

Reprint

Wire Harnesses and Shoes?

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By Loren Smith

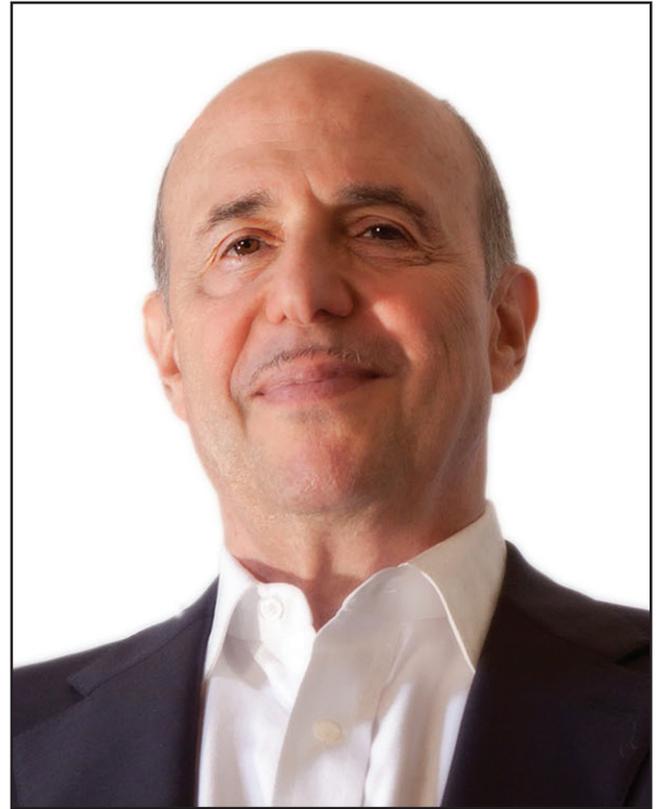
What could a company in the wire harness industry have in common with one that sells shoes on the Internet?

I recently found out from a book called *Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose* by Tony Hsieh. Although I am generally not a fan of business books, especially those written by CEOs, this book is definitely worth reading. It is an inspiring tale of determination and willingness to bet everything on an entrepreneurial dream, and it is an illuminating book about business culture.

A company that created over \$1 billion in market value in less than nine years must have done a few things right, and Zappos did. Moreover, they excelled with an unlikely business proposition--to sell shoes online--and a product lacking differentiation. How? By creating and maintaining an exceptionally service-oriented culture that differentiated them from their competitors.

In one of my columns this past year, I commented that many years of observation have made it clear to me that the single greatest factor distinguishing extremely successful harness companies from the ones that just get by is culture, and that I attribute most of the success I have enjoyed in our industry to the culture my team and I created. So Hsieh's main theme was not news to me. But the way Tony Hsieh and his team were able, over time, to embed this commitment to service into their organization was what made the book compelling.

Many of the concepts pointed out in the book have invaluable application for the wire harness business: a focused hiring process that looks for cultural fit as much as technical and administrative skills; strong internal training programs; clearly stated mechanisms enabling internal promotion; managerial humility; clear, candid, consistent, communication with all employees, and partnering with suppliers as opposed to the win loose dynamic that often characterizes these relation-



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ships. That's a tall order for a young business, but the Zappos team was able to incorporate all these principles while effectively managing exponential growth.

Their culture has been particularly predicated on providing customers with what they call a wow experience, a concept we surely recognize as the key to getting and keeping business, but one that can be difficult to keep front and center every day. I'm thankful I understood that objective early on.

When I first got into the wire harness business, a buyer from a major construction equipment manufacturer showed up unannounced one day and put a set of blueprints on my desk. Explaining that he had just lost one of his harness suppliers, he told me if I could produce the harnesses over the weekend and give him product Monday morning he would not forget it.

We disrupted our schedule, worked extra hours, and were able to provide the company with product on Monday morning. We gave him a wow experience he never forgot, and the company became my largest customer.

All of us in the wire harness business need to keep learning and stay inspired. *Delivering Happiness* does both.

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