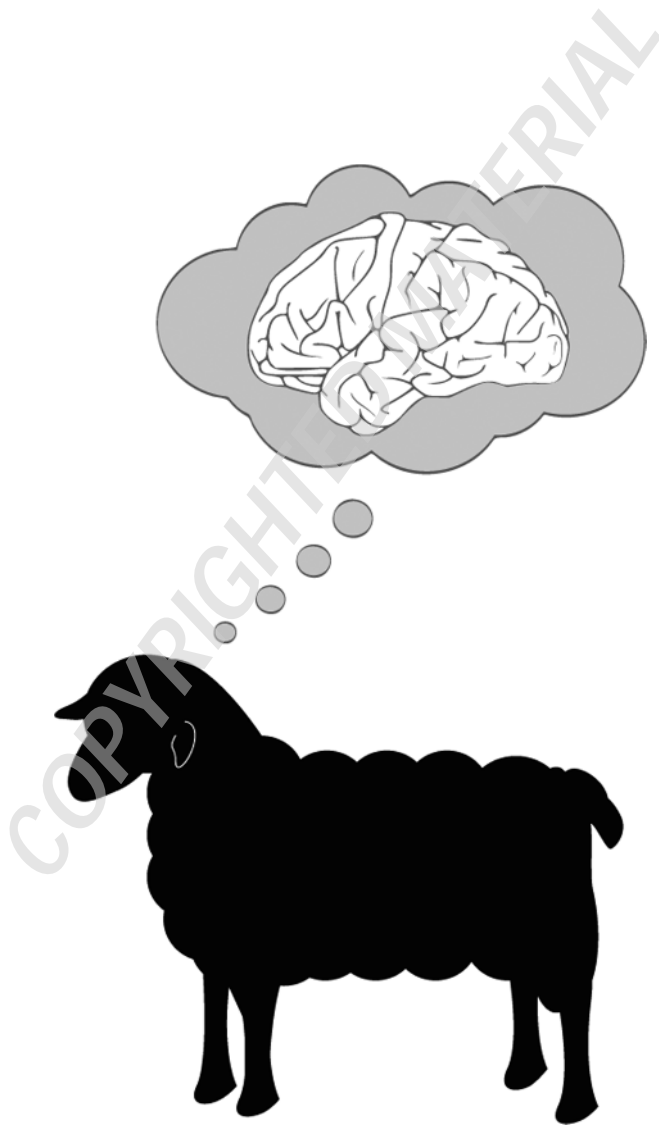


# CHAPTER 1

## RETHINKING UNPOPULAR





**B**ack in high school, my friends and I weren't going to win any popularity contests, but we were the ones who all the popular kids crowded around on test days so they could copy off our papers. We were never cheerleaders or star athletes, but we won more accolades for the school than the sports teams did. We went to high school dances as a group, and all of the social glory that went with those formative years—well, we missed it. We knew what unpopular was. It was the opposite of cool. Maybe we were cool among our friends, but we weren't the ones with crowns and tiaras on prom night.

And today, nobody gives a damn.

## IT'S TIME TO LEAVE THE PLAYGROUND, DONTCHA THINK?

Who gives a rat's ass who was picked first or last at kickball or who walked away with a plastic tiara or crown on prom night? Today, we look back at those days with a bit of disdain, because most of us have become wise enough to realize something so simple: **popularity isn't important**. And as smart businesspeople, popular is the last thing we ever want to become.

That's not a message you can deliver on playgrounds or in high school gymnasiums, but popular is the last thing smart businesspeople should ever want to become. And there's nothing at all wrong with having achieved popularity with the people who surrounded you in your formative years. When it can cause problems is when we rely on it in business, because it's pretty damn useless.

Let's go with the World English Dictionary's definition of *popular*: “appealing to the general public; widely favored or admired.”

