

**THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPARK:
RECOGNIZING OPPORTUNITIES AND
DEVELOPING THEM INTO VIABLE BUSINESSES
JOSE ROMAGUERA**

BOOK REVIEW

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Have you ever had a conversation with a book? We have all read books where we get caught up in the passion of the author, swept away with the story, not wanting to put the book down until we have read the last page. These are wonderful experiences, but we know that our role is that of reader, of observer. When you finish *The Entrepreneurial Spark*, you will feel like you've been chatting with an old friend. You will have the sense that you were in a comfortable chair, sitting across from José, listening to his storytelling, and sharing your ideas in return. This book offers stories—some that you have heard before and some that are new. Each is in the book to make a point. As you read (listen) to them, you will respond. You will tell José, “Yes, but why did she do that?” or “I know what you are saying, and let me tell you about my example.” The word *spark* in the title of this book lets you know you will be jolted into action as you travel through the pages.

In the courses I teach, book reviews are invariably required. I want students to relate what is covered in the classroom to what other authorities have had to say on the subject. Part of the review must address the credentials of the author. Is the author really qualified to write about the subject? The biographical information regarding José Romaguera documents his experience in industry, both as a corporate executive and as a consultant to venture teams. He has had a distinguished career as a professor and academic dean, performing entrepreneurial roles by launching various economic development programs focused on small business and entrepreneurship. The respect he enjoys from his peers is demonstrated in many ways, including having been elected president of the International Council for Small Business and to the board of the Collegiate Entrepreneurs Organization. There is substantial evidence that the author is not only knowledgeable in the field of entrepreneurship, but that he has also

contributed to the building of that body of knowledge.

Pay close attention to the subtitle of this book. A key word is *opportunities*, which connects directly back to the word *spark*. Romaguera has obviously encountered many people who want to own businesses but are unsure about what concept will work for them. They want to know where ideas for successful ventures come from. They do not know how to choose the “right” idea. Romaguera makes it clear that the notion of opportunity is multifaceted. There are practices by which you seek opportunities, techniques for identifying opportunities, procedures for assessing opportunities, and then steps to act on the opportunity. The first seven chapters of the book, from Chapter One “The Entrepreneurial Spark” to Chapter Seven “From an Idea to a Business,” all deal directly with these opportunity issues. Of course, Romaguera acknowledges that “the entrepreneurial spark is not just about finding or identifying an opportunity. The entrepreneurial spark also relates to the process of moving an idea to a business, in such a way that will help turn that possibility into a reality.” The remaining six chapters focus on execution, while continuing to weave being opportunistic into the conversation.

In the chapter entitled “The Spark of Curiosity,” Romaguera tells us, “There are hundreds of books that define entrepreneurs and types of businesses. But our aim is not to overwhelm you with such information. We only want you to be clear in that we can all be enterprising and consequently, we can all be entrepreneurs.” This quote raises an immediate reaction: if there are hundreds of books out there, why do we need another one? In one sense, the answer to the question is implied in the comment that “we

can all be entrepreneurs.” That means that people can absorb information and be generated by a spark from any number of sources. This book may be the perfect spark for those who want to move forward but have not been certain what their first step should be. However, I also find something more profound in Romaguera’s contention about all being capable of entrepreneurship. In my thirty plus years as an entrepreneurship educator, I find it remarkable that articles still appear asking whether entrepreneurship can be taught. Given the millions of people globally who have created enterprises, it should be obvious to everyone that there is no single set of characteristics or combination of genes that are required from birth in order to succeed as an entrepreneur. Romaguera addresses this in another passage in Chapter 12 “We Are Just Beginning”:

We have mentioned on various occasions that we can all be entrepreneurs and that each person may have different motives for this. There are some who think, however, that in order to be successful in business, the person must have extra special attributes; should think big, and in a global manner. The first thing we must remember, and should respect, is that not all people who are entrepreneurs have as their primary motivation to be number one in the world. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they couldn’t possibly achieve such a level. On the other hand, not all businesses that are big and global today began with such a goal in mind.

Romaguera’s observations are supported through the many true stories that he offers

of individuals and teams who started their companies under incredibly diverse circumstances. Thus, this book may prove to be precisely the spark needed for many who are still at the idea generation stage.

