

A	Λ	Λ
B	B	3
C	C	C
D	D	∂
E	Ε	6
F	Γ	^
G	G	<
H	h	γ
I	I	I
K	κ	k
L	L	~
M	3	~
N	N	Z
O	O	?
P	P	✓
Q	G	^
R	R	?
S	S	✓
T	7	7
V	V	U
X	X	✓
Z	Z	Z

Beside each modern alphabetic character appear the *Graffiti* and *Notae Tironianae*, symbols that represent it (middle and right columns, respectively). *Notae Tironianae*, likely the first single-stroke short-hand, was developed in 63 BC by a freed slave of Cicero. Illustration by the author based on Panati, C. (1984). *Panati's Browser's Book of Beginnings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. p.81

Piloting through the Maze

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It always drives me nuts when ideas are rejected for reasons other than their merit. One common example is when an idea is skewered because someone pipes up and says, "That's already been done." For me, this "argument" holds no water at all. In fact, I take it for granted that the greater part of new ideas are reworkings of old ones. After all, how many breakthrough inventions or products are completely new? I can't think of any. New perspectives, insights, or circumstances? Yes. But I hope that you will excuse me if I don't hang my future on someone coming up with something that is 100 percent original. It would be great if they did, as would be winning the lottery. I just don't see counting on this happening as being a great investment strategy.

But what really gets my goat is when someone tries to nix an idea because, "That has already failed in the marketplace."

Obviously if something has failed we would be irresponsible to proceed without thoroughly studying the history of the previous attempt. However, previous failure in itself is absolutely no reason to reject the new proposal outright. Rather than being an argument for not proceeding, that failure (which was probably extremely expensive to your predeces-

sors), might very well be the cheapest source of intelligence to guide your idea to success.

That was certainly the case for Jeff Hawkins when he was developing the original Palm Pilot.

Think about it. You had to be an idiot to have invested in Palm. After all, the market was littered with the dead—or near dead—that had tried to introduce pen-based PDAs. Sony, Grid, Momenta, EO, GO, Sharp, Daulphin, and General Magic are just a few. What else would you have needed to alert you to the fact that this would be a losing proposition? Imagine someone from Palm trying to solicit funds from a venture capitalist who had woken up that morning to a *Doodlesbury* cartoon that made a complete mockery of the Apple Newton!

And yet, Palm did get funding, and they hit a home run. Not only did they get better than an 80-percent market share, they did it competing directly against Microsoft who was also trying to enter the same space with their Windows CE devices. And furthermore, this was at exactly the same time that Microsoft was being accused of unfair monopolistic trade practices (which tells you something about what the courts and some of Microsoft's less imaginative competitors understand about the nature of

innovation and competition).

What Palm did is learn from their predecessors: Their device was affordable, fit into a shirt pocket, worked faster than the paper alternatives, and you could "photocopy" its entire contents in less than a minute with one button push. But for me, at least, the best part of this story is that *Graffiti*, the single-stroke script that the device used, was essentially a reincarnation of *Notae Tironianae*, a shorthand developed in 63 BC (!) by a slave of Cicero, named *Marcus Tullius*. So much for brand new ideas.

Yes, you had to have been a fool to have invested in Palm. But you would be a rich fool.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bill Buxton, principal of Buxton Design, has a 30-year involvement in research and the design of technologies for creative endeavor, including music, film, and industrial design. He was a researcher at Xerox PARC, a professor at the University of Toronto, and Chief Scientist of Alias Research and SGI Inc. During the fall of 2004 he was a lecturer at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and in spring 2005, he was a visiting researcher at Microsoft Research, Cambridge England. More information on Buxton and his work can be found at: www.billbuxton.com.