If you're looking to build a business (or life) that makes you appealing to the general public, I'll go ahead and say that you're poised for a life of disappointment. Just think about the most important people in your life—their quirks, nuances, and talents. You have them in your life because, for all they are (including each of those equally fabulous and maddening qualities), they suit you and *make your life better*. It's the quirks, nuances, and talents you remember, not the plain vanilla things they do. The general public? That's plain vanilla.

And that's why people and businesses that find success in this life, in any regard, have changed their opinion of what being unpopular really means. They've left the general public behind, knowing that reaching them is a futile endeavor; and instead, they have set their sights on a specific audience.

The builders of unpopular brands are looking to make new inroads. They take the current standards, break them apart, and re-shape them into something that fits people who have been left behind or left wanting more. The last thing they're striving for is to be liked by the general public, because they understand that not even Walmart has something for everyone. And being unpopular can be a scary thing, because we all know how people hate change and we don't know that people will like our particular flavor of unpopular. Some won't. But some will, and that's the audience that matters. Pretty contrary to those playground politics and the "Did you bring enough for the rest of the class?" mentality we were raised with, isn't it? That's why we're leaving the playground and deciding to do business instead.

## BY THE WAY . . . WHO THE HELL AM I?

I'm the unpopular girl.

And all that crap I put up with in school? Priceless. In fact, being that geeky, unpopular kid caused me to learn some pretty wicked lessons. I came to understand that if something was going to work, it was up to me to make it happen. I also knew that the trendiest blue jeans and hippest sneakers weren't going to get me a job. I started to realize that, to me at least, the coolest people in the world were people who made things happen. People who changed things and made people think differently. People who, without any fanfare, were designed to survive—and thrive.

All through history, it has been the same way.

Thomas Edison had only three months of formal schooling but turned out to be one of the most prolific inventors in U.S. history, holding 1,093 patents in his name. (He was also afraid of the dark.)

After being awarded his secondary degree in 1900, Albert Einstein searched two years for a teaching job to no avail; in 1921, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics.

It was more than money, academic achievement, or social standing that made these people *do* extraordinary things. It was something *inside* them. For 17 years, I tried to do things everyone else's way and be one of the "supposed tos": you're supposed to get a job, get promoted, make more money, buy a nicer car, get married, and save for retirement.

And none of that worked for me.

What I wanted to do was do wasn't a popular idea with anyone in my life—I wanted to take a risk and pursue what I loved, which was writing and figuring out solutions to problems. So one day in early 2007, I made the really unpopular decision to leave my six-figure gig and went to work as a junior copywriter for a boutique advertising agency in Las Vegas, Nevada.

I'd never been happier in my life.

About the same time, I started blogging and got thrown into social media in true baptism-by-fire fashion as one of my roles at the new agency. Bit by bit, I was finding new readers, starting new conversations, and discovering what I loved—marketing, branding, and helping people understand where they fit. As someone who was just finding where *she* fit, I was on the same journey.

That led me to Denver, Colorado, having left the ad agency and taken on a real estate technology start-up as my main client, along with becoming an investor. I outsourced all the freelance work I'd accumulated, as this was my first real opportunity to live my dream, going full monty in writing, marketing, and problem solving—and it jazzed me every day for nine months. We were bootstrapped, all of us giving what we could (and beyond), and there came a day where I realized (or rather, my bank account did) that I hadn't drawn a paycheck in over two months.

I walked into the conference room and asked the chief executive officer (CEO) and chief financial officer (CFO) when they thought I'd be able to take a draw, as things were getting tight.

That's when they told me the company was out of money.

That was a Thursday. The following Monday, I woke up with nowhere to go. I'd given something a shot, it failed, and there I was with the next decision needing to be made. Aside from walking out of that six-figure gig over a year prior, this was the best thing to have happened to me yet.

## MY “TODAY” AS AN ENTREPRENEUR

I was a super shitty W2 employee, and it was clear long before I admitted it that I wasn't meant to work according to someone else's rules. With no other choices than to sink or swim, I got off the couch and set about figuring out my assets.

Money? (Cue unbridled, mocking laughter.)

Over 17 years of sales and marketing skills? Check.

