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A History of Axon Enterprise

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Introduction

In the annals of American enterprise, certain companies stand out not just for their financial success, but for their profound and often transformative impact on society. Axon Enterprise is unequivocally one such company. From its humble beginnings as a startup focused on less-lethal conducted energy devices, Axon has evolved into a titan of public safety technology, a journey culminating in its recognition as an S&P 500 company. This book, "A History of Axon Enterprise: The Story of an S&P 500 Company," chronicles this remarkable trajectory, exploring the innovations, challenges, and pivotal decisions that have shaped a company at the forefront of law enforcement's digital age.

The story of Axon is one of relentless innovation, starting with the original TASER device that sought to offer a safer alternative for de-escalating dangerous situations. But its narrative quickly expanded beyond hardware. Recognizing the burgeoning need for accountability and transparency in policing, Axon boldly ventured into the realm of digital evidence, pioneering body-worn cameras and the integrated software platforms necessary to manage the vast quantities of data they generate. This foresight transformed the company from a hardware manufacturer into a comprehensive public safety ecosystem provider, forever altering how law enforcement agencies operate, collect evidence, and interact with the communities they serve.

This book delves into the pivotal moments that defined Axon's growth, from its initial public offering and the inherent challenges of being a publicly traded company, to its strategic acquisitions that broadened its technological capabilities. We will examine the controversies the company faced, the ethical considerations inherent in developing powerful law enforcement tools, and the legal battles fought to protect its intellectual property. Moreover, we will explore Axon's global ambitions, its commitment to training through the Axon Academy, and the intricate dance between competition and collaboration that characterizes its industry landscape.

Ultimately, "A History of Axon Enterprise" is more than just a corporate biography; it is a lens through which to understand the evolving landscape of public safety itself. It's a story of how a single company has profoundly influenced the modernization of policing, fostering greater transparency, enhancing officer safety, and providing critical tools for evidence collection and justice. By charting Axon's path to becoming an S&P 500 company, we gain insight into the strategic vision, technological prowess, and cultural shifts required to achieve such a distinguished position in the global market.

The following chapters invite you on a journey through the evolution of a company that dared to reimagine public safety. From the spark of an idea in a garage to its current status as a market leader, Axon's story is a testament to the power of disruption and transformation. It is a narrative filled with fascinating characters, groundbreaking inventions, and the persistent pursuit of a mission to protect life, capture truth, and accelerate justice. This book promises to illuminate the intricate details of Axon's past, provide context for its present influence, and offer a glimpse into the future of an enterprise that continues to shape the very fabric of law enforcement worldwide.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Spark of an Idea: TASER's Origins

Every revolutionary company has a genesis, a moment when an abstract notion transforms into a tangible pursuit. For Axon Enterprise, that spark ignited decades before the company's formal inception, deep within the inventive mind of an aerospace scientist named Jack Cover. It was a confluence of observation, inspiration, and a desire for a safer world that laid the groundwork for what would become a cornerstone of modern public safety technology.

Jack Cover, a nuclear physicist who had contributed to NASA's Apollo moon-landing program, possessed a keen intellect and an insatiable curiosity. In the 1960s, a newspaper article caught his attention, detailing an incident where a man accidentally came into contact with a fallen power line. The man survived, temporarily immobilized but otherwise unharmed. This seemingly mundane event struck Cover with profound significance: electricity, when applied correctly, could incapacitate without causing lethal injury.

This revelation resonated with another influence from Cover's childhood: the "Tom Swift" adventure series. These early 20th-century science fiction novels, penned by the Stratemeyer Syndicate under the pseudonym Victor Appleton, featured a young inventor and his futuristic gadgets. One particular title, *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle*, left a lasting impression on Cover, planting the seed of an idea for a real-world "electric rifle" that could offer a less-lethal means of control.

Driven by these inspirations, Cover began tinkering in his garage. His goal was to create a device that could project an electrical charge to subdue an individual from a distance, thereby offering a non-lethal alternative in dangerous situations. This was particularly relevant in an era grappling with concerns like airplane hijackings, where traditional firearms posed inherent risks, such as accidental depressurization of an aircraft.

By 1974, Cover had successfully developed and patented his invention. He christened it the TASER, an acronym derived from his childhood literary hero: "Thomas A. Swift's Electric Rifle." The original TASER device bore a resemblance to a large flashlight and utilized gunpowder to propel two wire-tethered projectiles toward a target. Once these darts made contact, an electrical circuit was completed, delivering a high-voltage, low-amperage pulse designed to immobilize the individual.

