

Q&A with Erik Wesner, author of *Success Made Simple*

First of all, who are you, and why did the Amish, who are famously wary of strangers, trust you and let you into their lives?

I first met the Amish while selling books, 80 hours per week, in rural Illinois. I happened to bump into a settlement of Amish families and, originally planning to skip these prospects (I was selling, among other books, college prep materials at the time), nonetheless one day decided to give them a try. I found a good response to my younger children's books, and especially the company's Bible products, so I decided to continue. As I got a chance to see Amish society from the inside out, I became fascinated with the culture and people.



Selling in Amish communities, you get to know a good bit about the Amish from the inside out. A little slice of what their lives are like—what they do, what they care about, everyday-life things like what they eat, and so on. I sold a set of books called the Family Bible Library, and so I was talking to families and learning about why it was important that their children learn about the Bible and Christianity. It was pretty revealing, and you got to know more about what Amish really care about. I grew to respect them and their values.

Direct sales is really capitalism at its most raw. And I feel it's in that type of environment you can really learn a lot. Over thousands of sales presentations, you learn human nature. Trust is a big issue. The Southwestern Company, whose products I sold, has been around since the 1850s and is already known to a number of book buyers, which helps to a degree. But when someone you've never seen before, from halfway across the country, after a 20-minute presentation asks for a check for hundreds of dollars for a product to be delivered in three months, that reputation only goes so far. You really have to learn how to establish trust.

You also have to determine whether your product might be a good fit for that particular prospect, and if not, to know when to move onward and save yourself and the other person time. Yet at peak times I was having 8-12 people a day writing these checks out to me as an independent contractor, a person from a totally different culture, based on that trust level established.

One way I think I was able to gain trust as a stranger was by respecting Amish ways and respecting their time. From a sales standpoint this meant never being pushy. In response to that, I developed a new way of closing sales, which I used fairly frequently—basically totally removing myself from the situation, and letting prospects decide without me in the room, which in some ways goes against what salespeople are taught, by giving up control of the situation. It was an extremely low pressure and very enjoyable way to do sales, and it got a good response. It also helped me understand a few truths about human nature, and I found that the saying that people love to buy and hate to be sold applies everywhere, across cultures. And Amish appreciated this low-pressure approach as well—at least that is what they told me.

One's reputation travels pretty quickly in Amish communities. I found the adage, as one Amish friend puts it, that there are three lightning quick means of communication—telephone, television, and tele-Amish—to be true. Word gets around and if you treat people well, others will learn about it quickly in Amish communities. The opposite is true as well.

Though I found it varied from community to community, once you get past the at-times gruff exterior, generally Amish people are friendly and welcoming, exhibiting a traditional rural hospitality, even to outsiders, and I tried to respect that. Also, testimonials from other Amish I'd met, or who knew of or already had my product, helped a lot to build bonds of trust in a short time.

You spent a lot of time researching this book. How did this change you? What did you learn about yourself while researching and writing this book?

Working and living with Amish I think has had a couple of effects on me. One—or at least I'd like to think this is so—is that it's helped me to better appreciate the value of humility. Most everything in the Amish persona reflects humility, from the manner of speaking, to dress, to how they promote their companies.

It really clashes with the celebrity culture we are exposed to in America, but I think it is a healthier and more positive approach to life.

Another thing working with Amish has done is it has made me appreciate and value family more. Without TV, internet, and so forth, Amish society places a greater emphasis on relationships and people, more so than I think we do in our often-fragmented society.

Rather than spending hours absorbed in a video game, an Amish teen is much more likely to spend that time in outdoor pursuits with friends or learning a trade while working alongside family. Everything revolves around family in Amish society, and there is simply a high value placed on people, whether one is young or old, rich or poor. You feel it when you spend time in the culture for an extended period. Amish youth, for example, will go and sing to older and infirm members of the community. The old and weak are not forgotten, and you can see that in this example of selflessness.

Writing the book was an exciting and often challenging process. Some Amish entrepreneurs were uncomfortable at first sharing. I interpreted this as being due to not wanting to seem prideful. Others were very forward and open. Quite a few told me at the end of the interview that they'd like a copy of the book. And those reviews are probably the most-anticipated, at least from my standpoint!