A small, but growing audience surrounding my blog and social media activities? Check.

Some talent with words? Apparently.

I fully owned the knowledge that I wasn't for everyone, but I was bound and determined to find more of the people who appreciated what I was doing online through my two blogs and social media accounts. I pulled back in that freelance work I'd outsourced, cultivated relationships, and kept doing what I was doing, learning something every step along the way. From September 2009 (which was the *On the Couch* date) to early 2011, I'd built an even bigger audience—and it was one that participated, one that shared with me as much as I shared with them. I guess people noticed. My brand had become this go-to source for an irreverent, in-your-face perspective on business, marketing, and life in general and that happened only for three reasons: the audience, their willingness to share what I was doing, and my commitment to own everything about my brand. In early 2011, I was invited to write a regular monthly column for *Entrepreneur Magazine* and was then offered the opportunity to write this book.

But . . .

## I'VE NEVER HEARD OF YOU. WHY SHOULD I LISTEN TO ANYTHING YOU HAVE TO SAY?

Fair question, and one I even asked myself! When I was approached to write this book, all I could think was, “Who the hell am I to tell this story?” In the middle of one of my laments, a friend of mine stopped me by smacking her hand down on the table and said quite plainly, “You're just like everyone else who's taken a risk and started something. The only difference is you're not on the front page of magazines.”

She was right.

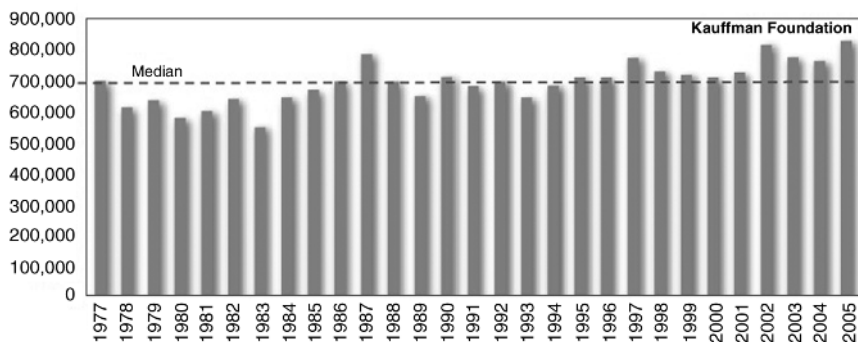
I'm just like you. And I think that maybe people were tired of getting business advice from people who *aren't* just like them. Whether we aspire to make headlines or simply be a household name in our own neck of the woods, I know we all share two common goals: to be great businesspeople and to build brands that become integral parts of the communities in which we live and industries in which we excel.

So, what a person like me can do for a person like you is show you the power I see each and every day in being unpopular and how you can use that power to differentiate yourself in a meaningful way from those who believe that the line in the middle of the road is the best place to open a business. And it all begins with giving failure a big, fat hug.

## FAILURE: A *SUPER* UNPOPULAR CONCEPT

It's the looming question: What if my business venture fails? Well, it's highly likely. (I know—I'm such a killjoy.) More than 700,000 new businesses are launched in the United States alone each year (see Figure 1.1). Of those, only two-thirds survive the first two years and less than half make it to the four-year point (statistics courtesy of the

**Figure 1.1**  
**Kauffman Foundation Chart**



Source: "Exploring Firm Formation: Why Is the Number of New Firms Constant?" The Kaufmann Foundation, 2010.

Small Business Administration). Somewhere along your entrepreneurial path, you're going to start a business or have an idea that ultimately fails—just like you're going to do things in your personal life that don't work out so great every now and then. So here's my question: When did we start holding our businesses to standards of success that we can't even maintain as human beings?

Talk about needing to cut ourselves some slack! Failure is a rite of passage. We should learn to fail fast and often, yet differently each time. When we do, we can quickly get through the shit that doesn't work and find the things that do, which lets us get on with the business of creating something great. In the same way that a breakup doesn't mean we'll never find a companion again, having a business venture fail doesn't preclude you going on to building something that's everything you wanted in a business.

