

Unexpected Beginnings

Large Companies Around the World that Began in a Different Field

Shell sold seashells; American Express delivered packages; Sharp produced mechanical pencils. Many of the world's largest companies originally dealt in very different products and services than those they are famous for today. Here's a fascinating look at the unusual histories of some well-known companies.

- Aryeh Cohen



Competition with the Rockefellers

Company: Shell
Product: Gasoline
Originally: Seashells

Many of us come across the famous seashell logo several times a day while driving past one of the 44,000 Shell gas stations around the world, of which 25,000 are located in the US alone. But did you know that Shell did not begin as a gasoline and petroleum company? It actually dealt in seashells for a long time before entering the market for black gold. Which explains the company's interesting choice of name and logo.

The story goes back to 1852 when a London businessman from a prominent Iraqi Jewish family by the name of Marcus Samuel decided to expand. Samuel dealt in antiques, but at that time seashells were



At the time, seashells were extremely popular. Here, a jewelry box decorated with shells, produced by the Shell Company.



Various logos used by Shell over the years.

an up-and-coming fashion. They became very popular for their beauty, making them a hot commodity. Samuel was blessed with good business acumen and sensing some pounds coming his way he began importing seashells from faraway Asia.

Samuel profited greatly from seashells, and he also gained valuable experience in the import/export sector. He named his business Shell Transport and Trading Company. When Samuel died, the business went to his children, brothers Marcus Samuel "the Younger" and Sam. The children were blessed with their father's business acumen and they expanded the import/export business even more. They shipped English-made machinery, tools and fabric to Japan and other Asian countries, bringing back rice, satin, china and copperware on the return trip.

The Samuel brothers had an innate sense for a product with good marketing potential. In 1886, Karl Benz (who gave his name to the Mercedes-Benz company) created the first practical motor car, which was driven by a gas engine. The Samuel brothers predicted that petroleum, from which gasoline is produced, would soon be big, so they began shipping oil from the east.

It was not all smooth sailing. The crude oil was packed in barrels and it tended to spill. The oil barrels also took up lots of valuable space, which was at a premium on their transport ships. The Samuel brothers hired ships to transport the oil from Baku, Azerbaijan, which was then part of the

Russian Empire. In doing so, they took a significant risk since they were directly competing with Standard Oil, which was controlled by the powerful and domineering Rockefeller family. If the Rockefellers discovered the Samuel brothers' plan too soon, they would use their monopoly to force the troublesome brothers out of business.



Shell's first oil well in Indonesia.



Shell workers load oil barrels onto a ship in Indonesia.

However, the gamble paid off. The Rockefellers did not learn about the new oil import until it was too late, and the rest is history.

Today, Shell is one of the largest oil companies in the world. (Standard Oil was forced out of business in 1911 by a US Supreme Court ruling that declared it an illegal monopoly. Don't worry about the Rockefellers, though. They just splintered the company into 33 subsidiaries, a move which transformed John J. Rockefeller into the richest man in the world.)

In 1892, the Samuels revolutionized oil transport when they began using an oil tanker, the *Murex*, to transport oil. This allowed them to transport far greater volumes of oil at a time, drastically reducing costs. Today, Shell is the seventh-largest company in the world by profit, and it all began with seashells.

Competition with the Post Office

Company: American Express
Product: Credit Cards
Originally: Package Deliveries

Today, most American Express employees sit at office tables and oversee the massive financial operations. Decades ago, however, most American Express workers sat in wagons pulled by powerful horses as they rushed all over the United States and Europe. Ever wondered why a credit card company has a name that sounds so similar to the transport company Federal Express? The answer is because American Express was operating in the same line in its early years.



Today, Shell is a huge oil corporation.



A Shell gas station.