Throughout the book, I reference a variety of commercial TV spots and videos as we examine monster and not so monster campaigns. Instead of including flip-book-style drawings in the corners of each chapter, I put links to the spots on the Super Uber Official “Chasing The Monster Idea” Web site. Any time you see the above filmreel icon appear, it will be accompanied by a slash-name denoting where you can see that spot.

For instance, if you ran across this callout within the pages of a chapter:

/RappersDelight

You would be ultra-keen to type in:


Where, of course, you’d be redirected to video of horrifying marketing relevance.

Carry on.
“I have an idea.”
That’s what Alex said to me just before he laid out his master plan for community domination. Alex and I met just after college when he started looking for a local design firm to develop the logo for his one-man pest control company. He came from a long line of exterminators, which I always thought was a killer thing to say at parties. (Pun intended. Laugh, dammit!) Alex was completely consumed with a passion to make it on his own, he wanted nothing more than to succeed without his parent’s help and out from under his parent’s name. I applauded his initiative and was drawn to his passion. I’ve always been drawn to people who have a passion for whatever. You could have a deep-rooted passion for human taxidermy and I’d probably still be drawn to you. (That was an example, not an invitation. No, seriously.)

Alex’s logo was one of the first I designed professionally, and I was quite proud of it. I entered it in every design contest imaginable thinking this was going to be the project that put me on the map. Looking back now, the mark is so decisively atrocious, I wouldn’t dare show it to anyone I liked. Even if I didn’t like you, I’d probably still shield you from the horror (and as evidenced by its absence from this page, consider yourself mercifully saved). Alex, however, loved it and we developed a friendship around the work. We’ve grown apart over the years, and I’d like to think it had nothing to do with my impassioned encouragement to put his time, money, and reputation behind what was quite possibly:

the worst idea man has ever thunk.

Alex and I had been throwing around ideas to generate some buzz for his new company (again, pun intended. Get used to it. As a matter of fact, if I fail to mention that a pun was intended, and you find it even remotely chuckle worthy, go ahead and assume it was intentional. Just covering my bases.). Like everyone I’ve ever done business with, he didn’t have much money to spend but was convinced that the creativity of two bright guys like us would generate ideas previously unknown to human kind. Of course, I was hesitant to disagree. After all, I just graduated with a degree in graphic design for Pete’s sake. I wasn’t just some poor, inexperienced schmuck off the street, I was educated . . . and in design nonetheless! This was going to be One Show worthy, I could feel it in my black turtleneck.

We spent a couple nights throwing around ideas, going back and forth about cost and effectiveness. He was fond of saying “not enough bang for the buck, brah.” I was fond of envisioning creative ways of wrapping his tongue around his melon after hearing it the first 16 times, but in most cases, he was right and the constant rejection was pushing us to think larger. And that’s when he said it.

I so wish he never said it, because I know I would never have suggested it. I would be forced to tell you a completely different tale of epic, humiliating failure to make my point. More important, someone else’s epic, humiliating failure. But he said it, and I grabbed it like he just suggested the cure for male pattern baldness.

chasing the monster idea introduction

introduction
I read somewhere that Coke pays for the menu boards at a lot of the fast-food restaurants that sell Coke so they can control the Coke message and imagery on the board. The fast-food joint gets the value of free menu boards and Coke gets to make sure they are positioned right. That’s a pretty good idea. We should do the same thing. My buddy, Rob, works at his dad’s pizza joint. What if we offered to pay for all their pizza boxes if they’d let us put our ad on the box? That way, every person in the neighborhood that orders their pizza gets our ad. We get ad space and distribution for the cost of a few boxes!”

I could hardly contain myself. I was both excited and angry. Excited by the possibilities but angry that exterminator boy came up with that idea and not me, the trained professional. Bastard! I wouldn’t let him out-idea me. I had to take it to the next level:

“That’s a great idea! But why stop there? One pizza shop covers too small an area, let’s go to every mom-and-pop pizza shop in the area and offer the same thing! And not just pizza shops, but Chinese take-outs, frozen yogurt shops, hole-in-the-wall burger joints, let’s hit them all!”

