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A History of Nordson Corporation

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Formative Years: Nordson's Genesis
- **Chapter 2** Early Innovations and Market Entry
- **Chapter 3** Post-War Expansion and Diversification
- **Chapter 4** The Rise of Hot Melt Technology
- **Chapter 5** Going Global: International Ventures
- **Chapter 6** Leadership Transitions and Strategic Shifts
- **Chapter 7** Adhesives and Beyond: Expanding Product Lines
- **Chapter 8** The 1970s: Challenges and Resilience
- **Chapter 9** Entering New Markets: Powder Coating and Curing
- **Chapter 10** Technological Advancements and R&D Focus
- **Chapter 11** The 1980s: Growth Through Acquisition
- **Chapter 12** Lean Manufacturing and Operational Excellence
- **Chapter 13** Environmental Consciousness and Sustainable Practices
- **Chapter 14** Digital Transformation and Automation
- **Chapter 15** Navigating Economic Downturns
- **Chapter 16** The S&P 500 Journey Begins
- **Chapter 17** Continued Growth in the 21st Century
- **Chapter 18** Focus on Precision Technology
- **Chapter 19** Corporate Culture and Employee Engagement
- **Chapter 20** Adapting to Industry 4.0
- **Chapter 21** Strategic Divestitures and Core Business Reinforcement
- **Chapter 22** Innovation in Medical and Electronics Markets
- **Chapter 23** Global Supply Chains and Manufacturing Footprint
- **Chapter 24** Nordson's Impact on Modern Manufacturing
- **Chapter 25** The Future of Nordson: Sustaining an S&P 500 Legacy

Introduction

Every enterprise has a story, a narrative woven from ambition, innovation, resilience, and the relentless pursuit of progress. The story of Nordson Corporation is precisely one such narrative, a compelling journey that began in the nascent years of the 20th century and evolved into a globally recognized leader in precision technology. This book, "A History of Nordson Corporation: The Story of an S&P 500 Company," chronicles that remarkable evolution, offering readers an in-depth look at the forces, decisions, and individuals that shaped a small Ohio company into an industrial titan and a consistent presence on the prestigious S&P 500 index.

From its earliest days, Nordson distinguished itself through an unwavering commitment to engineering excellence and a keen understanding of unmet industrial needs. What began with foundational innovations in coating and dispensing technologies steadily expanded into a diverse portfolio, impacting countless manufacturing processes across the globe. This isn't merely a corporate timeline; it's an exploration of how a company adapts, innovates, and thrives amidst technological revolutions, economic fluctuations, and shifting global landscapes. The chapters ahead will delve into the pivotal moments that defined Nordson's trajectory, from groundbreaking product developments to strategic expansions and critical leadership transitions, illustrating the dynamic interplay between vision and execution.

The journey to becoming an S&P 500 company is a testament to sustained growth, financial discipline, and market leadership. For Nordson, this achievement reflects decades of strategic foresight, a dedication to operational excellence, and a corporate culture that fostered both innovation and adaptability. We will examine the key strategies that propelled Nordson onto this elite list, including its consistent focus on high-precision applications, its disciplined approach to acquisitions, and its ability to continually redefine its role within critical industrial markets. Understanding this journey offers valuable insights not just into Nordson itself, but into the broader principles that underpin enduring corporate success in the modern era.

Beyond the balance sheets and technological advancements, this history also illuminates the human element of Nordson's story. It is a narrative populated by visionary founders, dedicated engineers, astute business leaders, and a global workforce that has consistently driven the company forward. The book will explore how Nordson fostered a distinctive corporate culture, one that has navigated challenges and embraced opportunities, contributing significantly to its longevity and success. This includes the company's evolving commitments to sustainability, employee engagement, and its pivotal role in the communities where it operates.

Ultimately, "A History of Nordson Corporation" is more than a chronicle of a successful company; it is a rich tapestry of industrial innovation, strategic growth, and corporate resilience. It offers valuable lessons for business leaders, aspiring entrepreneurs, and anyone interested in understanding the intricate mechanisms that drive long-term success in a competitive global economy. As we trace Nordson's path from its formative years to its current standing as an S&P 500 powerhouse, readers will gain a deeper appreciation for the relentless pursuit of excellence that defines truly exceptional organizations and their lasting impact on modern manufacturing and beyond.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Formative Years: Nordson's Genesis

The story of Nordson Corporation, a global leader in precision technology, doesn't begin in 1954 with the company's official founding, but rather much earlier, in the bustling industrial landscape of the early 20th century. Its roots are firmly planted in the U.S. Automatic Company, an enterprise established in 1909 in Amherst, Ohio. This predecessor firm specialized in manufacturing high-volume, low-cost screw machine parts, primarily serving the burgeoning automotive industry. This initial venture laid the groundwork for a future defined by precision and adaptability.

The intervening years between the founding of U.S. Automatic Company and Nordson's emergence were marked by significant global events, most notably World War II, which profoundly influenced American industry. It was during this period that Walter G. Nord, the father of future Nordson founders Eric and Evan Nord, took the reins of U.S. Automatic Company in 1935. Under his leadership, the company strategically pivoted its production emphasis. The shift was critical, moving away from general automotive parts to high-precision components vital for the United States' defense efforts. This move not only showcased the company's agility but also instilled a culture of exactitude and specialized engineering that would become a hallmark of Nordson.

