

Amish ex-farmers have business tips for CEOs: There's more to it than making a bundle of money

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Some of the most successful entrepreneurs in America have never been to high school, don't use electricity, and would sooner love their competitors than sue them.

For generations, the Amish have tended farms tucked away in rural communities like Lancaster, Pennsylvania, motivated by a faith that urged them to be in the world but not of it. But as housing subdivisions and strip malls suck up farmland, many Amish have traded their plows for profits—with remarkable success.

There are nearly 9,000 Amish-run small businesses in North America, according to Donald Kraybill, a professor at Elizabethtown College in Lancaster and a noted expert on the Amish and other Anabaptists. And whereas 50 percent of small businesses fail within the first five years, only 10 percent of Amish-run enterprises have gone belly up.

Despite church strictures against electricity, the Internet, motor vehicles and many forms of advertising, Amish businesses have landed contracts with companies like Kmart and Ralph Lauren, developed nationwide networks of retailers and crafted kitchens for customers from coast to coast.

“The phrase ‘Amish millionaire’ is no longer an oxymoron,” Kraybill says.

Amish expert Erik Wesner explores this surprising success story and offers tips on what other entrepreneurs can learn from the “plain people” in his new book, *Success Made Simple: An Inside Look at Why Amish Businesses Thrive*.

Wesner first encountered the Amish while he was a traveling book salesman in the Midwest. “The business owners were the busiest of anyone,” Wesner recalls. “They only had ten minutes to talk to me. But when I did talk to them, they bought books.”

At a time of short-sighted speculators, when Wall Street brokers brag of luring widows into bad investments and executives admit to ambitions that outpaced their ability to produce safe cars, the Amish have a unique and compelling ethos, according to Wesner. “The meaning of success in an Amish context tends not to be wealth,” he said. “Generally, financial success is a means to an end.”

Those ends include preserving their family-centered lifestyle, working hard at an honest trade and passing a meaningful vocation on to their children. As a result, Amish businesses tend to stay small, keep a low overhead, treat employees and customers with kindness and practice frugality, Wesner said.

In short, many Amish would rather be righteous than rich—a lesson that could benefit everyone from Microsoft to mom-and-pop stores. “It’s not a very sexy message,” Wesner said, “but I think we’ve lost touch with that quality.”

Whereas mainstream entrepreneurs may shutter shops and liquidate assets if they don’t make a pile of money right away, the Amish are willing to put up with slim profits, as long as they stay in the black.

“There’s more to it than making a bundle of money,” said Benueel Riehl, an Amish man from Lancaster who recently opened a food stand with his wife and six sons in a market in Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania. “This has really given me an opportunity to work with my family, to know my wife in a whole new way, and to build new relationships with my sons.”

There are limitations on Amish entrepreneurs: the entertainment, alcohol and computer industries are verboten, traveling by airplanes is forbidden, and bishops will break up businesses that grow too large. “You don’t see 500-employee Amish companies with Amish CEOs kicking their feet up on a mahogany desk,” Wesner said.

What you do see, however, are thousands of small, thriving shops making furniture, leather goods and gazebos, not to mention countless stands selling food, clothes and crafts. Surrounding those shops is a strong social network that provides reliable labor, business acumen and loans, if need be.

While Wesner takes a sunny view of the Amish move from farm to factory, the long-term consequences of this mini-Industrial Revolution remain to be seen, said Kraybill. Will gender roles change? Will the use of the unique German dialect

dissipate? Will religious teachings adjust to an increasingly pluralistic society?

“It’s the biggest and most consequential change in Amish life since they came to North America,” Kraybill said. “It will have dramatic repercussions in the next several generations.” -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*