That, in and of itself, was actually a decent idea. It created an experience, it would confront unexpectedly and it was targeted. The only thing left to do was to come up with the message. We couldn’t just put his logo and phone number on the packages, regardless of how life-changing the experience of seeing the logo would surely be. I thought it would take a little more than that, even if it was only slightly more (insert wry, arrogant smile here). We needed to do something so memorable, so creative that people would naturally say, “What an amazing idea, I simply must know who came up with it. Shortly after having my mansion bug-bombed, I need to talk with the savant that came up with that idea. If he can do it for the exterminator, he can do it for my Fortune 100 company.” Or something like that. And the idea I had in my head would do all that and more. It was a big idea. BIG. I’d never seen it done, so it had to be big. That’s the sign of a great idea, right? That I’ve never seen it done. I was, after all, a design major. I’d seen waaaaay more than Alex; he would have to listen to me.

“Alex, here’s what I think will make a HUGE impact for you. It’s revolutionary, it’s perfect. Before I tell you, I have to ask what your business model is prepared to hold right now, in terms of volume. Will you have the infrastructure to deal with hundreds of calls almost instantly? I don’t want to overload you if you’re not ready yet. Okay, here’s what we do. Instead of just a logo and phone number on the boxes, we print an image of a bug at the bottom of each container, along with the headline ‘Bugs can hide anywhere, be prepared’ with your logo and phone number! On each box, we could even customize the message to go with the food type, like ‘Little known fact: roaches prefer teriyaki sauce to sweet-and-sour’ or something witty like that. It’s brilliant! Folks will think you are the coolest exterminator in town! And if it’s okay with you, I’d like to offer doing it for free if you’ll let me put my name and number down as the creative genius behind the ad. Whatcha think?!”

From the moment I said “... bug at the bottom,” Alex had a strange smile on his face. It was the type of expression that I have grown to know as the “UM” face because it’s usually followed by a “Ya,
umm, Stef . . . I don’t know about that” type of response. This was no different. Alex had reservations. Part of me was joyful of his doubts, as I had taken my rightful throne back as the creative genius of the pair, but part of me knew I was going to have to convince him that while I knew it sounded a little risky (not to me, to me it was pure, unadulterated genius), I had bucketsful of experience in stuff like this, and it was going to generate more business than he could possibly handle. I spread it on thick with questions like “do you have contacts for other exterminators you could throw the overflow work to until you ramp up?” and quips about him “killing it.” He finally gave in, and I went home to clear space over my TV for the giant gold pencils.

Our agreement was easy: I did the work for free, and he paid for the boxes and the printing. I even went with him over a few weekends to secure our restaurant participants. The reception to the idea of providing free boxes was met with an overwhelming acceptance. We were in business.

The day was finally here: delivery day. We had a garage full of boxes, cartons, cups and containers, each adorned with a different bug and a different headline. I decided not to wait for Alex; I went and delivered each of the packages to the restaurants personally. No one opened the packages, they just accepted them and I was told they’d put them into play as soon as that night. I started clearing my calendar for the inevitable flood of business that was surely coming my way. I told Alex to do the same.

The next week and a half was a bit of a blur, thinking back now. I remember getting my first package-related call the next day, from
an ice cream shop owner that evidently didn’t find the creativity as ingenious as I did. No matter, there’s always going to be naysayers who don’t like a creative approach. What do they know, anyway? But after eight solid days of phone calls that ranged from crank-call-obscene to scathing and profanity-laden, I began to reevaluate my assumptions. Alex did, too. He was inundated with store owners, managers, and end-customers contacting him to inform him of what they believed was the most disgusting, distasteful ad they had ever seen and even if their wallpapers were physically lifting off the walls and repositioning themselves with pests, they would rather bathe in Raid than employ his services.

Um, oops.

What could possibly have gone wrong? That idea was destined for greatness, right? Um, wrong. When I developed that idea, I was completely engrossed with its possibilities. My design professor had always told me that a great idea dislodges people. This idea dislodged people, certainly. But what was missing was a host of other characteristics that play just as important a role to the success of the idea as alarm does.

