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Newell Rubbermaid Co.

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Introduction

Newell Rubbermaid Co. has played a prominent and often pivotal role in the landscape of American consumer goods. The company's story, rooted in more than a century of entrepreneurship, resilience, and transformation, provides a fascinating lens through which to examine the rise of modern manufacturing and marketing in the United States. From its modest beginnings as a curtain rod maker in upstate New York and an Ohio-based balloon company, Newell Rubbermaid's journey to becoming the global powerhouse Newell Brands encapsulates the dynamic realities of industry consolidation, innovation, and adaptation.

The narrative of Newell Rubbermaid is fundamentally about the power—and perils—of growth through acquisition. Both the Newell and Rubbermaid legacies were built on the philosophy that scale and diversity are the keys to long-term competitiveness. In an increasingly globalized world, their bold expansion strategies—through the purchase of well-known brands across kitchenware, office supplies, baby products, and beyond—enabled the company to weather economic downturns, shifting consumer preferences, and the relentless demands of mass retail. Yet, beneath the surface of deal-making and headline-grabbing mergers were complex challenges: integrating diverse company cultures, realizing synergies, and sustaining innovation amid rapid change.

The turn of the 21st century marked the most transformative period for the company, beginning with the dramatic 1999 merger that created Newell Rubbermaid and culminating in the ambitious acquisition of Jarden Corporation in 2016. These combinations not only brought iconic brands like Rubbermaid, Coleman, and Yankee Candle under one roof but also tested the limits of integration and value creation. The successes and setbacks of these mergers provided stark lessons about the importance of strategic alignment, decisive leadership, and the perils of overreaching in pursuit of size.

Today, Newell Brands stands as a testament to the enduring value of adaptability. Through continual restructuring, portfolio refinement, and a focus on operational excellence, the company has worked to restore profitability and sharpen its competitive edge. Its most recent chapters reflect a growing emphasis on responsible sourcing, environmental sustainability, and social stewardship—issues that are increasingly central to a company's reputation and license to operate in the modern marketplace.

Yet, the story is not without its complications. Recent years have brought new pressures, including legal challenges over product safety, rising costs, and the

necessity to manage geopolitical and supply chain risks. The journey of Newell Rubbermaid Co. thus becomes a microcosm of the challenges facing consumer goods companies everywhere: the need to balance legacy and reinvention, growth and responsibility, profit and purpose.

This book seeks to unravel the full arc of Newell Rubbermaid's evolution. Moving chronologically from its earliest days through its meteoric growth, hard-fought mergers, and the realities of 21st-century competition, it provides both an in-depth business history and an analysis of the issues shaping the company's current strategy and future prospects. In telling the story of Newell Rubbermaid Co., we explore not just the story of a single company, but the shifting landscape of American industry itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Roots: W.F. Linton, Curtain Rods, and Early Newell

Every colossal oak begins as a tiny acorn, and for what would eventually become Newell Rubbermaid Co., that acorn was a rather unassuming, yet essential, household item: the curtain rod. Our story begins not in the bustling financial centers or grand industrial hubs, but in the quiet, scenic town of Ogdensburg, New York. It was here, in 1902, that a company known as W.F. Linton Company first unfurled its metaphorical curtains, incorporating with the specific purpose of manufacturing brass curtain rods. At the dawn of the 20th century, as homes increasingly embraced decorative elements and privacy became a more refined domestic concern, the humble curtain rod was poised for its moment in the sun.

The W.F. Linton Company, however, found its sun quickly setting. Within a year of its inception, the company faced the grim reality of bankruptcy. This abrupt halt could have been the end of the story before it truly began, a footnote in the annals of failed turn-of-the-century ventures. Yet, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, or perhaps more accurately, a curtain rod emerging from a dusty inventory, a new proprietor stepped onto the stage: Edgar A. Newell. It was 1903, and with his acquisition of the beleaguered firm, the Newell name, which would one day grace countless consumer products, officially entered the business world.