So how does this apply to businesses designed to be popular and those who embrace the power of unpopular?

If you build a business in order to be popular, you're going to fail—and fail the same way every time.

**Why?** Because you take the same path, and it's the path of following someone or something else. It's devoid of innovation and instead uses “me too” concepts that don't give anyone a reason to care about what you're doing or why.

If you build a business designed to be unpopular with just the right audience, although you might fail, too, you're going to fail *differently* each time.

**Why?** Because you're thinking, creating, and being proactive. You're pursuing your vision with a pair of titanium balls and a gleam in your eye.

One model is destined for failure. One has a chance at success. Which one do you want to have a go at?

## FAILURE? INEVITABLE. UNPOPULAR? POWERFUL!

Hug failure. Roll up next to it in bed every night and spoon it. Become intimate with it because it's going to allow you to do things in life and business that those who are afraid to fail can only imagine. Entrepreneurs use great relationships and great ideas to give things a



go with both feet in the pool, and they understand that being unpopular isn't about changing what they do and who they are for the people who aren't their fans . . . it's about finding the people who will love them.

Acknowledging that your brand is unpopular isn't about being disliked—it's about knowing who will best be served by what you want to build. Just think about the possibilities for your business when you:

- Stop focusing on pleasing the people who are never going to like you, your product, your service.
- Learn more about the ones who already do (and just don't know it).
- Can focus 100 percent of your efforts on building a business for *that* audience instead of spinning your wheels on the myth of universal popularity.

### **Harry Potter—The Ultimate Unpopular Brand**

Although she might be the stuff dreams are made of to aspiring writers and people who like wizardry, J. K. Rowling's life prior to Harry's rise to Hogwarts-flavored success was anything but a dream. Living on government assistance as a single mother whose own mother had recently passed away, Rowling's first incarnation of the Harry Potter series took her years to complete and was rejected by 12 publishing houses. She finally received an offer on the first manuscript in 1996, along with a whopping advance of £1,500, or roughly \$2,250 in those days. Try to tell a single mother not to spend all of that in one place.

Flash forward to today. The last four books in the Harry Potter series all consecutively set records as the fastest-selling books in history, and the brand itself is estimated to be worth in excess of \$15 billion (figure as of 2007).

It's not popular to follow your gut. In fact it's anything but in most cases. Truth be told, I'd never picked up a Harry Potter book until 2011 out of sheer spite for the worldwide phenomenon. I was damned if I was going to hop on the Hogwarts Express. But sometimes, you keep hearing about things because they truly are so exceptional that people can't stand to *not* talk about them, which is why I turned my first page of Harry Potter (finally) in 2011.

This is the kind of brand and reputation we as entrepreneurs should strive to build—unpopular with all of the people who will never love you or will be the tough sell and pure nectar to those who will admire, follow, and, most important, share what you love to do with everyone they know. It doesn't matter what the current size of your business is or what its eventual scale will be; brand advocacy is brand advocacy. The power of unpopular rests in understanding those who will love what you do and the persistence involved in finding them. Just as Harry Potter wasn't an out-of-the-gate hit, great brands take time to develop traction, and it's a continual process of evaluating your audience and refining your message so that you keep the eyes you want on you, unconcerned if others look away.

Sure, there are people out there who hate the Harry Potter books for some reason (or like me, for no reason at all). What you build will have the same critics—justified or not.

So we've figured out that being unpopular isn't about being disliked and that, yeah, there will be people along the way who will hate what we build (and some for no good reason). What will people think about you if you decide to build an unpopular brand?