The end of World War II brought with it a new set of challenges and opportunities for American manufacturers. The demand for wartime materials diminished, prompting many companies to re-evaluate their strategies and seek new avenues for growth. It was in this post-war environment that Walter G. Nord, along with his sons Eric and Evan Nord, began to actively search for a proprietary product. Their goal was to find an innovative offering that could serve as a solid foundation for the company's future expansion and ensure its long-term viability.

This quest for a unique product led them to a pivotal discovery in 1954: the acquisition of patents covering the "hot airless" method of spraying paint and other coating materials. This technology represented a significant leap forward in industrial application processes, promising greater efficiency and precision than existing methods. Recognizing its potential, the Nord family decided to establish a new division within the U.S. Automatic Company, specifically to produce and market this innovative airless spray equipment. This new division was christened Nordson.

The decision to name the new division Nordson was a direct nod to the family's enduring legacy and their commitment to the venture. The founding of Nordson in

Amherst, Ohio, in 1954, by brothers Eric and Evan Nord, with their father Walter G. Nord, marked the official genesis of what would become a global enterprise. Their initial focus was clear: to make industrial material application more precise and efficient. This simple yet profound goal would guide the company's trajectory for decades to come, establishing a reputation built on practical solutions to real manufacturing problems.

Eric Nord, a key figure in the company's early development, was an alumnus of the Case Institute of Technology and a prolific inventor, personally accumulating more than 25 U.S. patents throughout his career. His technical acumen, combined with the entrepreneurial spirit of his brother Evan and the seasoned business experience of their father Walter, formed a formidable leadership team. Together, they channeled their energies into developing and refining the hot airless spray technology, believing firmly in its transformative power for industrial applications.

Nordson's early years were characterized by a deep commitment to engineering excellence and a relentless pursuit of solving specific industrial challenges. The initial products were designed for manufacturers who required tighter control over the application of adhesives, coatings, and other materials. This niche focus allowed Nordson to cultivate a reputation for reliability and accuracy on the factory floor, a critical factor in a conservative industrial market where performance often spoke louder than branding.

The company's business model from day one was eminently practical. It wasn't about mass consumer appeal, but about providing specialized engineering solutions that delivered tangible improvements in manufacturing processes. Early buyers weren't looking for flashy advertisements; they sought dependable equipment that could enhance their productivity and product quality. This early emphasis on direct accountability and proven performance helped Nordson build trust and secure repeat orders.

The timing of Nordson's founding in 1954 was also particularly fortuitous. It coincided with a post-war manufacturing boom where process control was rapidly gaining importance across various industries. Factories were increasingly looking for ways to streamline operations, reduce waste, and improve consistency, creating a fertile ground for Nordson's precision dispensing equipment. The company's innovative technology offered a compelling solution to these evolving industrial needs, setting the stage for steady growth.

Initially operating as a division of U.S. Automatic Corporation, Nordson benefited from the established infrastructure and experience of its parent company. This provided a stable environment for the new venture to develop its products and build its customer base without the immediate pressures faced by a completely independent startup. The focus remained squarely on the hot airless spray method and its potential

applications, allowing for dedicated research and development.

This period of incubation within U.S. Automatic Company proved invaluable. It allowed Eric and Evan Nord to hone their vision for the company, refine their engineering processes, and understand the intricacies of the industrial market. They were not just selling a product; they were offering a solution that could significantly impact a manufacturer's bottom line by improving efficiency and reducing material waste.

The transition from a division to an independent entity was a natural progression as Nordson's product line and market presence expanded. In 1966, the entire U.S. Automatic operation was merged into the subsidiary, Nordson Corporation, marking a significant milestone in the company's history. This merger solidified Nordson's identity and provided the autonomy necessary for its continued growth and diversification.

The early years also saw the beginnings of Nordson's foundational work in adhesive dispensing. While initially focused on paint and coatings, the underlying principles of precise material application were highly transferable. This early experience with heated coatings technology would prove crucial in the mid-1960s, leading to the development of equipment specifically designed for applying thermoplastic adhesives, commonly known as "hot melts." These hot melt systems would revolutionize case sealing, carton manufacturing, and various product assembly operations, opening up entirely new markets for Nordson.

The entrepreneurial spirit inherited from Walter G. Nord, combined with Eric and Evan's engineering prowess, fueled this continuous innovation. They understood that staying ahead in the industrial sector required not just meeting current needs but anticipating future ones. This forward-thinking approach, evident from their initial search for a proprietary product, would become a defining characteristic of Nordson Corporation.

The genesis of Nordson was, therefore, a confluence of factors: a strong familial foundation in manufacturing, a strategic pivot towards high-precision components during wartime, a keen eye for innovative technology in the post-war era, and a relentless dedication to solving practical industrial problems. These formative years, rooted in the U.S. Automatic Company and culminating in the establishment of Nordson as an independent corporation, laid the essential groundwork for the company's remarkable journey to becoming an S&P 500 leader.

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