When you read the story, and you came to the part where I described the idea in detail, you most certainly had no problem deciding that this idea was doomed for a fiery death, did you? (If you didn’t, please return to the bookstore and purchase another nine copies of this book, just in case you lose this one.) Why was it, then, that a professional creative destined for glory and greatness such as myself couldn’t see what a terrible, appalling idea it was at the time? I mean, don’t we all believe we have the ability to differentiate a good idea from a bad idea? Internet access on a plane = good, pay toilets on a plane = bad. There are few people, if any, that would openly admit they have difficulty determining a good idea from a bad one. Unfortunately, though, it’s not always a black-and-white matter. There have been plenty of ideas I thought would fail that succeeded, and plenty I thought would succeed that failed miserably (one comes to mind). Sometimes, the predictive waters of an idea’s success is murky. Other times, it’s clear to see. Let’s see how you do with this one: In 2000, Nike wanted to reinforce the versatility of their new Nike Air Cross Trainer II shoe while increasing quality branding time with their audience.

Nike has always been athlete-centric, so they wanted the audience to experience this athlete-centric brand message of the athletic-wear superpower in a completely different way. What if the viewer wasn’t just watching a commercial, but was in the commercial, controlling it in some way?

The resulting campaign was called “Whatever” and it featured famous Nike athletes engaged in their sport. Instead of watching the action passively, the spot put the viewer right in the commercial and asked them what they’d do. The first spot featured then red-hot Olympian Marion Jones and dropped the viewer into an immediate first-person challenge. The spots faded to black before the climax of the story, leading the viewer to the Web site to choose how it would end from seven different endings. Armed with more time with the viewer, the endings could be as long and entertaining as the creators wanted.

For example, the first spot featuring Jones begins with the premise “You’re racing Marion Jones. The fastest woman in the world. What
do you do?” Jones then challenges the viewer to a race through the streets of Santa Monica, California. She races down the world-famous promenade, dodging street performers and meandering through groups of tourists. The viewer, on the other hand, chases behind her and eventually slams into a chain saw juggler, who tosses the chain saws into the air on contact. As the chain saws fall back to the ground, the screen goes black and says “Continued at whatever.nike.com.” The Web site concludes the story with seven possible endings, like letting the chain saws fall and chasing Jones into a garage, where a boxing trainer fits you both for boxing gloves and you duke it out (eventually losing your teeth when Jones pops you silly) or you end up on the back of a two-person bike pedaling down the beach-front walkway, Jones in the front, while you constantly reach out to try and grab Jones but are always inches away. The spot always ends with Jones getting the better of you because she is a Nike athlete (plus, she’s way faster than you anyway). Entertaining and dripping with brand character, the endings almost forced you to watch them all to see what could happen.

So, good idea or bad idea? You had me worried there, you took a second to respond. Of course it’s a good idea! The campaign was an instant hit, drawing media attention to the point that TV stations were afraid to run the spots. They felt that people would leave the TV and go straight to the Web to finish the story. The Nike Air Cross Trainer II almost immediately shot to number one in Nike sales and was outselling the nearest competitor 10-to-1. All in all, a monster idea.

Now compare the Nike “Whatever” idea with my cockroach idea. Why was the Nike “Whatever” idea a huge success and easily defined as a good idea while my exterminator campaign went down in flames? There are obvious assumptions we make: Nike authentically tapped the emotion and curiosity of their well-defined audience. The cockroach disaster is a self-serving advertisement meant to line the pockets of commercially minded entrepreneurs. All valid points, yes (although I feel even more shallow than I did prior to that sentence). But strip away the purpose of the idea and get down to the quality of the idea itself and you’ll discover they’re not that different after all.

Both start with a problem: In one instance, there’s a desire to expand a brand message and in turn sell more shoes, and in the other, there’s a desire to see a community informed of a new, available resource in a cost-effective way. The degree of problem is certainly inequitable, but there is still a problem to be solved in both cases.

Both benefit from nontraditional methods to solve the problem: In one instance, the mixture of TV and the Internet were rare, especially when story and video were part of the equation and in the other, traditional cost-effective advertising methods like flyers or direct mail goes relatively unnoticed.

