



On Being Curious

Ian Sanders

About Ian Sanders

Ian started a media career while he was still at school, presenting a weekly youth show for BBC Radio, a role he juggled with a Saturday job working at a record distribution business. After a stint in television production working on music and arts programmes for Channel 4, Ian joined The Unique Broadcasting Company where he worked in every part of the business, becoming special projects director alongside a role as managing director of Unique Facilities. In 2000 Ian went independent as a consultant, helping clients - including UBC Media Group and MTV Networks Europe - launch startup ventures. He undertook an interim marketing role for Keith Rabois' London startup BrightStar and went on to run a major project delivering marketing campaigns for Benetton.

Today Ian runs The Ian Sanders Company. He has a rich network of contacts in digital, tech and entrepreneurship on both sides of the Atlantic. An author of four business books, he's spoken at SXSW Interactive in Austin Texas, is a contributing writer for the Financial Times 'Business Life' section, and contributes to Monocle magazine's radio channel Monocle 24. Passionate about entrepreneurship, Ian is a mentor for Women Innovate Mobile, a New York based startup accelerator in mobile-first female led ventures.

Ian lives by the coast in Leigh-on-Sea, England with his wife and two sons. He is driven by curiosity and damn good coffee.

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Are you curious?

What do you think of when you hear the word 'curiosity'?

I think of my eight year old son Barney, seated at the breakfast table with his book of facts, wide-eyed with wonder as he tells us about the world's tallest building or the fastest car.

Most of us were like that at his age. But some of us lose our appetite for exploration and discovery as we get older. We become experts in a single field or industry: our job doesn't require us to peer over the walls into other areas, and we lose our curiosity. We know what we know. That's a shame.

I know many people with a laser focus on where they direct their attention. Focus is good but not if it is so narrow there's no room for taking anything new in. I try to stay broad. I still apply a laser focus to *how* I spend my time, but I revel in the exploration of the new, staying open-minded about where I will get my stimulation.



Me & curiosity

I was a quiet child. I mostly liked to observe from the edges, rather than participate fully, watching those around me, taking it all in. In classes like Latin and religious education, I invested my time doodling pictures of the teacher, rather than paying attention. I became good at writing stories and of doing impressions of class mates, teachers and my family. Those observational tendencies helped inform my skills as a writer.

I've always strived to broaden my horizons, not narrow them; so I struggled sticking to a single discipline in my career. When I started working for myself in 2000, curiosity gave me a work life with no limits. In the space of a couple of months I worked with some friends managing a rock band, advised the fashion brand Benetton, co-wrote a kids' book, and advised a member of the House Of Lords about a website. My career strategy? I just followed my curiosity.

Curiosity meant my offering didn't need to be set in stone, I could try my hand at multiple roles, venturing into totally new areas, broadening my horizons.



Don't underestimate it

Don't underestimate curiosity as something that only a scientist or an academic might find necessary.

For most of us, curiosity can actually be a hard skill for work, business and the rest of our lives. A chief executive can harness curiosity in her leadership style, a freelance web developer can use it to hunt for new clients, an entrepreneur can apply it to research his startup idea.

Being curious is often about shifting your mindset to ask a really simple question: 'what if?'

What if we ran the project this way instead of the usual way? What if I ventured out of my comfort zone and gave that a try? What if, instead of continuing down the straight road towards the destination, we took this random left turn?

Earlier this year when I was in New York my curiosity led me to meet Matthew Stillman. We discussed many interesting things that day. One thing he said stuck with me: *"Follow your curiosity to the smallest corners and you'll find tremendous light there."*



What's the point?

What benefits does asking 'what if?' bring?

It can unlock innovation, it can make us solve problems in new ways. It can make us ask obvious questions that we never thought to ask before. Questions like, do we really need a three hour meeting in a boardroom to solve this problem when twenty minutes in the corner coffee shop might nail it?