Edgar Newell, an individual clearly possessing a keen eye for opportunity, promptly renamed his newly acquired enterprise Newell Manufacturing Company, Inc. While a savvy salesman, Newell quickly discovered that the art of manufacturing, particularly brass curtain rods, was a different beast altogether. The early days of the Newell Manufacturing Company were marked by a revolving door of general managers, each tasked with wrangling the complexities of production. It seems that while Edgar could sell a curtain rod with the best of them, getting those rods consistently and efficiently made proved to be a puzzle that required more than just salesmanship to solve.

The turning point for the fledgling company arrived around 1908. Recognizing that sheer willpower wouldn't magically produce more curtain rods, Newell Manufacturing Company made a crucial investment: machinery. This wasn't just any machinery; it was equipment specifically designed to significantly improve and accelerate the production of curtain rods. This strategic pivot from mere ambition to concrete industrial efficiency laid a foundational principle for the company's future success: embracing technology and optimizing production were paramount to growth. The whirring of new machines in Ogdensburg signaled a new era for Edgar Newell's enterprise, transforming it from a struggling startup into a more serious manufacturing

contender.

Newell's vision, it seemed, wasn't confined to the borders of Ogdensburg, or even the United States. Foreshadowing the global reach the company would one day achieve, Newell Manufacturing Company Ltd. was established in Prescott, Canada, around 1910. This affiliated company marked the very first step in Newell's international expansion, a tentative but significant move across the border to tap into new markets. It demonstrated an early understanding that growth often lay beyond immediate horizons.

Back in the domestic sphere, the original Newell company continued its physical expansion. In 1912, construction began on a new factory, a testament to the company's growing production needs and aspirations. The facility was completed the following year, providing the increased capacity necessary to meet burgeoning demand. This was not just about making more curtain rods; it was about building the infrastructure for sustained growth, a common theme that would repeat throughout Newell's history.

A truly pivotal moment arrived in 1916, one that would redefine Newell's market strategy and set it on a course toward mass distribution. The F. W. Woolworth retail chain, a titan of early 20th-century merchandising, became the first national customer for Newell's bronze-plated curtain rods. This wasn't merely a large order; it was the inception of Newell's mass merchandising strategy. Selling directly to a national chain like Woolworth's provided an unprecedented reach, placing Newell products in countless homes across the country and bypassing the more fragmented local distribution channels. It was a partnership that demonstrated the power of scale and strategic alliances.

Innovation wasn't lost amid the focus on production and distribution. By 1917, Newell continued to refine its core product, introducing non-tarnishable lacquer coatings for its curtain rods. This seemingly minor improvement addressed a common consumer complaint and enhanced the product's longevity and aesthetic appeal. It underscored a commitment to product quality and continuous improvement, even in what might seem like a simple household item. Such refinements, though subtle, contributed to brand reputation and customer loyalty.

The company's expansion continued its relentless march westward in 1921 with the establishment of Western Newell Manufacturing Company in Freeport, Illinois. This wasn't a random choice; Freeport was strategically chosen for its excellent access to railroads, a critical logistical advantage in an era before widespread trucking. The ability to efficiently transport raw materials in and finished products out was paramount, and Freeport offered the ideal nexus for such operations. The investment paid off quickly, with Western Newell becoming profitable in short order, further validating the expansion strategy.

The success of the Freeport operation was so resounding that a new factory was constructed there in 1925, just four years after its inception. By 1928, Western Newell's sales had not only surpassed those of the Canadian Newell Ltd. but had also reached half the sales volume of the original Newell Manufacturing in Ogdensburg. This rapid growth in the Midwest highlighted the wisdom of decentralized production and the potential for new markets. The company's product line continued to diversify, moving beyond basic curtain rods to include a variety of drapery hardware, such as extension and ornamental rods, and even pinless curtain stretchers, by the time the stock market crashed in 1929. The Newell Company, though still a relatively small player in the grand scheme of American industry, had firmly established its foundation, expanded its geographical footprint, and begun to broaden its product offerings. The stage was set for the challenges and transformations that the coming decades would bring.

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