Both were dislodging in concept: In one instance, the cliffhanger endings created an immediate desire to see completion and do so in an entertaining way and in the other, the unexpected placement of messaging was sure to be noticed and absorbed.

In those terms, both ideas carry similar attributes. So why is the Nike “Whatever” idea so much more successful, both in perception and in reality, then the cockroach campaign idea? The answer lies
in the totality of their characteristics. They share the above traits, but those traits don’t define the success or failure of an idea by themselves. And they certainly don’t predict the probability, at an idea’s inception, that the idea has the chance to go from good to great or great to monster.

A good idea is an idea that simply solves a problem. I’m hungry and my wife suggests hitting Chipotle for dinner. That’s a good idea. I’m hungry and my wife suggests robbing Chipotle for dinner. That’s a bad idea.

A great idea is an idea that solves a problem creatively. I’m hungry and my wife suggests grilling steaks at home and watching the game. That’s a great idea. I’m hungry and my wife suggests grilling eggplant and watching *Steel Magnolias*. That’s a terrible idea.

But a monster idea is one that is more than good, it transcends the boundaries of the problem and solves it with such simplicity and fullness, it almost tells itself. The monster idea is fluidly passed from person to person, barely requiring any force beyond initiation. It swells and grows on its own, carried by an ever-expanding group of evangelists that latch on to its side like remoras alongside sharks, taking it wherever the idea wishes to go. Monster ideas manifest themselves in many ways, we’ve seen them in traditional creative circles like advertising and design to more organic entities like government and social culture. Any place a problem exists, examples of monster ideas can be found. The question is:

How do we recognize an idea’s potential to be monster?
As per our previous example, it’s not difficult to see monster ideas in hindsight, but it’s exponentially harder to predict if an idea has monster idea potential. The originator of the idea is quite possibly the worst soothsayer of an idea’s potential, as was so painfully proven by The Great Cockroach Debacle. As idea originators, we are all incredibly passionate about our ideas, often filling in the holes of an idea’s possibility with rose-colored spackle. It’s not uncommon for an originator to respond to the question “Well, what about this obstacle?” with “Oh, I’m sure it’ll be just fine!”

Friends and family fare only slightly better at influencing the originator of the idea’s monster, or lack of monster, potential because as necessary as passion is to the growth and development of an idea, passion also clouds judgment. It takes a mature originator to be swayed from their belief, and rightfully so. Some of the most monster of ideas came from a complete ignorance of surrounding opinion. But I would contend that there have been a far greater number of right idea critics than wrong idea critics.

How many times has a friend or family member come to you with an idea that is clear (in your mind) to be an absolutely horrendous idea with a 1.67 percent chance of succeeding? I bet it happens far more than a friend or family member coming to you with a clearly monster idea. Why can we see the writing on the wall so clearly for them but so turbidly for us? Because the originator is always the most passionate and therefore the most clouded.

What we need is an objective gauge against which to judge our ideas. In reality, the perfect solution would be to find the Oracle from the Matrix movies and rent her out to ideators. We could simply ask her if our idea will be a monster idea. The problem is she’d tell us exactly what we needed to hear. Plus, it would be so cryptic a response we’d have no idea one way or the other anyway. Okay, example of a bad idea.

No, what we need is a barometer for ideas, something that we can measure the qualities and characteristics of our ideas against to help predict if the idea is as undeniably strong as we think it is. While there is no tried-and-true method to determine if our ideas will be as big as we think they could be, it would be incredibly
helpful to have something to measure our ideas against, some form of comparison to make. Since we often view uniqueness as a quality of a big idea, it’s always been difficult to compare ideas, as few are exactly alike. As soon as we see another idea that is similar to ours, we immediately feel our idea now lacks the potential to be monstrous, as we’ve lost the one true measure of greatness: novelty (not entirely true, but certainly helpful). What we need is a way to dissect other ideas surgically to diagnose what made them big, what foundational characteristic led to their overwhelming success. We need a measuring stick.

