they come from? Where do you get your wood and how do you choose it, where do you store it? Flesh out the story about how your chair comes into being – and who's involved in that process. Add more characters into the story.

Or maybe it is about buying the ingredients and then making the perfect cup of fresh steaming coffee. What does the china look like? Where did you buy it? What about the coffee machinery – a simple kettle and cafetiere or a complex silver Italian super machine? Once again, bring the story to life – the coffee doesn't just appear, it comes about as a result of different activities.

And think about the 'who' in all of this. You have some new characters to add to your story, some of them walk on parts, people who come and go but don't play much of a role. But there may be others who feature regularly and are a key part of what you do. Maybe your wood supplier is important because he delivers great quality and on time so you are never waiting for what you need or you make great chairs. Maybe you have a friend who helps you in the café dealing with the early morning rush of people wanting their fresh coffee on the way to work.

The story is beginning to take shape – you now have a cast of characters and a core story about creating and delivering value through your idea. Try telling it again as a chronological sequence – what has to happen in order for the next thing to happen, and the next? How does the story develop? Maybe it's a linear process from developing the idea and then trying it out on your market? Or maybe it's two parallel streams, one about creating the idea whilst the other is simultaneously exploring the market side?

Now let's add some more detail. If this thing is going to work it needs resources – time, energy, money. Think of them as characters of a different sort – and position them first of all on the left hand side, waiting in the wings to come on stage. Try and develop the detail again – how much time, what kinds of materials, how much money?

Think about when you would need them, what has to be there from the start, what comes into play as you start to develop the idea? How do the resources flow to support the creation and delivery of the idea?

Unless you have a wealthy benefactor or an indulgent parent you are going to need to get those resources from somewhere. Where do the revenues (the resources flowing in) come from? If you have read them right then your market will pay for your idea and you'll have their money flowing back in. Where else might revenues come from – maybe loans, maybe you can sell the idea to someone else as a license or franchise? Create a cast of characters on this side of the story.

And, just as before, try and work out the timing of the revenue flows.

Tell the story again, this time focusing on trying to keep the balance between the income and the outflow of resources. If this flow doesn't at least balance, you're in trouble – your idea is going to cost more than it brings in and pretty soon you'll run out of resources. How can you increase the number of characters or their timing to keep this balance? Could you reduce some of the costs?

You've now got the very basic outline of a story – a storyboard, a picture of how the themes will develop and the movement of different characters and scenery. Now start to run the story as if it were a movie, looking for the flow and watching what happens over time as it develops. Imagine – on your own and then try telling it to and with others – how it plays out. What happens?

A key part of this imagining is to think about what happens when external things come into the picture, things you hadn't originally thought about. What if there is a new competitor who comes along and copies your idea? How could you tell the story to make sure that doesn't spoil your happy ending? Can you protect your idea in some way? Or can you make your relationships with your customers so personal that someone else trying to muscle in isn't trusted?

Or what if the costs of some of your materials go up suddenly? Or a key resource or person disappears from the story? Try and imagine a whole set of 'what if's?' and think about how you would change the story to make sure they didn't spoil the happy ending. Of course it's not just bad things that can happen 'out there' – there are also positive things. What if a large company comes along and likes your product so much they ask to buy it from you, or to licence it from you? What if

Like any story it can develop in many ways. It makes sense early on to sketch it out as a draft and run it a few times, finding out where it needs strengthening, where it isn't clear. The happy ending is when you are able to use your idea to create value and enough revenues flow to help you maintain and develop – maybe building on the idea, maybe launching a new one.

The whole idea of the storyboard is to make explicit and visual your thoughts about how your idea could create value. The more detailed the imagined picture, the less you will be surprised and the more prepared you will be. And in creating it in this visual, storytelling form you make it possible for other people to share your vision. Sure they may challenge and question it but that could be very useful – they may see something which you don't. At some stage you may well need to 'pitch' your story to someone else to get their support – maybe an investor, maybe a key partner. By telling them a well-

developed story and inviting them to add to it, tell it in their way, you are bringing them on board or at least around the table, perhaps giving you some sharp advice, perhaps asking you a key question which you have missed.