In fact I did have Amish reviewers, about a half-dozen of them, who read drafts of the book and offered helpful comments, which has really helped ease my mind that I am representing them accurately. I hope that other readers find that the case as well.

What were some surprising things you found out about the Amish?

There have been a number. The first stereotype that sort of melted away very early on was that the Amish are somehow different from us. It's true that they are different in a way, in that they live within a separate socio-religious sphere, but human nature remains the same under the beards and bonnets. That said, I have to give Amish credit in that I feel that they really strive to live out their Christian principles. You see this in their day-to-day actions and in business dealings as well.

Another surprising thing is the Amish openness to technology and propensity to innovate. They create new products and use certain technologies to make their lives easier. They just do this within certain bounds. An Amishman may use a headband flashlight to walk around outside after hours if he needs to go check on the animals, for example. Having a light stuck to your head frees up your hands. On a similar note, an Amish acquaintance has invented an alternator that allows a buggy battery to power up while traveling, eliminating the risk of a dead battery and getting stuck on the road with no lights.

Amish don't live the way they do out of some notion that suffering without modern conveniences is somehow good or redemptive in and of itself; in fact they're geared to convenience and try to promote that, within the bounds of the *Ordnung*, which roughly translated is a set of rules for living, and which guides everything from dress to technology in a given community.

A final thing would be the level of diversity throughout Amish society. There are truly many "flavors" of Amish. Though they would all adhere to some common beliefs such as non-resistance and adult baptism, they still have many differences in dress, style of buggy, or technology allowed, for instance. You've got everything from Amish who use the outhouse and do not have hot water in the home, to those that buy their children hand-held battery operated video games and hire drivers to travel to Niagara Falls for vacation. The diversity was surprising and lends a richness to Amish society.

Give us some examples of things modern American businesses can learn from the Amish.

I think the most obvious lesson right now is the value of taking a generally conservative approach to business.

We've encountered numerous bubbles—housing, stock market, and so on—driven by greed or unchecked ambition or just a blind assumption that things were good yesterday and they'll continue to be so tomorrow. Or, a business might grow too fast and end up collapsing. Ambition and the pursuit of profit are definitely not a bad thing in and of themselves—in fact they're necessary to capitalism. Amish know profit is essential to survive, pay employees, develop new products, and so forth.

But Amish society tends to promote the smaller and more manageable—it is not anti-growth, but believes in doing things within bounds—by not borrowing or spending too much, for example. By weighing decisions more carefully. In this sense, taking an "Amish approach" may have helped some non-Amish companies that have found themselves in bad situations recently.

Another important idea is the emphasis Amish place on relationships. This comes naturally for Amish, perhaps more so than for non-Amish Americans. Amish communities are tight-knit, with a web of relations and friends running across the community.

Amish leverage these relationships—whether it is with employees, customers, or other businesses, even competitors—to their gain. A couple of concrete examples: Amish competitors in a given industry may pool supply orders to take advantage of large purchase discounts. Or: Amish are averse to laying employees off. They'll do it as necessary, but an employee is seen as an extension of family in a way. And sometimes, often, they actually *are* family. It's a lot harder to lay off your neighbor or brother whose family you know and who are depending on you in a sense, than it is the anonymous hire.

This is tied in with the first point as well—seeing employees as more than just a disposable input is going to force you to be more careful with the decisions you make. You remember that the well-being of a lot of people is riding on your company remaining functional. I think Amish really take this to heart. And their employees realize this about their employers, and I think it adds a lot to the workplace dynamic, and the productivity Amish owners get out of them as a result.

In the Introduction, you mention that, when asking for “words of wisdom” from one of the Amish business men, you received a bit of a gruff reply. What were some of the more trying moments with the Amish?

Gaining trust was at times difficult. This really varied from community to community. I recall a particular community in Indiana where I was nearly getting doors slammed in my face. The people there were just especially wary of outsiders and generally had a really rough exterior. They were tough! At times I thought of giving up, but pressed on and in the end got a good response and actually did quite well there. I had to establish myself and gain trust and this took a lot of hard effort.

