

## JACK MILLER QUILL CORPORATION

Jack Miller created the Quill Corporation. By the 1980s Quill had become the world's largest mail order business specializing in office supplies. It subsequently merged with the giant store-based office supply company Staples.

Jack did not create Quill alone. His brothers, Arnold and Harvey, share the credit for Quill's success. But in the beginning the Quill Corporation was a one man operation and that man was Jack Miller.

### Career Ladder

Jack graduated from the University of Illinois in 1950 with a major in advertising and no idea of what to do with his life. He financed his college education by digging ditches, washing dishes, modeling for art classes, and performing an acrobatic act at various public events, night clubs and theaters.

Following graduation he took a job with his father in a Chicago retail chicken store near Wrigley Field. There he waited on customers, slaughtered birds and cleaned the premises.

Tiring of that work he left for Oregon with visions of becoming a lumberjack. But he changed his mind en route and returned to Chicago where he got a job selling advertising for a suburban newspaper. He soon quit that job and went to work in a chicken store owned by his brother Arnold.

One Saturday an uncle who owned a successful specialty food manufacturing firm stopped in the store. Seeing Jack mopping the floor, he asked, "What kind of job is this for a college graduate?" He offered Jack a job in sales with his company. Jack accepted. For the next few years Jack traveled throughout the United States calling on food wholesalers. Those years taught Jack much about distribution in the United States and he used that knowledge later in his own business.

At the end of the fourth year as a traveling salesman Jack married and soon began to look for work that would allow him to be home more often. He eventually left his uncle and took a job selling brief cases in Chicago.

In 1956 Jack decided to start his own business selling office supplies through direct calls on Chicago businesses. He found an office supply wholesaler who would sell to him if he put up a \$300 deposit. It was agreed that his wife would work to support the family until the business began to pay. A \$2,000 loan was obtained from his father-in-law. A business telephone was set up in his father's chicken store; and Jack began calling on potential customers with the wholesaler's catalog under his arm.

### Growth of the Business

It took a year and a half for Jack to build the business to a size large enough to support his family. Then he risked that modest success by bringing in his brother Harvey as a partner. They opened an "office" in the basement of a relative's two-flat and six months later hired their first employee – a part-time secretary.

In an effort to boost sales Jack began experimenting with mail order on a very small scale. He began sending penny post cards to 153 accounts. The first mailing touted 5 special items and generated enough order to encourage Jack to continue the practice. By 1960 the periodic mailings were generating more business than the personal calls and a decision was made to concentrate exclusively on the mail order side of the business. Money was borrowed from a bank to finance the first catalog and the backup inventory and in 1963 the mail order business began.

A cash flow crisis occurred when the first catalog failed to produce adequate sales. A family meeting was held. Jack and Harvey were advised to give up on the idea and return to personal selling. But Jack insisted on sticking with mail order. His judgment was vindicated as catalog sales slowly rose to the breakeven point.

With a survival level of sales achieved, the company, named the Quill Corporation, entered into a period of steady growth, culminating in a 1973 move to a modern plant in Northbrook, Illinois. By then Quill had 60 employees and had reached a critical point in the company's history – the choice between continued but modest growth or the "fast track."

Jack and Harvey chose the fast track. They brought in their brother Arnold as third member of the top management team; they made rapid growth their goal; and they began to train the managers needed to sustain that growth. Over the next decade Quill's sales grew thirty-fold; employment rose to over 300 full-time employees; and Quill a position as a leader in its industry. During this time the company moved again, this time to a state-of-the art facility in Lincolnshire, Illinois. Also during this time they brought the third brother, Arnold, into the business.

### The Family Farm in Modern Form

One of the distinguishing features of Quill under Jack's leadership was its success as a family business. The three brothers managed to work smoothly together by taking separate areas of responsibility. Jack was responsible for advertising, merchandising and promotion; Harvey handled production and purchasing; and Arnold handled financial matters. The brothers took titles because corporate law required it – Jack was president, Arnold was treasurer and Harvey was secretary. But they truly ran the business as a team. The family team was expanded when Jack's father died. His mother needed something to do and the brothers brought her into the business to work in the mail room. In addition all of the brothers' children worked at Quill at one time or another as did Jack's wife Audrey. To the nuclear family Quill was more than a source of livelihood. As Jack once put it, " This business has been absolutely fabulous. It brought the whole family together. It used to be common for a whole family to own a farm. It was their center, their core. That's what this business is for us. It's our fun. The best game in town. I'm a tough handball player, but the business is more fun than that."

### The Quill Culture

From the customer's viewpoint Quill's success was built on outstanding merchandise lines, attractive prices, excellent service and highly effective communication. Jack Miller believes that a deeper explanation for Quill's success was what he refers to as "The Quill Culture." He describes that culture in terms of the following ten components:

1. WE CAN MAKE GOOD THINGS HAPPEN  
(We have the power and the responsibility to create our own future)
2. WE MUST CONSTANTLY DEDICATE OURSELVES TO THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE  
(...aggressively, pursuing superior performance in every area of the business. Success will follow.)
3. WE MUST CONCENTRATE OUR EFFORTS  
(Great results can be achieved by concentrating our abilities and resources on carefully defined objectives).
4. WE MUST ALWAYS STRIVE FOR SIMPLICITY  
(The simplest way is usually the best).
5. WE BELIEVE STRONGLY IN THE VALUE OF HARD WORK  
(Hard, consistent effort and pride in our work can achieve great results).
6. WE BELIEVE IN BEING VERY AGGRESSIVE YET CONSERVATIVE  
(Conservative does not equate with timid. It means careful analysis and careful preparation and not letting greed and hopes override reality and judgment).
7. INTEGRITY IS THE GLUE THAT HOLDS EVERYTHING TOGETHER  
(We should always deal honestly with all people and with ourselves ).
8. KEEPING A LEAN, HANDS-ON ORGANIZATION IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS  
(Fat clogs the arteries and reduces efficiency in people and organizations. It has to be avoided).

9. WE BELIEVE THAT NO COMPANY HAS A DIVINE RIGHT TO SURVIVE AND PROSPER  
(It's a right that must be earned ... year in and year out).

10. WE CARE  
(About our customers, our suppliers, our fellow workers and ourselves).

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