Curiosity can also deliver a multitude of possibilities. A friend of mine Sarah Parmenter is a successful user-interface designer who speaks at conferences around the world. But she's also just set up a completely unrelated business in my neighbourhood - a blow dry bar. She's launched her new business because she's curious to see if she can apply her talents to be successful in a totally different discipline.

She's giving it a go.



Fuel your startup

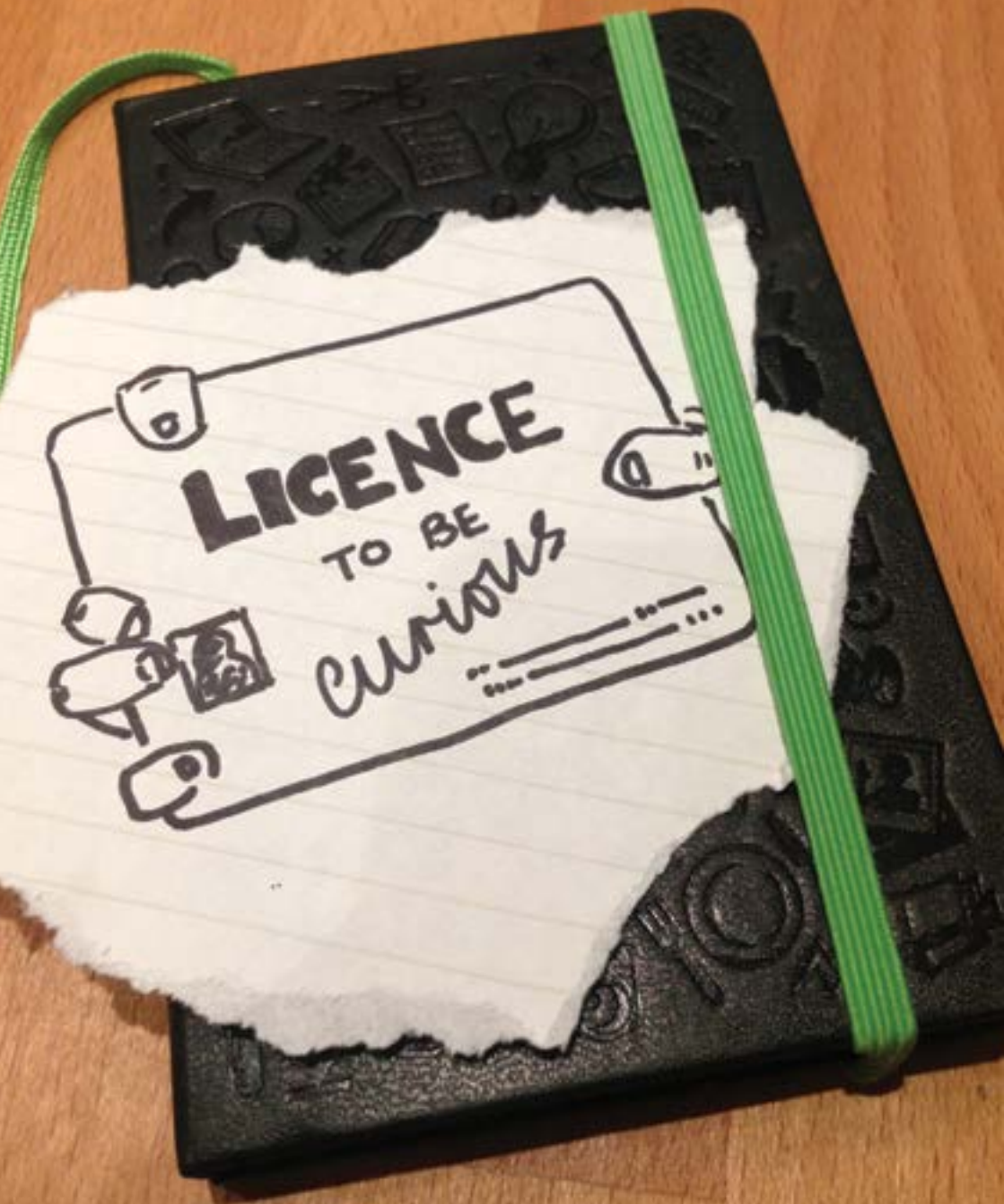
Twenty years ago, Will King experimented with his girlfriend's baby oil to combat razor burn whilst shaving, applying principles he'd learned in his engineering degree. He applied the 'what if?' principle. Not only did his kitchen table experiment with oil and foam work, it worked so well that today King of Shaves is the third biggest shaving brand in the UK.