Another example may seem odd, but comes when living with Amish friends. The longest consecutive spell I’ve lived with Amish has been two months. I treasure those friendships, and I really appreciate the opportunity, but you really have to adjust. Besides getting used to brushing your teeth by the light of a flashlight or drying clothes outside or getting up at the crack of dawn to help with milking, modern Americans are used to a greater measure of private time and space, and though there is privacy, it is more limited. You simply have more people around and more activities going on. Amish life may be stereotyped as “slow”, but they sure do stay busy!

Where down time for the modern American might mean writing some emails to friends or listening to music, with Amish it is more often spent talking, sharing, and visiting in the living room, or having a cookout over an open fire, or socializing at a charity auction. Which is great—I love those activities, but at times it can be tiring. Adjusting as a “modern” person to the very social aspect of Amish society and the fact that personal time is a bit more limited can take some getting used to.

Part of what is so remarkable about the success of the Amish is that they achieve it without what modern Americans consider the essential trappings of success; they cannot use technology, for instance, such as computers or credit cards. But in what ways may the Amish have it easier than modern Americans in business?

I would say that in fact they do have limited use of technology (varying again by community), and in some cases, do use credit cards or cell phones, for example. Some, however, would be much more restrictive on what technology is permitted. So it is true that on the whole, Amish businesses have to deal with obstacles non-Amish businesses don’t, and one of them stems from limited technology.

And just briefly, other obstacles Amish deal with include a cultural aversion to lawsuits which can leave them exposed to losses, sometimes very large ones, an issue in the case of recent investment scandals (one of which may have resulted in many millions of dollars in losses to Amish and culturally-similar Plain Mennonites).

Another consists of the differences which lead to what I call a “cultural disconnect”. For example, one seasoned Amish businessman called marketing difficult, because his people “intentionally refrain from all the styles and fashions.” Marketing to a different culture—and along the way dealing with issues

such as your own culture's emphasis on humility which contradict the self-promotional nature of advertising and marketing—can complicate traditional marketing efforts. This can necessitate hiring outside consulting help to understand who you're selling to.

But you raise a good point in that there are definitely some advantages as well, and one of the most significant is being able to take advantage of the benefits of the Amish 'brand'. The Amish association is overwhelmingly positive—seen by liberal use of the Amish name by non-Amish businesses—and Amish business owners are in a position to tap into this from day one, something I address in Chapter 3 of my book. So this helps counteract some of the marketing issues I just described.

Strong community support is also another plus. This may be something as simple as advice from a business-owning relative, to, in some cases, the community appointing trustees to help manage an embattled business back to health, or in some cases taking the decision to liquidate it. The trustees situation is not too common, however.

Finally, another significant advantage is the exemption from paying the Social Security tax for self-employed Amish and Amish employees (though it would be paid for Amish ones), which reduces compensation costs. Amish do not participate in insurance programs, due to religious objections, and Social Security is viewed by Amish as akin to commercial insurance, so they neither pay in nor receive benefits.

At the same time, Amish business owners are often in the best position to step in with financial assistance when members of the community face difficulties such as large hospital bills, so they end up bearing some of those costs anyway. The church-community, including the business owners of course, bears the cost of providing for the elderly and infirm.

Also, Amish in some settlements do participate in community-organized programs similar to insurance, and would pay into these, with some employers funding employees' health coverage. In some settlements, there are also community programs substituting for liability insurance as well.

While the idea of an Amish businessman is not unusual, it's a whole different story with Amish women. Tell us about some of the gender issues within the Amish society, and how they may be misperceived by modern Americans.

The position of Amish women is a controversial one. The idea that the man is the head of the home and the woman should defer to him irks modern sensibilities. Amish base this in Biblical passages and it is deep-rooted in Amish society. Some Amish women may find it troublesome, but the majority I would hazard to guess are content with, or at the least accepting of this cultural norm. And some scholars who've studied this more in depth than I have, have made the point that Amish women exhibit notable self-contentment, reflective of the high regard in which they are held in Amish society.

An Amish commenter I think also made a good point when writing that "It's not a question at all of whether or not women are as good as men. The Bible teaches very clearly that men and women are equal. But being equal in worth does not mean being the same in calling." He basically makes the point that men and women each have different roles, and this is reflected by their position in society and in the home.

