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Opportunity of a Lifetime

Staff Writers

We need to take more opportunities to ponder what could be.

So, it's finally over. America has a newly elected chief executive, who'll spend the next two months planning his inauguration speech and which black tie celebrations to attend on January 20. On that day, for the 42nd time in our nation's history, power peacefully will be transferred from one administration to the next, as cabinet members move into White House offices to begin serving at the pleasure of the President.

Boy, are they in a great position!

With experts everywhere bemoaning the disintegration of our economy, and one over-the-top foreign leader predicting the end of America's position on the world stage, the opportunity exists for the next generation of Washington wunderkinds to go down as some of the greatest achievers in history. Of course, many factors will play a role in how they're ultimately judged, including setting a clear vision, inspiring action, and executing smoothly. Misconnect on any of those essential areas and we'll simply endure another term of unfulfilled hope.

The World on Your Desktop

For the past five years, I've written a monthly e-newsletter that now reaches about 2,000 business leaders. In January 2006, I shared the story of a company that quickly grew into one of those proprietary eponymous brands—like Kleenex, Coke, and Jell-O. In fact, you probably have heard a smart fifth grader say, "Let me google the answer." The company's stated mission is to: "Organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," and they appear to live that every day. While Google is known for its Web search engine, the introduction of services such as Earth, News, and Picasa continues to strengthen the bond with users across the planet.

Recently, Google announced an initiative that's sure to gain a solid ROI from a publicity standpoint, and might lead to results as significant as anything those decision makers in Washington will accomplish in the first year of the new administration. To celebrate its 10th anniversary, Google will provide \$10 million to bankroll innovative ideas that could change the world. Named Project 10^100 ("10 to the 100th"), the global contest, judged by the public and a panel of judges, will select up to five winners in February. (If one winner is selected, he/she will receive the entire \$10 million. If five are, they'll share and receive \$2 million each.)

"These ideas can be big or small, technology driven, or brilliantly simple—but they need to have impact," the company said in a news release. "We know there are countless brilliant ideas that need funding and support to come to fruition."

The Future Is Now

This may be the chance I've waited for all my life. You see, I've always wanted to create something really big; something that helps humankind evolve dramatically (and, not so coincidentally, ensures the finances of my progeny for generations).

When I was 10, I asked my grandfather to put a steering wheel on my bike; thought that would be a big seller. He just looked at me and said, "Why?" That idea took a wrong turn.

At 35, after an afternoon in the Texas heat mowing and fertilizing our yard, I told my wife, "What if I develop a pellet that people place into their sprinkler systems, so it fertilizes while they sleep? Oh, and my fertilizer would slow growth, so they only have to mow half as often." That one never got off the ground.

After Hurricane Ike knocked out power in neighborhoods across Houston, I said, "So, we could blow up a continent with a nuclear bomb, but we can't figure out how to blow up a small tropical storm before it becomes a Category 2 catastrophe?"

Get me the number of the National Hurricane Center!

Naturally, when I heard about the Google initiative, I decided it's time to connect with my inner Thomas Edison and get serious about this whole invention thing. With \$10 million in seed money, there's a high likelihood I could become more famous than Ruth Handler. All she ever did was create a doll and name it Barbie. Big whoop!

My Turn

So, here are three of the 15 ideas I'm presenting to Google. Remember, when you hear the announcement of the big winner in a couple of months and see my face splashed all over *CNN*...you read it hear first. (And, please don't make me have to ask my lawyer to write you a letter and remind you these are copyrighted ideas.)

Google Oxygen: So cars drive down the road, right? And they put out air damaging carbon dioxide, correct? Well, let's place a filter on tailpipes that converts it back into oxygen. I mean, plants do it every day, and we're much higher on the intellect chain than plants. (This one is so simple, I'm shocked no one in Washington thought of it. You get who you elect.)

Google Service: So they say America is collapsing, correct? And the world is passing us by, right? Okay, let's have everyone over 18 donate one hour a week to fixing what's broken. How great could we be with 10 billion hours of community service? I'm thinking we'd at least figure out something useful to do with those empty plastic water bottles taking up space in our landfills, if not discover how to simplify filing tax returns. (Heck, if everyone just writes their representative one letter every week expressing displeasure with the results we're getting, maybe they'd actually start listening to us.)

Google College: So college tuition costs are increasing astronomically, right? And many are at risk of not being able to attend, correct? Duh! Let's terminate all the tenured professors who universities pay exorbitant salaries for prestige and research dollars, and let Google figure out how to organize their combined knowledge in a way that easily puts it within reach of every young adult on the earth. Instead of \$20,000 per year in education expenses, it will be a \$2,000 laptop—and local discussion groups for those not completely at ease in a virtual world. (I realize this could endanger my beloved college football, but I'm willing to take one for the team, which is a lot more than a senator in his third term on either side of the aisle seems to be doing lately.)

Ever Stop to Think?

The biggest inheritance we've misplaced from those who built this nation is the time to pause and reflect. Such is life in the Google generation, where images of right now are always at your fingertips. If there's one thing your country needs more than ever in these challenging days, it's clear thought. Your role is to pause and reflect more often. For real change to occur—in your printing business, in your community, and in Washington—you and every one of us need to take more opportunities to ponder what could be.

David Handler is the founder of Success Handler, LLC, an executive coaching firm that helps clients explore their professional and personal dreams. Since 1988, he's developed three successful businesses by first taking time to ponder. To start thinking about what dreams you desire, send an email to coach@successhandler.com [[http://mailto:coach@successhandler.com](mailto:coach@successhandler.com)] or visit www.successhandler.com.