

October 25, 2014

## JOHN JOHNSON

### JOHNSON PUBLISHING COMPANY

John H. Johnson was a pioneer African-American entrepreneur. His vehicle was a publishing company which earned him the title of “Apostle of the Black Middle Class.” His flagship publication, *Ebony*, made him a wealthy man and inspired countless readers to strive for success within the American democratic capitalist society. His story provides timeless inspiration for anyone frustrated by obstacles to success. As Johnson so correctly liked to put it, “Don’t get mad; get smart.”

#### THE OBSTACLES

John Johnson was born in segregated Arkansas City, Arkansas in 1918. His father, a sawmill worker died while John was an infant. His mother remarried but the family lived in poverty.

In 1933 John’s mother moved with John to Chicago where she hoped her son would have a better chance to realize his potential. At first 14-year-old John found Chicago to be anything but hospitable. The family had to survive on welfare. John was frequently humiliated by teens his age who laughed at his simple country ways including his homemade clothes. But, thanks to his mother, he did not get discouraged. As he put it, “My mother instilled in me the desire to excel, and although there was nothing but defeat around me, she taught me that I could win.”

John also found inspiration in reading Dale Carnegie’s book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It was there that he found his future lifetime motto, “Don’t get mad, get smart.”

At DuSable High School in South Chicago John was an honor student, member of the debate team, manager of the school paper, and editor of the yearbook. On one assignment as a reporter he interviewed Harry Pace, president of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company of America and a leading black businessman in Chicago. Pace offered Johnson a job.

#### PREPARING TO START HIS OWN BUSINESS

Johnson worked as Harry Pace’s assistant in charge of producing the company newsletter. At the same time he attended first the University of Chicago and then Northwestern University. The company newsletter included information of interest to black Chicagoans and much of that information was drawn from other published sources. Preparing the newsletter introduced him to the black social and political leadership of Chicago and issues related to the local black community. It wasn’t long before working on the newsletter caused Johnson to believe that there existed a potential national market for a magazine of success stories serving the black community. And so, in 1942 he launched a monthly publication called *Negro Digest*. It was to the black communities’ equivalent of the then popular American magazine *Reader’s Digest*.

## THE FIRST BUSINESS: VISION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Johnson once explained his business vision as, “catering to others who, like him, had aspirations for a better life, had been embittered by failures to enter mainstream society, and were obliged to seek opportunity within the black community.” He regarded his business as both a means of livelihood and a social mission.

To finance his new venture Johnson borrowed \$500 using his mother’s furniture as collateral. He mailed charter subscription applications to the 20,000 policy holders of Supreme Life Insurance Company. Three thousand responded. In addition, he attempted to get a local magazine distributor to carry *Negro Digest*. The distributor was decidedly not interested but Johnson managed to get him to do a trial run. Just to make sure that the trial was a success, Johnson paid 30 co-workers to ask for the *Digest* at newsstands and then reimbursed them for the purchases. That may have been necessary to jump start sales, but the market was there and within a year *Negro Digest* was selling at the rate of 50,000 copies per month.

## EBONY

In 1945 Johnson launched his next and most famous publication, *Ebony*. This was to be the black equivalent of *Life*, a magazine full of success stories and great photos. *Ebony* quickly became a sales success but Johnson had difficulty getting large companies to advertise in the magazine. Initially, he dealt with the problem by starting several cash generating mail order businesses and advertising them in *Ebony*.

But his long run goal was to get advertising from major corporations and his first breakthrough in this regard occurred in 1947 when Zenith Radio Corporation agreed to advertise in *Ebony*. Johnson had repeatedly tried to sell the idea to Zenith’s advertising manager and got little more than a cold shoulder for the effort. So Johnson decided to bypass the manager and go directly to the president of Zenith, Eugene McDonald. Johnson knew that McDonald had a strong interest in an Arctic expedition that had included a black explorer. So he obtained an interview with Johnson for the purpose of talking about an article featuring that explorer. Once in McDonald’s office Johnson did discuss the explorer but also managed to sell McDonald on the idea of advertising in *Ebony*. Zenith became a long term advertiser in *Ebony* and Johnson was eventually named to Zenith’s board of directors.

## CRACKING THE OFFICE BUILDING RACE BARRIER

By 1949 Johnson’s business had made him a millionaire. His business had grown large enough justify a move to a larger facility and he had his eye on a building on the fringe of Chicago’s elite downtown office area. His initial bid was turned down because of his race. In typical Johnson “don’t get mad, get smart” fashion he tried again, this time with a white lawyer making the offer for an anonymous buyer. The offer was accepted and Johnson Publishing Company moved into the elite area.

## COSMETICS- ANOTHER BOLD VENTURE

In 1973 Johnson started Fashion Fair Cosmetics, a cosmetics business targeted at the upscale black community. For a number of years he had sponsored a touring fashion show named the Ebony Fashion Fair. Through that experience he became aware of the lack of darker shades of makeup for his models. After failing

to convince white cosmetics firms to meet that need, he decided to do it himself. His new cosmetics company lost a million dollars a year before finally becoming profitable. During that tense time he spearheaded a sales effort that gained entrance for his cosmetics at major department stores, starting with Marshall Fields. By the tenth year of its existence Fashion Fair Cosmetics was carried by 1500 department stores and was profitable.

Here's what Johnson had to say about this special time in his life, "Things got so bad that friends told me I was endangering the whole company. But I had so much invested that I had to see the whole card. Beyond that, I wanted to know if I still had it. I wanted to know if I could still open doors and accounts and turn negatives into positives. I was 55 years old when I mobilized my forces to turn yet another disadvantage into an advantage. The disadvantage was the historic neglect of black women by major cosmetics manufacturers who refused to manufacture and sell products that met the particular needs of black women and dark-skinned white women."

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND PLACE IN HISTORY

From the beginning John Johnson saw entrepreneurship as both a means of livelihood and a way to put meaning into his life by providing a needed service. As he put it, "I didn't start a business to get rich; I started a business to provide a service and improve myself economically." And what was that service? In 1942 he said, in an opening editorial, "*Negro Digest* is dedicated to the development of interracial understanding and the promotion of national unity." In 1945 when launching *Ebony* he said, "We wanted to emphasize the positive aspects of black life, and make blacks proud of themselves...We believed in 1945 black America needed positive images to fulfill their potential. We believed then and now that you have to change images before you can change acts and institutions."

*Negro Digest* and *Ebony* were part of the *Gestalt* that led to the successful civil rights court decisions and federal legislation of the 1950's and 1960's. Johnson Publications clearly played a part in that movement doing exactly what Johnson set out to... presenting positive images of blacks in all walks of life and thereby changing the image of blacks. If, as he thought, the image has to be changed before acts and institutions can be changed, then history will surely give John Johnson a prominent place as a social reformer in addition to a role model businessman.

## REFERENCES

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