But in reality, I would say in many cases the Amish female is not necessarily “oppressed” in this society, in fact often it’s quite the opposite. For example, I saw firsthand on numerous occasions that though nominally the man makes the big decisions, he more often than not will consult with or defer to his wife’s wishes. On a few occasions, I remember neglecting getting the woman of the house involved in my sales presentation—to my regret as she subsequently vetoed a purchase the man of the house was for!

Amish women are also active in business. In a way, businesses have empowered Amish women. For example, Donald Kraybill and Steven Nolt have found that nearly 1/5 of businesses in the Lancaster settlement are run by women. Some of those are part-time sideline businesses, but a good bit are full-time firms as well. Common businesses for women include quilt businesses, market stands, and crafts businesses. They provide extra income and even may be the main breadwinners in some cases.

So while the position of women in Amish society is not one that post-modern society would necessarily approve of at first look, that does not necessarily mean it is worse. It’s a question of values, and within Amish culture, Amish women do have a very important and in many cases influential position.

The main reason for an Amish man to work is to pay the bills and feed his family. Doesn’t that contradict company growth, and these so called million-dollar Amish businesses? How are the Amish spending their millions?

Amish are reinvesting their profits back into the business, lending out capital to others in the community to help them get started in business, and somewhat ironically purchasing farmland, which in some areas has gotten too expensive for most Amish and actually served as an original impetus to go into business.

As far as the motivations for going into business, I think that for many years, farming was seen not just as a way of making ends meet, but as something closer to a vocation. In more recent times, with not everyone being able to farm, factory work came to be a way to pay those bills and put food on the table in some communities. With the rise of an entrepreneurial culture, and as Amish have established reputations in fields like furniture and building, I think you’re seeing the most ambitious members of Amish society going into business as an outlet for talents and as a way to excel in a competitive field—really something that wasn’t as much of an option in earlier generations on the farm.

You also do have another breed of owners, who are more of the “custodian” types, who are content with one or two employees, or just family working in the company, and are able to earn a decent income and make ends meet. But they’re not necessarily looking to expand, like some of their counterparts. So you have businesses on both ends of that spectrum, and along that spectrum. There is some tension between those who believe a business should stay small and manageable, versus the most ambitious Amish who push for more growth. Even though it is a cultural value and in some way regulated by social checks, you still have Amish that want to grow things and get bigger. It’s a point of tension that some in Amish society are rightfully concerned about.

One danger point has been what to do with some of the savings and wealth. As wealth has increased, so have opportunities for investment—some good and some not-so-good. There have been a few very recent occasions of Amish becoming involved in investment opportunities that turned out to lead to large losses. In some cases the Amish propensity to trust others has been taken advantage of. So it’s a danger point and following these recent occurrences, I really think it is going to be taken as a warning

that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is, and a reminder of the old values of saving and investing in tangible assets when possible, such as land.

A common image of the Amish is a family riding in a horse-drawn carriage, sometimes without even a roof. Can you tell us why this is the preferred method of transportation of the Amish?

The buggy serves a couple of purposes. One is that it serves as a literal brake on the pace of life. Amish see danger in unfettered access to travel and the conveniences we are accustomed to. Owning a car allows one to travel far from home and in general Amish feel this freedom contributes to breaking down the bonds of community. Without a car, you are more reliant on your immediate neighbors and community for assistance. This may be something as simple as walking to the dairy farmer neighbor's next door to get fresh milk everyday, to pooling immediate resources in the community to solve challenges such as a burnt-down barn.

Amish do in most cases allow cars—the so-called “Amish taxi”—to be hired. This is in recognition of the realities that some Amish need transportation to the workplace, to operate their businesses, to go to the hospital, or to visit relatives in communities in other states. There is a difference here, in that Amish do not own the cars, which makes access more limited. Ownership versus usage is the key issue. Using a technology might be permitted where owning it may not. As another example, some Amish I know use computers at their workplaces, but wouldn't have them at home.

Cost also is a factor, as hiring a taxi for travel is not cheap. So allowing use while restricting ownership allows Amish to preserve boundaries while still permitting access to motor transportation in specific circumstances.