## DOES BEING UNPOPULAR MEAN I'M AN ASSHOLE (OR HAVE TO BECOME ONE)?

No. In fact, the people who build unpopular brands are just the opposite and understand that it's not about seeking to offend, tearing other people down, or yelling the loudest. Pick up a copy of Robert Sutton's *The No Asshole Rule* if you're in doubt. Unpopular business strategies offer no harbor for asshole behavior and if you're offended by that vernacular, take it up with Sutton—he's a professor at Stanford and I'll defer to his expert grasp on both the word and concept. I think that we'd all do better by taking an anti-asshole approach to the Path to Unpopular and embrace the following from the start:

- **Humility:** It's impossible to get everything done on one's own, and the sooner you acknowledge that you need a team to get you from point A to point Z and every point in between, the better off you'll be. Ask for help, know what you don't know, say thank you often, and never be afraid to admit it when you're

wrong. (Four rather unpopular acts for people who are supposed to be self-sufficient, no?)

- **Including While Excluding:** Building great companies and brands (and consequently, human beings) isn't merely about being exclusive. The more you seek to include the people who are influenced by your business decisions, the more clearly you can get a sense for how we can better serve the people we wish to please. In the tech-laden, referral-based business culture that rules the lives of many, consumers flock not only to brands where they have a voice but to brands that they feel truly *hear* them. It's important to remember, however, that every brand excludes someone by nature—and that's part of what we're going to figure out.
- **Purpose:** It's the *why* behind your motivations and what guides you. Although these motivations can change over time, understanding the purpose that drives your business decisions at any given time is imperative. Unpopular brands stick to their guns (even when sticking to your guns sucks) because they know doing so is for the best over the long haul. There also comes a time where there may be disagreements about your brand's purpose and direction, and those times make for great conversations because purpose is something that can't be a divided issue. (We'll discuss this more in Chapter 7.)

## BUT HOW DOES BEING UNPOPULAR HELP ME BUILD A BETTER BUSINESS?

Although being unpopular might never have scored you a date to the prom or a featured position in the yearbook, becoming comfortable with unpopular holds an inherent power your competitors aren't willing to tap. By taking the three anti-asshole principles just discussed, we can begin to look at how following the path toward unpopular enables us to be better at them, and in turn build better businesses:

- **Unpopular thinkers hate sheep:** Not of the barnyard variety, but of the shortsighted-thinking variety. You innovate, create, and break down the norms because you see better solutions and

underserved audiences yearning to be noticed. You seek out unconventional solutions to conventional problems because you've never been wrapped in the protective, chocolate-flavored outer coating of popular thought that keeps us from coming up with our own ideas. You are the ones who notice.

- **Unpopular brands love critics:** Remember when we were told to embrace constructive criticism? Being unpopular holds the power of making your critics work in your favor. This is so epic that I had no choice but to give the subject its own chapter. (Try to resist the urge to flip forward to Chapter 8, okay?) Critics make us better. Assholes don't. You—the unpopular thinker—know the difference.
- **Unpopular brands don't have a backup plan:** If you're afraid to make a jump, that fear goes into every decision you make. This is why we talked about getting on touchy-feely terms with failure. Commitment can't be faked, and unpopular brands need it by the bucketload. Unpopular thinkers work without a net and invest everything you have into what you love—because that's how shit gets done.

Unpopular strategies are more powerful than the *popular* crap we've been fed for eons. They'll do more to help you build better businesses and create fiercely loyal audiences than any tactic you can pull out of an MBA program. So how do we get from where we are to unpopular? Let's head to the kitchen before we launch some half-baked idea. We need a recipe.

## A RECIPE FOR UNPOPULARITY: FIVE INGREDIENTS

When I sat down and looked at every brand I'd encountered in the marketplace that had found any level of longevity and success, they each demonstrated an understanding and daily practice of these five elements. From my favorite local restaurant here in Denver to the larger-than-life brands that decorate pop culture, it didn't matter the size or scale. It just matters that they understand *all* of these qualities and don't just go through the motions—they weave them seamlessly into their business cultures.