A measuring stick is, as you would suspect, a stick used to measure the length of something in comparison. It doesn’t have any markings or divisions on it, it simply is a reference tool. It can be used to measure anything as it has no defined measurement assigned to it.

Taking the literal definition out of it for now, we have seen many things in our cultural history become their own measuring sticks on which future iterations are judged. It’s not uncommon for monster ideas to create new measuring sticks for an industry or category. In 1954, a man by the name of Ray Kroc was selling milkshake machines to restaurants and stumbled across a hamburger joint that had an unusually efficient production line style of food preparation. Recognizing the monster idea potential, he purchased the franchise rights from the owners and eventually bought out the remaining partners to own outright what would become the measuring stick for a new quickly prepared restaurant category called “fast food”: McDonald’s.

Often, measuring sticks in product categories are recreated with the introduction of new technology or product offerings, effectively lengthening the measuring stick and creating new subcategories through innovation. In 2005, Apple and Motorola got together to release the first mobile phone that included support for iTunes, Apple’s flagship music purchasing and management software. Apple CEO Steve Jobs was unhappy with the limitations of sharing technology development with Motorola, so he set out to see his monster idea developed internally. In 2007, the current measuring stick for a new category of mobile phones called “smartphones” arrived in the Apple iPhone. It wasn’t the first smartphone on the market, but its monster ideas made it the measuring stick upon which all future smartphones are judged. Of course, there will inevitably be a new measuring stick developed in the future, as the circulation of technology never ceases.

Almost every category or industry has a measuring stick example, including subcategories within our focus: advertising and marketing. An ad agency out of Miami had a desire to generate a Web site that would be passed around from person to person through e-mail, chat, and natural conversation that could work as a traffic leader to communicate their client’s brand character. Their monster idea was to dress a guy up in a chicken suit, put him on camera and allow people to control his movements through a text field input on the site. The goal was to promote their fast-food client’s new chicken menu and their solution, Subservient Chicken, became the measuring stick to a new avenue of digital conversation: viral communication.
In each of these cases, the measuring stick for the industry or category was created by a monster idea but there were certainly opportunities in each case to see or develop less than a monster idea. Ray Kroc could have seen the McDonald brothers’ operation and thought, “The assembly line metaphor is a good idea, I’m going to apply that to how I sell milkshake machines” (good idea) or “The assembly line metaphor is a great idea, I’m going to buy their restaurant from them” (great idea) but he didn’t. He saw the potential to create multiple franchises using this business practice and McDonald’s, the monster idea, was born.

How did Ray Kroc see the monster idea potential in one restaurant’s process? How did Steve Jobs shake off the epic failure of the Newton MessagePad, Apple’s first touch screen PDA, and turn that technology into the current standard in mobile communication? How did Crispin Porter + Bogusky know that people would frequently and freely pass along their chicken-dancing Web site in such volume? Simply put, there was a universal understanding that each idea met certain idea characteristics that gave some insight into the idea’s potential to go from good to great to monster.

Some people have an innate ability to see things through monster idea glasses. They can instantly process an idea’s potential and be able to measure whether the idea has a chance at monsterdom. These people, in one way or another, are processing the characteristics of the idea to determine its potential awesomeness, characteristics that we can use to predict an idea’s chance at monsterdom, too. All we have to do is interrogate the idea and see how it responds.

This is the hardest part for idea originators, by the way. Removing ourselves from the idea and interrogating it objectively is painful. The idea is our baby, we carried it, bore it, nurtured it, and fed it. Now, we are asking ourselves to sit it in a chair in a dark room, shine a bright light on it and ask it questions until it breaks. (“Where were you on the night of the 15th?!” “I was in your sketchbook! You were there! Why are you doing this to me?!”) While interrogating our ideas sounds heartwrenching, it’s necessary to determine if our ideas have the chance to go monster like we think they do. Until we break down and ask the right questions of our ideas, their chance of success is a guess at best. But what questions to ask?

In their book Made to Stick, Chip and Dan Heath report upon a pattern they found in their research of why certain ideas stick and others don’t. Their research, through interviews with dozens of storytellers, psychologists, and political scientists, revealed that sticky ideas all shared common traits, but no distinct formula exists. Ideas that stick tend to be simple, unexpected, clear, credible, emotional, and story driven. They don’t have to be all of these to stick, but almost all ideas that tend to stick fall into at least one of these camps.

