Thomas Edison: The Man Who Marketed his Inventions

Thomas Edison, though remembered primarily for inventions such as the light bulb, not only invented much more, but also created a business model like none other. By actually promoting his inventions, he achieved a practical celebrity status during his life. Inventor, Telegrapher, Filmmaker; Edison practically single-handedly invented the modern world.

Early Life

Thomas Alva Edison was born on February 11, 1847 in Milan, Ohio into a middle-class family. In 1854, the family moved to Port Huron, Michigan. There, he attended school at the local “noisy, one- room schoolhouse with 38 other students of 11 ages.” (thomasedison.com) He did not last there long. His teacher did not enjoy teaching him, because he was hyperactive and easy to distract. Because of this, his mother pulled him out of school and home-schooled him the rest of his life. She believed that his hyperactivity was a sign of remarkable intelligence. By age twelve, he had read more books than are worth mentioning, but they are impressive to say the least. His mother was correct.

Edison became primarily interested in science, and started asking his parents about complicated physics problems. They then saved enough to hire him a tutor, who helped to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. At age 12, he began to sell newspapers along the Grand Trunk Railroad. He kept chemicals in a baggage car for experiments, and during one, a fire was started. The conductor reportedly rushed in and stuck him on the ear in anger. This caused him to go “almost deaf”. He was 15 by now, and had learned Morse code from a kind father whose child he had saved. He was sadly handicapped by his deafness because he could not hear the telegraph clicking, which made it hard for him to find jobs.

An Inventor

It was 1866, and Edison, at the age of 19, had invented an electric vote counter in his spare time from working at the Western Union Telegraph company in Boston. Sadly, the lawmakers for whom it was designed did not like it, because, “as they explained, most legislators didn't want votes tallied quickly. They wanted time to change the minds of fellow legislators.” (biography.com) In 1869 he moved to New York City and successfully created an improved stock ticker, which was able to synchronize several stock ticker's transactions together. He sold the rights to this and an improved version to the Gold and Stock Telegraph Company for $40,000 (about 7 million today). He was 22 years old, and, with this success, moved to full time inventing.

He invented more items, most notably the quadruplex telegraph which was able for signals to be transmitted and received on the same wire at the same time. In 1871 Edison married 16-year-old Mary Stilwell. With her, he had three children: Marion, Thomas, and William. She died in 1884. By now, he was living in Menlo Park, New Jersey (Where he moved to in 1876). Here, he built his most famous laboratory in which two of his three most famous inventions were created. Edison hired muckers: They were essentially men who came looking for jobs from either other states or other countries. He became known as the “Wizard of Menlo Park.” His first great invention was the phonograph. It was the first machine with the ability to first record then playback someone's voice. It recorded to tin foil.

He soon met a young woman by the name of Mina Miller. He taught her Morse code, making them able to communicate secretly while others were around. As the story goes, “One day he tapped a question into her hand: would she marry him? She tapped back the word yes.”(nps.gov) They were married in 1886. Mina wanted a country home, so he purchased a large home located in West Orange, New Jersey. A year later, he built another laboratory here. It was ten times larger than the previous. Half of Edison's patented inventions (which numbered around 1,000) were created here. Here at West Orange, he worked on what would arguably become his second greatest achievement: The motion picture camera. Early versions of this camera worked by recording images to film so quickly, that when played back in another one of his inventions, the kinetoscope, they would seem to move. This was the first of it’s kind to record to spools or rolls of film: which was used up until the dawn of the digital film-making age (early 2000s). There was, however, a problem. His light bulbs were not bright enough to provide illumination to properly light a scene. In 1893, “they built a stage out of wood planks and tar paper, with a roof that opened up to the sun. This strange building looked a little like a police wagon or a hearse (which took coffins to the graveyard).” (nps.gov) The building was called the Black Maria, and stayed operational until 1903 when it was demolished.

One thing that set Edison far apart from others was that he allowed almost anyone into his laboratories to experiment-- so long as they paid for the materials and labor used. Also, any rambling machine shop worker could come in and stay as long as he wished. If Edison liked him, then the person would be hired for pay. Thus, his business model was radically different from almost any other person of the time. Another interesting thing developed at West Orange was the X-ray. Clarence Madison Dally, an employee, worked on this research project. He later died of radiation poisoning.

By far, however, Edison's greatest achievement would, quite literally, light up the world. In 1878 he began working on the light bulb-- an invention that would eventually revolutionize the world we live in today.

Edison's achievements, by far, came not only from his single-minded genius, but also from the influence of his muckers. By thinking outside the box, Edison was able to create some of the greatest inventions ever created in the history of the world. He literally invented entire industries of work, by creating jobs that had never before been necessary.