- **Personality:** Your brand is a who and never a what. People do business with people.
- **Approachability:** If you haven't created a personality that lets your audience know they can talk to your brand, you need to rethink the personality you created.
- **Sharability:** Your brand personality along with the welcome mat you put out for your audience dictates how, why, and how often people share you with the people in their lives (also known as your potential customers).
- **Scalability:** Every unpopular brand pays attention to infrastructure—if you've spent the effort on creating an approachable personality that makes your audience want to share your brand, growth is inevitable and you must be able to deal with it.
- **Profitability:** You've invested in the who and put out the welcome mat. Word's gotten around, and you're growing. You've built the infrastructure to support the growth. Now, how do you make sure you remain solvent and keep on track so that you can point your brand toward generating revenue? The emotional and practical implications of profitability.

For the remainder of this book, these are the five ingredients we'll be working with in our big ol' business-building kitchen. But this whole "unpopular" thing . . .

## WILL IT WORK?

The only determining factors in whether anything you set out to accomplish will find success are you, the market, and a shitload of perseverance. What you'll get here are some tools to use as you get into the thick of things and show you, step by step, how to establish a foundation for your business that can:

- Withstand changes in the economic climate.
- Tune out the assholes and tune in to your audience.
- Start becoming something that the audience you seek to serve will appreciate, share, and continue to patronize.
- Put a smile on your face more days than not because you're doing something you love for a living—no matter how big you

become, how many people work for you, or whether or not you find yourself in the headlines.

And I didn't mention a thing about making money.

The pages that follow will have few references to money and none to the speed at which you can expect to start stashing some away in the bank. Even Chapter 7—where we discuss profitability—is less a chapter about making gobs of money than one on building your business so that you don't wake up one day and realize you've been working for free. Making money from a business is a by-product of doing good business—and every unpopular brand is built to do just that.

In addition to being a literary icon, Henry David Thoreau was also a pragmatic man who offered entrepreneurial spirits a tip on how to perceive wealth acquired along life's road: "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."

This is why I run a business—so that I might have the means to let some things alone. It's also a part of every unpopular business, deciding what you can (and should) let alone or let others take responsibility for. *That* is how we all can buy time and spend it on the things we hold dear. So although you can't spend money to buy time, you can build a business that will make both for you.

So yes, the "unpopular" thing works, and the next step is actually building that unpopular business (which I know you're chomping at the bit to do). But first let's take a trip to Kidron, Ohio, so that I can introduce you to J. E. Lehman, a guy whose parents told him he should probably figure out what he wanted to do for a living. And boy—did he!

## CASE IN POINT: THE STORY OF LEHMAN'S

### *BY NO ONE'S RULES*

Kidron, Ohio, is a small town whose current-day population tips the scales around 600 residents. You'd never guess that it's

home to a 42,000-square-foot hardware store that sprawls between four pre-Civil War-era buildings and welcomes between 500,000 and 750,000 people through its doors each year.

They sell more oil lamps than electric ones.

You're more likely to find a wide selection of butter churns than 17 different interior paints in butter yellow.

They are the primary supplier of period-specific, nonelectrical appliances to Hollywood productions.

And it all started because J. E. (or Junior, as he was called back then) Lehman's parents asked him just *what* he was going to do for a living.

### **The History**

Kidron was founded in the early 1800s by Swiss Mennonites seeking religious freedom in the Americas. The surrounding area welcomed others of a similar religious and farming ilk, including the Amish. Just like every small town in any country, there was a little hardware store that opened in Kidron in 1915. It sold everything from heating oil to Dodge automobiles; a population of a few hundred whose faith was about self-reliance didn't need more than one store to supply what they couldn't build at home. But this store wasn't Lehman's.

In 1955, J. E. Lehman returned home to Kidron from volunteering service overseas for the Mennonite missionary community. Soon after his arrival, J. E. knew the farming lifestyle wasn't one that suited him, so his parents put it on the line: if you're not going to be a farmer, what are you going to do for a living? After a long discussion, J. E. decided he wanted to buy the town's hardware store. His father approved of the move and lent him the money to make the purchase. And *that's* when Lehman's came to Kidron, Ohio.