By contrast, we’re not going to explore what characteristics make any idea stick but rather what characteristics make marketing and advertising ideas grow. In the creative industry, we generate an innumerable amount of ideas every day; some bad, some good, some great, and once in a blue moon (or insert the oddlly colored celestial body of your choice) a monster idea that garners
a reaction far greater than we were expecting. While we knew it was a great idea, we didn’t know how great until it was released into the wild and started scaring unsuspecting campers. It’s the hope of every marketer: to create something that not only does what it was designed to do (that is, sell more product or raise more awareness), but does so with such force and with such verve that the audience doesn’t just remember it, or even that they respond positively to it, but they evangelize for it. When the audience becomes the messenger of an idea, gather the mob and sharpen the pitchforks . . . your idea’s gone monster.

When we’re focusing our attention on marketing or advertising ideas, specifically the potential for the ideas we think are big ideas to be, in fact, monstrous, we have a slightly different measuring stick. For instance, BBDO’s award-winning “Voyeur” campaign for HBO, which involved a cross-section projection onto a large New York City apartment building where passersby could tune in to hear the activities occurring within different apartments, wasn’t necessarily simple but it did pass into monsterdom in successful buzz for both HBO and BBDO because the creators were able to interrogate the idea strategically and determine it had the chops. In the end, it wasn’t simplicity that captivated the concept’s creators, it was a lethal combination of monster idea characteristics that made the concept’s savage success clearer to predict.

So what do we ask of our ideas to find out if they’re as big as we think they are or if they’re really The Great Cockroach Debacle in sheep’s clothing? (I wish that upon no one. Except the Greek joint owner who swore at me violently in what I’m assuming is Greek. It was all Greek to me.) When we break down our ideas, there are six-plus-one core questions we need to ask to determine monstrous potential. Notice I didn’t say there were seven core questions, I said there were six-plus-one. There are six core questions we need to ask of our idea and one general feeling we need to search for within ourselves to begin to predict an idea’s potential for epicness. The common thread between most monster ideas can be found in a positive response to all or most of these questions. The more positive the response, the better the chance of a monsterlicious result.

For instance, let’s take an example of a wildly successful monster idea, one that contains a serving of all six monster idea characteristics, and we’ll use it as a measuring stick for our own idea. In each chapter, as we discuss the monster characteristic, we’ll come back to this example and touch on how that characteristic played a role in this idea’s monsterdom:

In 2008, Microsoft turned to ad agency McCann Worldgroup SF to help them plan the launch of the Xbox 360 Halo 3 video game. Halo 2 was one of the most successful game launches in the history of the industry, and Microsoft wanted to top the success with the new title. McCann Worldgroup SF spent months with the game, its creators, writers, and with fans and enthusiasts. Their monster idea: Believe.

McCann Worldgroup SF created a campaign that centered around the main character in the game, Master Chief, and one mythical battle. They created TV and online video documentaries using real-
life characters in the future, reliving Master Chief’s performance in the battle as if they were really there. Set in the future, they created the fictional Museum of Humanity that documented the battle, the weapons, and the enemy. Real-life former “soldiers” even walked the documentary film crew through the fictional battle at fictional locations where Master Chief’s heroics saved the platoon . . . and the war.

The campaign was a monster success. Halo 3 made $170 million on the first day of release and has sold 8.1 million units worldwide. Throughout our exploration, we’ll take a look back at this monster idea and begin to dissect the campaign to identify what characteristics played a role in the idea turning monster in hopes of illustrating how these same characteristics can become the harbinger of monstrous things to come within our own ideas.

Along with this look back, each chapter will conclude with a characteristic tear page that summarizes the take-aways from that chapter. Literally tear the page away as a reminder of the important points surrounding that characteristic. Tape it to your work area next to a picture of me. Or just the tear sheet, whatever floats your boat.

So let’s get to the monster idea characteristics already, GAWSH! Ask your idea these questions, and let the games begin.