Having just mentioned stories, I want to note something that I particularly liked about Romaguera's approach to incorporating real cases to reinforce the advice he is offering. In many books, anecdotal stories of entrepreneurs are injected once, and then other examples are cited as the author introduces additional concepts. Romaguera intentionally revisits specific entrepreneurs and their ventures. We find multiple references to Ray Kroc and McDonalds, to Gerber, to Velcro, and more. This enables us to see more than just opportunities, more than developing ideas, more than creating viable businesses. We can grasp how these various examples followed paths that led to their eventual successes.

Returning to the notion of definitions of the word entrepreneur, I have preferred to view it as a label under which many more narrow concepts may fall: small business owner, gazelle (i.e. high growth venture), intrapreneur, etc. Because there is no universally accepted definition, it is incumbent on authors to be explicit as to how they use the term. Romaguera does so: "We present our definition of an entrepreneur as the person who has **the vision to see opportunities, the skills to make them realities, and the work ethic to get going**" (words in bold in original). He then proceeds to elaborate on the key concepts of vision, skills, and work ethic. In this way, Romaguera provides a framework for readers to perceive that the messages conveyed through the book are interrelated.

Speaking of words and definitions, one recommendation I would have for the author is that I believe readers could be helped by the inclusion of jargon that is widely used in practice. In Chapter Two "Necessity Ignites the Entrepreneurial Spark," Romaguera introduces the saying "necessity is the mother of invention" and proposes how opportunities can be identified through the "necessity at home," the "necessity at work," "economic necessity," and "necessity in the community." In each area of necessity, there are multiple potential business opportunities for meeting the needs of a market segment. The popular term currently among entrepreneurs and investors is *pain*. What pain is your prospective customer suffering and what is your solution? Similarly, in Chapter Eight "The Client, the Concept, and the Competition," Romaguera contends that the three C's in the chapter title provide guidance for developing an idea into a business:

In this case, it should be clear that you have various alternatives of possible clients on which to focus your efforts. For each one of these possible clients, you can direct your efforts to satisfy their different needs, add value, and facilitate exchanges, taking into consideration your possible competitors. In sum, you have many options that you should consider and alternatives that can be adjusted in the process of deciding on the appropriate ways to start your business, given your particular circumstances.

There is a term that has become popular in practice that is implied in this chapter:

pivot. The idea behind the pivot is that your original idea will almost certainly have to be changed once you launch your venture and discover what changes are demanded in the marketplace. Thus, the consideration of alternatives is essential for long-term success.

My point is that readers should be aware of the words used by practitioners as they begin their entrepreneurial endeavors. However, my advice could be misplaced. Jargon can be overused and go out of fashion quickly. Ultimately, the concepts that Romaguera is attempting to express are more important than the specific words chosen.

Another issue that may bother readers of this book is the use of the word *spark*. Although I have endorsed a link between spark and opportunity, some readers may recall the warning of Michael Gerber, author of the business classic, *The E-Myth*. Gerber referred to the *entrepreneurial seizure*. The seizure occurs when someone forges ahead with their new creation without having thought through the actions they must take or the risks associated with the venture. In Romaguera's case, however, he is careful to insert the necessary dose of reality. He also provides an interesting twist to risk analysis, explaining that not taking an entrepreneurial initiative can be as much a risk as taking one.

In addition to describing concepts backed up with stories, Romaguera presents tools for entrepreneurs both to assess viability and to consider courses of action. Foremost among them is a matrix he introduces in Chapter Nine "The Process of Making the

Start of Your Business Viable." He proposes an assessment of time and resource investment against results to be achieved. The result is four squares in which a venture may find itself. Then he explains how an entrepreneur can devise strategies to move from a less desirable square to a more advantageous one.

Having provided so many guidelines, Romaguera asks "why don't all people who have entrepreneurial ideas or projects begin them? Another question could be: why do so many of the people who start an entrepreneurial journey ... not continue to recognize the other opportunities that they come across and make them a reality?" He devotes Chapter 11 "Don't Let Doubts and Fear-of-Risk Stop You" to answering these questions. Early in the chapter, he makes an extremely insightful observation: "An idea is not the same thing as a business." A phrase that comes up often in this chapter and elsewhere in the book is, "One thing led to another." Once again, I argue that he is letting readers know that they may have to pivot from their original idea. Experience and information gathering are critical to discovering the weaknesses in original plans and what opportunities really exist. It is especially important to learn from your customers that you did not resolve their pain with your first idea, but that first try can lead you to success on the second or third try or beyond.

José Romaguera packs a lot in fewer than 150 pages. On nearly every page, you will want to say something back to the author about the idea or story that he tosses at you. By the end, I believe what you will want to say is, "Thank you!"

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