However, the initial design faced a significant hurdle. Because the TASER used gunpowder as a propellant, the U.S. government, specifically the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), classified it as a Title II firearm. This

classification severely restricted its sale and distribution, limiting its availability to both law enforcement agencies and the general public. Despite Cover's vision, the early TASER remained largely a niche item, adopted by only a select number of police departments. Cover even attempted to market the device to airlines as a defense against hijackings, but widespread adoption remained elusive.

For nearly two decades, the TASER remained largely on the periphery, a promising invention hampered by regulatory challenges and limited market penetration. While some police forces experimented with the device, it failed to gain widespread acceptance as a standard tool for law enforcement. Its classification as a firearm made it cumbersome to acquire and deploy, hindering its potential to become the less-lethal option Cover had envisioned.

The true catalyst for the TASER's eventual rise came in 1993, when two brothers, Rick and Tom Smith, entered the picture. Rick Smith, driven by a personal tragedy—the shooting deaths of two high school acquaintances in a road rage incident—was determined to find a way to reduce gun violence and provide safer alternatives for both citizens and law enforcement. He believed deeply in the power of technological change to solve entrenched problems and improve public safety.

Rick Smith, who would later become the CEO of Axon Enterprise, graduated cum laude from Harvard with a degree in Neuroscience and earned an MBA from the University of Chicago, as well as a Master's in International Finance from the University of Leuven in Belgium. His academic background, combined with his entrepreneurial spirit and profound sense of mission, made him uniquely suited to revitalize Cover's invention. The Smith brothers, recognizing the untapped potential of Cover's TASER, contacted the inventor and began collaborating on a redesign.

Their primary objective was to overcome the critical hurdle of the firearm classification. This meant developing a version of the TASER that did not rely on gunpowder as a propellant. In 1993, Rick and Tom Smith founded AIR TASER, Inc., setting up operations in a garage in Tucson, Arizona. Their mission was clear: to develop a "non-firearm TASER electronic control device."

The early days of AIR TASER were characterized by intense development and a strong belief in their product's potential. The Smith family, particularly Rick's parents, invested heavily, nearly risking financial ruin to get the company off the ground. This level of personal commitment underscored the deep conviction that the TASER, if redesigned correctly, could genuinely make a difference in saving lives and enhancing public safety.

In 1994, AIR TASER officially launched its redesigned device: the AIR TASER 34000. This new model addressed the limitations of Cover's original invention by utilizing compressed nitrogen to propel the darts, rather than gunpowder. This crucial

modification allowed the device to circumvent the restrictive firearm classification, opening the door for broader sales to both the public and law enforcement agencies.

The AIR TASER 34000 also incorporated an "anti-felon identification (AFID) system." This system was designed to release numerous small pieces of paper containing the device's serial number upon deployment, aiming to deter criminal misuse. This early focus on accountability and responsible use would become a recurring theme in the company's future development.

The launch of the AIR TASER 34000 marked a pivotal moment. The company's innovative approach to propulsion allowed for easier sale to the general public, and slowly, law enforcement agencies began to take notice. While early sales were directed towards consumers due to an existing licensing agreement between Jack Cover and another manufacturer, Tasertron, which claimed exclusive rights to sell TASERs to police and military, the Smith brothers continued to refine their technology.

The settlement of a lawsuit with Tasertron in 1998 finally freed AIR TASER to market its products to law enforcement. This legal victory, combined with the proven effectiveness of their new design, paved the way for significant growth. The company, which had been founded with a handful of employees, began to expand rapidly, selling through electronic gadget retailers and gaining traction in the market.

By 1998, AIR TASER had sold over 100,000 devices in the United States and exported to some 60 countries. The following year, in 1999, the company changed its name to TASER International, Inc., a reflection of its expanding international sales and the evolution of its product line beyond just the initial "Air Taser" model. This rebranding signaled a new era for the company, one of global ambition and a renewed focus on public safety.

The Advanced TASER M26, released in 1999, further solidified the company's position. This ergonomically handgun-shaped device featured an advanced electrical waveform that caused "neuromuscular incapacitation" (NMI) by stimulating both sensory and motor nerves, resulting in involuntary muscle contractions. This meant a more effective and reliable subduing capability. By 2000, just a year after its release, more than 500 law enforcement agencies were either using or testing the Advanced TASER M26, and TASERs were even deployed by police at both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions. The spark of an idea, first ignited by Jack Cover, had finally begun to catch fire, transitioning from a theoretical possibility to a practical tool transforming law enforcement.

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