Do you have a dream? There's never been a better time to begin a new business.

In honor of Entrepreneur Month, my next 12 Forbes articles will outline each of the characteristics I cover in depth in my newest eBook, *Characteristics of A Successful Entrepreneur*, premiering this week on Amazon.

So let’s begin. What is your dream? All award-winning entrepreneurs have had a dream and followed it. Do you have a dream to follow?

**Now is a good time to start**

If so, I believe you qualify to begin the first step. You should know there has never been a better time to follow your dream and turn it into a reality. Having a dream is the key. Sadly, I have seen scores of individuals who have had a terrific idea, a great concept, but for one reason or another were unable to follow their dream to start and grow a new enterprise—whatever the case, they never left the couch and the dream died, never to be followed.

Over the years, great companies have been built by innovators who saw an opportunity and had an inspired thought on how they might meet customer needs.

**Ideas**

What is the origin of inspiration? Most entrepreneurs tell me ideas come as if they were mining for gold. They sift through thousands of dull stones until they find a bright and shining one. The key is to start the process with a broad funnel of possibilities from which pure gold will be collected from the narrow filtered end.
There are many mountains to mine. Which ones should you select? As an investor who reviews thousands of business plans every year, I particularly recommend you investigate the following:

1) Distributive technologies
2) New resource discoveries
3) Demographic changes
4) Lifestyle and taste changes
5) Economic changes
6) Calamities
7) Government rule changes

Each of these categories contains new and unique niches with potential for profit. In addition, innovators might consider product improvements, better pricing, enhanced service and other channels of distribution. Lastly, new product and service ideas might come as you listen to buyer complaints and wishes. Potential customers in your current industry are the most common source of new product ideas. Your next step is to do your homework and, from this research, determine the best possible opportunities.

Value

On a side note, please know that as an investor, I am often told by enthusiastic entrepreneurs that their idea is worth millions of dollars. They are surprised when I respond, no, at this moment, it’s worth absolutely nothing. Your idea becomes valuable only when you have customers who will pay for it, as David K. Williams also notes in his own Forbes column this week.

Customers

After your research with a target audience and the initial development of your idea, it’s time to visit once again with potential customers. You might ask, “Will this idea/product be a solution to your need? Would you buy it? What would you pay for it? Where would you buy it?” Ask, “From what I have shown you, what improvements should be made?” With this vital information in hand, I suggest you return to your lab, garage or office to act upon what you have learned. Once you are ready with the next iteration, contact potential customers again for one more response to the changes you have addressed. Repeat this process until the customer is ready to buy. By the way, all too often companies build the product first and then visit with potential customers after the fact. This is a very serious mistake I have seen both large and small companies make.

A dream come true

The idea I had to start MarketStar, the company I founded and led for nearly two decades, came to me one day while I worked as president of a startup company known as Net Line Inc. Our young firm needed people to introduce and promote our technology products to computer dealers nationwide. We tried several options for contacting and engaging the owners of these companies. We called them on the phone. We contracted with manufacturer reps. We met with them at trade shows. We advertised in trade publications.
Sadly, none of these things worked. Then one day after weeks of frustration, we decided to hire and train electrical engineering students from nearby universities to visit computer dealers during their summer vacation. With this effort, we began to see some traction, but stopped the activity when the company ran out of money.

Happily for me, a flash of inspiration occurred — an aha moment. I saw a need in the marketplace and an opportunity to start another business, my fifth. I thought to myself, if Net Line needed sales assistance, why wouldn’t other startups need the same help? Net Line was closing its doors and I needed employment to pay my bills. At age 43, with six children at home and a very supportive wife, I began contacting small technology companies to learn if they would pay for temporary sales reps to promote their products. To my delight, the answer was yes, and we were off to the races. Now, nearly 24 years later, MarketStar is a global business with several thousand employees generating more than $8 billion in sales per year for its clients.

Sound improbable? This is the very kind of opportunity that can happen for you. But first, you need to answer the fundamental question – are you ready to follow your dream?

This article is available online at:
http://www.forbes.com/sites/alanhall/2012/06/10/from-idea-to-business-follow-your-dream/