Two years ago Tina Roth Eisenberg was disappointed by the poor quality of temporary tattoo her daughter wore home from a children's party. She asked herself whether she could do better. And she could. Today Tattly is a successful business employing seven people with thousands of customers worldwide, a business that Tina acknowledges practically started as a joke, just by being curious.

She applied the 'what if?' principle too.

But Will, Tina and Sarah didn't just use curiosity to fuel their ideas; they took action to make it happen.

And that is the secret sauce: acting on your curiosity.



A licence to be curious

I'm lucky. I have a licence to be curious.

I have a reason to be nosy, to knock on doors and ask questions - one of my gigs is writing for The Financial Times. That gives me an outlet to tell stories.

I'm not a trained journalist - and I know nothing about finance - instead I write about whatever sparks my interest: the lessons Billy Bragg learned cutting out the middleman to sell direct to his fans; the opportunities and cross pollination that come from people sharing co-working spaces; the working cultures that small businesses adopt to attract the brightest recruits; the independent coffee scene in New York and London. I follow no editorial agenda, just my own curiosity.

But you don't need to wait for permission - you can issue yourself a self-authorized licence. All it takes is a commitment to ask questions, to explore new possibilities, to embark on a journey of discovery.



Unplanning & serendipity

When I'm thinking about ideas for my FT articles, I don't have a big plan. Instead I stay open-minded, rely on curiosity and serendipity, and then step back to connect the dots.

This picture is of Ocaña, a bar in Plaça Reial in Barcelona. When I was there last year I got talking to a woman at the next table called Lisa, she was creative director at a digital agency in New York. Spotting my temporary tattoo of a typewriter she asked was I a writer. I told her about my FT role, and by listening to her story I could see the start of an idea for a piece.

A few days later I was on a train to London and happened to sit next to Andy, an acquaintance of mine who is an academic. It was a random encounter, but as we started talking I realised he'd be great to feature alongside Lisa in the story.

My connections with Lisa and Andy were both literal 'blink and you'll miss it' moments - but I had been in the right mindset: my curiosity senses were heightened and I took action to turn it into something tangible. Adopting that mindset is key. The kind of mindset where you talk to strangers in bars and unplug from your electronic devices to talk to someone on a train.

When you are curious, you allow serendipity to come into play, and that can be a powerful combination.



Asking & listening

My two sons ask a lot of questions. Most of which I don't know the answers to, but I admire their thirst for knowledge.

Because I don't think we ask enough questions.

Away from my FT gig, when I work with client businesses as an advisor I ask a lot of questions. Questions like: 'What is your story?' 'Why do clients like working with you?' 'Why are you different from the rest?' 'What drives you?' 'What do you stand for?'

They may not sound very original, but these are questions that have not usually been asked before.

Asking and listening unlocks a valuable commodity. So valuable, one client said it was gold-dust. All I did was go and have lunch with one of his clients, a very important company, a well known tech giant. I sat and asked questions about why he liked working with my client. A simple question that had never been asked before. The implications of that one question were far reaching. That didn't come from a feedback sheet or a questionnaire but by two people sharing tapas.

Curiosity is about asking, listening and then connecting the dots. You'll be surprised at what it might yield for your business.

**So how can you inject curiosity
into your own life?**



**Here are seven ideas
to get you thinking...**

1. Be fluid

In life and business there's so much emphasis on having a bloody plan. It drives me mad. Why have a long term plan? Who knows what's around the corner? Who would be able to anticipate an economic disaster or a world event that forces us to rip up a five year plan?