Jay Lehman had always admired the simplistic way of life the growing Amish population brought to his part of the Ohio valley. They were a steadfast farming culture steeped in values and

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eschewed the newfangled technologies (like electricity) that were cropping up left and right after World War II. He thought it'd be a shame if future generations were unable to enjoy the benefits that his community enjoyed, created by the do-it-yourself nature of the Amish culture, so they became his target customer—he was going to do everything he could with his new little hardware store to ensure they had what they needed.

Even with his enthusiastic approach to the store, business was rather slow during the first months. So slow, in fact, that he had to hire his father—the one who lent him the money to buy the store in the first place—to watch the store each day so that he could drive a school bus to earn enough money to pay back his father's loan. So here was Jay Lehman—outstanding loan to his father, working a second job to pay him back, hiring him to watch the store so that he could go earn more money, and choosing to cater to a population that shunned modern conveniences. Probably not a course a career counselor would advise one to take, and certainly not one that followed what many would consider popular conventions for building a business.

The hardware store chugged along. In the early 1960s, Jay Lehman hired people to run the store while he went off on a two-year assignment with the missionary community to open a travel agency in Africa. Two years turned into four . . . six . . . and eventually more than ten. In his overseas adventures he came across the same situation repeatedly: people in the world who had unreliable sources of electricity, if any sources at all. (Do you see where this is headed?)

### **Two Things: Luck and Timing**

In the early 1970s, Jay Lehman returned from his missionary trip and came back to his hardware store. “A good business is the beneficiary of two things,” he states: “Luck and timing.” The year 1973 brought both to his doorstep.



When Lehman went to place an order for some wood-burning cooking stoves with one of the manufacturers he frequently patronized, he learned they were no longer going to be carrying the model he wanted. Knowing that his target audience—the local Amish community—relied heavily on these stoves for their day-to-day needs, he asked what he had to do to keep them in stock. The answer? He could buy a three-year supply.

What would be completely absurd to any sane businessperson, Jay Lehman did without a second thought: he took out a second mortgage on his house and bought a three-year supply of wood-burning stoves.

Right about this time, OPEC initiated an oil embargo primarily targeted at the United States and oil skyrocketed from \$3 per barrel to nearly \$12. Gasoline and heating oil came at a premium, and natural gas wasn't the prevalent resource it is today.

Jay Lehman's three-year supply of wood-burning stoves sold out in six months. Luck and timing—he had them in spades. But no entrepreneur is content with slam-bam success, and Lehman was already working on what was next. All those profits from the stoves went right back into the business. The town of Kidron was starting to see customers coming from as far away as Pennsylvania, all of them in search of the anachronistic nonelectrical appliances that comprised the bulk of Lehman's inventory.

### **Flash Forward**

A lot's happened at Lehman's since the 1973 energy crisis. They launched a catalog not long after and became one of the pioneers of the mail-order age, a move that exploded sales across the country. And remember Jay's missionary stints during World War II and then following in Africa? Well, that information he'd gathered about all of those places that had unreliable or no electricity sure did come back around to help his business. His missionary connections who still served those areas

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went to Jay's store for everything they needed that couldn't be acquired locally.

When the late 1980s and early 1990s rolled around, Jay's son Galen heard about these invisible connections that were going to help people across the globe communicate. Naturally, he was talking about the Internet, and (thankfully) Galen has the same entrepreneurial spirit as his father. When most people were skeptical about "this Internet," Lehman's was already selling product online (a Mennonite-owned business catering to the Amish community built a website?). To this day, Lehman's website remains a resource not only for their domestic customers but also for the loyal customers around the world who discovered the little hardware store in Ohio only through those "invisible connections." What began as a skeptical and wary network of information became the way for many global consumers to acquire hard-to-find tools and appliances not available anywhere else.