The second main role is symbolic. The buggy is a symbol of the Amish choice to live in the world, but remain apart from it. Amish are identified by their buggies, and Amish see the value in this symbol, just as there is similar value in modest dress and the Pennsylvania German language. They all help to comprise “Amishness” and strengthen the Amish identity. Nodding to realities, most Amish will give a bit on this point though, as most do use the bright orange slow-moving vehicle triangle on their buggies, reflecting safety concerns, for both themselves and non-Amish drivers. A few of the most conservative groups have, however, fought this mandate successfully, and do not use the triangle, having agreed to employ a measure of less-ostentatious reflective tape and flame lighting instead.

There is also diversity among Amish in the types of buggies they drive. Most do allow electric lighting, and have for many decades. In a few communities, only open-top buggies are used as you mention. You remember your umbrella and a blanket when you take one of those out for a spin, of course.

How have the Amish coped with the recession?

The answer to this likely depends on the specific type of business and industry. Some Amish businesses are more integrated with the outside economy, and others are less integrated with the outside economy and more closely tied with the ethnic one. A producer of the formal suits Amish wear to church, for example, would be an example of an Amish-oriented business.

Many Amish businesses, however, do a majority, and sometimes a totality, of their business with non-Amish buyers. Furniture makers and homebuilders are good examples of this. So with a recession affecting spending in the general population, Amish feel the drop in demand as well. Some adapt by

adjusting their focus to take advantage of changes in the market, switching from new home construction to remodeling, or from outdoor to indoor furniture, for example. Low debt loads help make this easier.

So those companies whose markets are more tied up with the outside world are typically going to feel the recession more strongly (though the effects would presumably trickle down to the ethnic “Amish economy” as well). Some builders in Lancaster County, for instance, have had hard times of late. I recently learned of one Amish closure, and a few more may be in the works.

As a related issue, Amish are affected by gas prices, for instance. While we’ve had these elevated oil prices over the past few years, most people assume the Amish with their buggies are immune, but they feel it too. On the one level, Amish consume fossil fuels to power diesel engines, which they use to generate electricity to power laundry machines or other implements, for example. Amish businesses using diesel-powered equipment are affected as well—and on a larger scale, as their energy needs would be much greater than the typical household. Also, there is of course the increase in shipping costs and prices of raw materials that come with higher oil costs as well.

So Amish, despite the perception that they are cocooned away from the rest of the world, are actually quite tied-in to the larger economy and do feel the impact of changes in the economy.

It sounds like there is an expanding opportunity here. What should modern Americans keep in mind when doing business with the Amish?

Amish companies in many cases do partner with non-Amish ones, from retailers to suppliers to marketing and internet support, so I think this is a very relevant question.

From a practical standpoint, prepare to have a bit more patience when it comes to communicating with an Amish company. Some business owners are accessible by cell phone (in particular, builders), but a lot of the stationary shops are going to have very limited calling hours, or you’ll need to leave a message and wait for a response. Amish are generally prompt and check messages regularly throughout the day, but it is a bit less fast than “instant”. Faxes and emails are generally not part of the picture either.

Generally, I would also feel quite comfortable trusting an Amish business person. I can attest, from doing business with them, that Amish are quite reliable—it is a cultural trait and one that people recognize, to the benefit of the Amish. You wouldn’t expect a lot of bounced checks or unpaid debts.

You spent so much time engaging and speaking with the Amish. Was there a particular story that you encountered that stood out for being exceptional?

One of the most memorable ones, which I share in my book and which really brought home what the Amish care about, was when I ran into an Amishman who had lost a five-year-old-son to a car accident. It had been awhile, but you could still see the pain on his face as he recounted the story, and in fact he broke down in front of me—basically a stranger, whom he’d just met 10 minutes previous.

But despite the hurt, you could also tell from the way that he spoke that he was utterly convinced his boy was in a better place. I really think that conviction says a lot about Amish values, and it is something that has stuck with me.

The time spent on this earth is transitory, and better things await those who adhere to God's plan. Business for the Amish is a way of making ends meet. But it's also a means of teaching children, building up community, and ultimately, of shuttling souls through this world to the next. What matters most is what awaits.

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