Goals in both life and career are important; it's good to have a vision of where you're headed. But stay open minded. Instead of having a fixed linear path for how to get there, embrace randomness and serendipity along the way.

Instead of having a fixed plan, try going where the water flows.



2. Think like a kid

Some years ago when I lived in south west London, a French friend came to visit. Alain had never eaten Japanese food before, so I took him to my local Japanese restaurant. Halfway through the meal he went to find the toilet, but when he hadn't returned after fifteen minutes, I went to find him. He was in the kitchen quizzing the chefs about the food and its preparation. I'd been to the restaurant a few times but had never met the chef. On his first visit Alain just walked in there and started asking questions. His curiosity was almost childlike - totally uninhibited unlike most of us who might think it inappropriate to walk in to a restaurant kitchen uninvited.

Imagine if you embraced that mindset and thought like a child. If you wanted to launch a retail business, imagine if you lost your inhibitions and walked into shops asking questions.

Imagine how you'd fast-track your mission and quest for answers.



3. Embrace discovery & exploration

Curiosity is critical to having ideas, whether you are innovating world changing solutions or just thinking about starting a side project. Through being curious you can learn all the answers to your questions. I heard a story on the radio about a woman who set up a cake-making company without knowing anything about baking. But that wasn't an obstacle to her trying it. She learned everything she needed to know watching YouTube videos. Now she teaches others how to do it as part of her business.

As the Buddhist priest Shunryu Suzuki said: "*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few.*" So knowing nothing about cakes proved to be no obstacle to start a baking business.

You just need to be curious. But venture further than YouTube for inspiration. Real value comes from going out and about, pounding the streets, sitting in coffee shops, visiting market stalls, asking and listening.

The most striking impact can often be gained by 'crossing borders'; by learning lessons from a completely different industry. Taking lessons in customer service watching a coffee shop barista at work, observing a chef in the kitchen to inspire how to better juggle your multi-dimensional work life.



4. Be an idea collector

Like most things in life, you get out what you put in.

So you need to invest time in exploring ideas. New ideas are often a fusion of old ones, so if you're looking to be more innovative or creative, try collecting ideas.

Take a notebook everywhere, or use your digital device and camera phone to capture thoughts and ideas. Capture your own thoughts on your morning train commute. Note down other people's ideas and stories, copy quotes that inspire you, cut things out, snap photos on your phone. The fashion designer Paul Smith uses his curiosity to take photographs of everything from street scenes to window displays on his travels around the world. These images inform his next collection.

The act of clipping (whether with a digital tool or a pair of scissors) makes my brain well-tuned to spotting inspiring content, whether it's a blog post, a tweet, a newspaper article or a photo in a magazine. I never know when these may come in handy. It's also satisfying to have a portfolio of ideas to leaf through when you're looking for inspiration.



5. Travel without a map

The other day a meeting got delayed and I found myself with thirty minutes to spare. Exiting the tube station I decided to dispense with the map on my iPhone and instead let my instinct guide me towards my destination. I knew that Whitecross Street would take me in the right direction northwards.

As I walked slowly up the street I followed the lunchtime crowd in their summer dresses and shirt sleeves into a little park that I never knew existed. Busy with office workers, children in a playground and people queuing at a coffee stand, it was a welcome, inspiring, break in my day. If I had focused on a map I would have never taken that left turn. It was a detour that just happened by following my curiosity.

I often try this approach when I arrive in a new city, following my gut rather than a GPS, discovering streets and sights that aren't in the guidebook. I did this on a recent trip to Geneva, stumbling across this cafe on an island [left] just like that. That sense of random discovery was really rewarding, like having an awesome meal in a new cafe, finding a great new novel or taking a ride down the coast and finding a deserted cove. It gave me a boost.



6. Read, watch & listen wildly

I think curiosity is like a muscle that you need to exercise if you want to continue to benefit from it.