### **Enter Y2K**

Remember the OPEC embargo? The entire Y2K scare of 1998 and 1999 proved to be another huge boost for Lehman's seemingly narrow target demographic. Mainstream America started to discover this store that carried products and tools that would prove useful when the computers stopped working when the clocks struck 2000. For the two years leading up to Y2K, the dozen phone lines leading into the store were incessantly ringing and Lehman's staff were answering more and more questions from the curious about how to do *this* and what they needed to do *that* in case of the grid going down. The buzz of activity and interest from novice customers made the Lehman team—now comprised of Jay and his son Galen and daughter Glenda—think: What if we started showing people how to use all these things we sell? Once again, they were on to something.

The looming threat of what could happen on Y2K sparked a renaissance of the do-it-yourself lifestyle and new, interested customers took to the Lehman's guidance with fervor. Things that were once considered old suddenly had new relevance, and customers felt empowered. Y2K didn't mean anyone had to stop living when (and if) the predicted downfall happened, and on top of it all, Lehman's had found a new way to demonstrate the relevance of these "old things" to those living more modern lifestyles than his original target demographic.

When Y2K passed without fanfare, Glenda described the in-store environment as quiet. "You could throw a baseball from one end of our showroom to another and not hit a single customer." So what did Lehman's do? Again, they took the least likely path and chose to expand. "We had to ask ourselves if we'd saturated the market. Had we really reached every possible customer there was to reach? If our showroom was this quiet, we needed to do an even better job than we have with Y2K in showing people how our products fit into their lives," she said.

Today, Lehman's continues to be a destination. In their showroom, customers and visitors can find everything from butter-churning demonstrations to a \$5,000 hand-hammered copper bathtub to an actual Boneshaker-style bicycle that tips the scales around \$800. The store isn't just a place for people to indulge in a bit of nostalgia—it's a living testament to Jay Lehman's original business goal: preserving the simple conventions of the surrounding Amish community for generations to come. "If there's something like a butter churn on our shelves, it will churn butter. You can use it as a daffodil vase if you want, but it works. We sell things that—while they might be simple, they work," explains Glenda. Although it might be considered a buzzword, Lehman's has achieved *authenticity* in the truest sense of Webster's definition: "original, primary, first-hand, one who does things himself." Lehman's products, work ethic, and way of embracing the education of customers speaks volumes—which means

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Lehman's has never found the need to scream from the rooftops about who they are and what they believe.

And if you're interested, Glenda *has* used one of their small butter churns as a daffodil vase. But she also uses it to make butter.

## AN UNPOPULAR BRAND BUILT BY THE MOST UNLIKELY MAN

Now, you probably wouldn't have thought you'd pick up this book and find one of the first case studies to be one featuring a Mennonite missionary who decided to buy a hardware store that served the local Amish community.

And that's the point.

Whatever your perception of popular has been, it's time to rethink it. The smartest people among us in the business world are pioneers of unpopular ideas and understand something that the popular kids never will: building, growing, and running a business has less to do with what you have to sell than it does the size of and your connection with the audience you're committed to serve.

Jay Lehman? Committed. Did he ever think he'd be the namesake behind a 42,000-square-foot retail location supported by a 100,000-square-foot warehouse and both Hollywood's and the world's go-to source for "if you think you can't find that anymore, think again" appliances? Was his goal to be the only business from Kidron, Ohio, featured on the town's Wikipedia page? Nope. He's just a man who "likes old stuff" and wanted to do his part to preserve some really cool pieces of history for generations to come. All along the way he listened to his customers and found even more ways to show them how this "old stuff" fulfilled their modern-day needs.

When you're unpopular with all of the right people—the ones who don't want, need, or understand what you have to offer—the ones who fall in love with you will eventually show up at your door. Or in the case of Lehman's, your parking lot. Jay Lehman likes to look at the license plates in the parking lot of his store from time to

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time, and on Black Friday in 2010, he did just that. That day he'd counted plates from 32 different states.

Not too shabby for a country boy with an eighth-grade education who decided to open a hardware store specializing in nonelectrical appliances.

So let's get on with the business of building an unpopular business, just like J. E. Lehman did. The first step is finding the people who will love us (which sure ain't the entire class), as there's no sense in performing a Broadway play in an empty theater.

