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VIEWS

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Mean Mega Business
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Boredom +

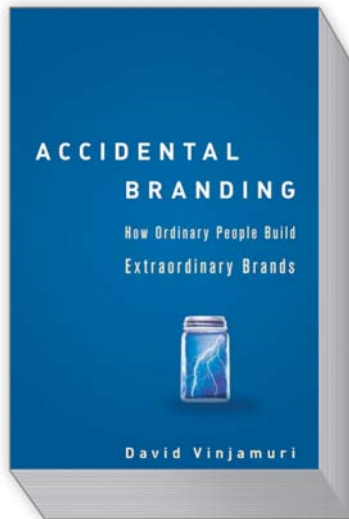
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ACCIDENTAL BRANDING How Ordinary People Build Extraordinary Brands

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Wiley

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Accidental Branding is a profile of seven companies that have achieved cult-like status: J. Peterman, craigslist, Clif Bar, The Art of Shaving, Columbia Sportswear, Baby Einstein and Burt's Bees. These seven highly successful firms are living proof that the entrepreneurial myth is true. It is possible, Vinjamuri asserts, for a single individual with no formal education in marketing, no money and no professional connections to create a phenomenally successful brand on the strength of determination and a unique idea.

None of the seven entrepreneurs who created these companies set out to build a business and make a lot of money. Rather, each stumbled on his or her business idea as a result of a "fortuitous accident" or a personal need.

For instance, Roxanne Quimby met Burt Shavitz when he picked her up hitchhiking in Maine. Burt was a former Time-Life photographer who dropped out, moved to Maine and was supporting him-

self by beekeeping. Roxanne and Burt learned they shared the same values, started a relationship and eventually ended up founding Burt's Bees.

J. Peterman's catalog began with a classified ad in *The New Yorker* for a single item, a cowboy duster, that Peterman had bought in a general store in Wyoming. He had been wearing it for several months and noticed that, when he had it on, people treated him differently. "Through the Owner's Manual," Vinjamuri writes, "Peterman teaches his customers how to turn a coat, a shirt and a pair of boots into a different attitude toward life."

Consumers recognize and connect with the uniqueness and authenticity of these products and services. Vinjamuri believes this is largely because, in each case, the entrepreneur is also a customer and so has a good instinct about what people want. Gary Erickson invented the Clif Bar because he needed compact and tasty nourishment on his long bike rides. Craig Newmark started craigslist in the 1990s as a way to share ideas with his friends for fun things to do in San Francisco.

As another example, Julie Aigner-Clark created Baby Einstein when she could not find educational videos that would teach her infant things she cared about: classical music, art, poetry and foreign language. Julie had a background in art and teaching, and with borrowed equipment, she produced videos from her basement, orchestrating scenes and music that held her children's attention. Her productions don't tell a logical story; rather, they are a video picture book that allows parents to point and narrate. Eventually, her unique videos caught on in a big way: Clark sold her company to Disney in 2001.

All of these entrepreneurs pay attention to detail, especially when watching how customers interact with their product. In the early days of her business, before branching out to soaps and creams, Roxanne made candles with beeswax from Burt's hives. She watched people closely as they examined her products, and she noticed that they turned the candles over. So, in her designs, Roxanne made sure the candle bottoms were interesting and attractive. Craig Newmark's current full-time job is policing craigslist, removing offensive posts and sending personal emails to the offenders. His daily work helps him keep his finger on the pulse of the community he has created. J. Peterman's customer-service representatives are never more than five feet from any item in the catalog; in this way, they can handle the merchandise while they talk to the customer.

In putting the book together, Vinjamuri met face-to-face with each person he profiles, so he is able to convey their human qualities. *Accidental Branding* presents convincing evidence that, aside from their extraordinary success, these successful entrepreneurs really are just like you and me. 📖