So become a stimulus junkie - browse websites and read books you wouldn't usually choose. I love browsing the shelves of Magma design shop in London. Here I've discovered beautiful magazines like Offscreen, a publication for people who work in the web industry. I might not be in their target audience, but I learned a lot about a bunch of talented people via some great storytelling and beautiful photography.

If you're on Twitter and only follow people in 'your world', try following interesting people in other cities, engaged in other professions, industries and worlds away from your own. You may learn a thing or two.

On a Sunday evening my radio is usually tuned to *World Routes* on BBC Radio 3 where I never know what music I'll discover - Peruvian hand music, sounds from the London Turkish community and music from Korea. The listening experience takes me on a journey, it challenges my assumptions and opens not only my ears but hopefully also my mind.



7. Dabble

Don't keep your curiosity to yourself and the pages of your notebook. Apply it to your business and career by trying your hand at new projects and experimentations.

In my thirteen years of working for myself, dabbling has provided the more interesting projects - from working with an artist management startup developing new bands to writing a kids' book. Had I worked in artist management before? No. Written a kids' book? Nope. And that's the point about dabbling, it doesn't require you to possess a qualification before you get started. I was just curious about my ability to transform random abstract ideas into concrete projects and ventures.

The benefit of dabbling is that it doesn't carry much risk. Because we recognise it's an experiment on the side, we can do it for the fun and curiosity of it. It's not our 'bread and butter' project, job or business - so who cares if it fails? It was just a dabble. At least we tried it.

Often waiting to get a qualification can stop us executing. But you don't need to wait for a piece of paper or certificate to start dabbling.

Enjoy the ride

Let me tell you a story.

A few years ago I was keen to meet Dave Stewart, one half of the successful 80s band Eurythmics. Today, as well as being a prolific musician and producer, Dave is an entertainment entrepreneur based in LA. Back then, I had no reason or licence to meet him. So instead I just contacted his manager and asked if I could interview him for my blog (which is always a good route to someone you want to meet).

But - understandably - Dave was too busy. He said no.

Nine months later I happened to be walking up Wardour Street in Soho when I thought the bearded guy in shades who just passed me looked familiar. I tweeted that I thought I just saw @DaveStewart. “*That was me, stuck here because of volcano*” he tweeted back, referring to the erupting Icelandic volcano whose ash cloud had shut down European airspace, leaving him stranded in London. That ‘blink and you’ll miss it’ moment - for that’s what it was - kick started my attempts to meet Dave. A few emails and phone calls later, we finally met one Sunday afternoon at The Soho Hotel where I recorded a video interview. I had no reason to do this, no-one was paying me (or my film maker friend), I had no licence other than my curiosity.

After our meeting we connected on LinkedIn; and then randomly, one morning I happened to notice that Dave

had a new connection named Liz Gooster. One click and I discovered she was editor of Dave’s new book. I started following her on Twitter. Two months later on holiday in Cornwall, I received an email from Liz Gooster. She’d seen I was following her on Twitter, checked me out and discovered my website. Did I want to write a book?

Four months after that email, I was with my friend and business partner David Sloy on a Eurostar train to Paris on an inspiration trip to start writing a book - ‘*Zoom! The Faster Way To Make Your Business Happen*’ - which came out the next year. A book that happened due to Twitter, a volcanic ash cloud and Dave Stewart. But it also happened because of curiosity.

I was curious to meet Dave. I had no idea where it would take me - and it ultimately got me a book deal.

So you don’t need to start out with a tangible goal when you do something out of curiosity - just enjoy the ride and see where it takes you.

Stay curious.....





The Ian Sanders Company helps businesses grow by improving how they communicate what they do, by capturing and telling their story, and helping them explore new opportunities. We apply a fresh perspective and our curiosity to every project we touch, delivering clarity, fresh ideas and effective solutions. Recent clients range from a one-person startup to Duarte Inc, the market-leading Silicon Valley design firm.

iansanders.com

Get in touch

Telephone
+44 (0) 7778 277697

Email
hello@iansanders.com

Twitter
[@iansanders](https://twitter.com/iansanders)

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Notes & Observations

