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Snap-On Inc.

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Introduction

Snap-on Incorporated stands as a quintessential example of American ingenuity and industrial tenacity. Since its inception in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1920, Snap-on has grown from a modest tool company into a global powerhouse and a member of the S&P 500. The company's ascent has been propelled by more than just the quality of its hand tools; Snap-on's story is one of continuous innovation, customer-centric philosophy, and a formidable entrepreneurial spirit that has driven its evolution for over a century.

This book, *Snap-On Inc.: The Story of An American Company*, chronicles the extraordinary journey of Snap-on—tracing its roots, pivotal moments, and the visionaries who shaped its course. From the creative collaboration between Joseph Johnson and William Seidemann to its groundbreaking strategies in direct sales and marketing, Snap-on's legacy is indelibly linked to the broader narrative of American industrial development. The company's distinctive "Five do the work of Fifty" socket wrench system not only revolutionized the tool industry but also set the stage for a culture of constant improvement and adaptation.

Yet, Snap-on's influence extends far beyond the shop floor. With the inception of the mobile van sales model and later the franchise system, Snap-on rewrote the rules of customer service and product distribution. This model fostered deep community roots, creating generational loyalty and transforming how professionals accessed high-quality tools. Through strategic diversification—ranging from acquisitions of precision electronics companies to the development of advanced diagnostic equipment—the company has adapted to new markets and technologies with exceptional agility.

In the following chapters, readers will explore the triumphs and challenges that marked Snap-on's expansion from a Midwest startup into an international conglomerate. The book delves into key turning points such as the introduction of new manufacturing methods, the move to the New York Stock Exchange, and the global rollout of franchise operations. We also examine how Snap-on's commitment to quality and innovation has secured its status as a trusted partner to mechanics, technicians, and industrial professionals worldwide.

Beyond its commercial achievements, Snap-on's enduring success is built upon its dedication to ethical conduct, corporate responsibility, and employee well-being. The firm's active engagement with local communities, emphasis on workplace safety, and drive toward sustainability reflect the evolving role of modern corporations in society. With a leadership team devoted to these principles, Snap-on continues to set a benchmark for integrity and stewardship.

As Snap-on enters its second century, the company faces new challenges and opportunities in a rapidly shifting global landscape. From leveraging digital diagnostics in automotive repair to expanding in emerging international markets, Snap-on's ability to innovate, adapt, and lead remains as vital as ever. This book offers an in-depth look both at the factors that have shaped Snap-on's enduring legacy and at the avenues through which it continues to forge the future of American enterprise.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins: Joseph Johnson, William Seidemann, and the Founding Vision

The year 1920 dawned with a nation eager for progress, a sentiment reflected in the burgeoning popularity of the automobile. This was an era of profound change, and with the rise of the automobile came the undeniable need for a more efficient and capable automotive repair industry. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city already known for its industrial vigor, an engineer named Joseph Johnson observed the existing landscape of tools with a keen, discerning eye. He saw a pervasive inefficiency, a problem that mechanics across the country faced daily: the prevalence of one-piece socket wrenches.

These traditional wrenches, while functional, meant that for every different size of nut or bolt, a mechanic needed a separate, dedicated wrench. Imagine a craftsman's toolbox, overflowing with dozens of single-purpose tools, each taking up valuable space and adding to the clutter. Johnson, an engineer who had previously managed the socket division at American Grinder Manufacturing Company, a Milwaukee-based factory, recognized this cumbersome reality and envisioned a better way.

Johnson's idea was elegantly simple yet profoundly revolutionary: interchangeable sockets that could "snap on" to a few universal handles. This concept would drastically reduce the number of tools a mechanic needed, saving space, time, and money. It was a vision that promised unprecedented efficiency and flexibility in the burgeoning world of automotive repair. He articulated this vision with a memorable slogan that would become synonymous with the company he was about to create: "Five do the work of Fifty."

However, as with many groundbreaking ideas, initial reception wasn't universally enthusiastic. Johnson reportedly presented his concept to the management at American Grinder, only to be met with skepticism and a dismissive "We sell tools, not toys." Undeterred by this shortsightedness, Johnson knew the value of his innovation. He left American Grinder, resolute in his determination to bring his vision to life.

To embark on this entrepreneurial journey, Joseph Johnson sought a partner, and he found one in William Seidemann, a co-worker from American Grinder. Together, these two determined individuals dedicated their weekends to transforming Johnson's innovative concept into a tangible reality. They labored with rudimentary bending jigs and sheer manual effort, meticulously crafting the very first prototypes of their interchangeable tool sets. Their initial product consisted of five unique handles and ten interchangeable sockets, a modest collection that nonetheless held the promise of

revolutionizing the hand tool industry.

With their two sample sets and a handful of brochures, Johnson and Seidemann ventured forth, not with established distribution channels, but with a direct-selling approach that would become a cornerstone of the company's future success. They generated over 500 cash-on-delivery orders, a remarkable achievement that underscored the immediate demand for such an innovative product among professional mechanics. This initial success was the spark that ignited the formation of the Snap-on Wrench Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1920.

The early operations of the Snap-on Wrench Company were rooted at 134 Reed Street in Milwaukee. The swift and enthusiastic response to their interchangeable socket tools confirmed Johnson's initial belief in the superiority of his design over the fixed socket wrenches that dominated the market. The first 500 orders were fulfilled within six months, a testament to the early manufacturing capabilities that were rapidly scaled up with the opening of a 2,500-square-foot facility in Milwaukee.

Beyond the initial sales, Johnson's inventive spirit continued to drive the company's early development. In 1923, Snap-on filed for its very first patent: a ratcheting attachment known as the No. 6 Ratchet. This ingenious device, designed by Joseph Johnson himself, was engineered to work seamlessly with the original set of interchangeable socket wrenches, transforming any handle into a ratcheting one. This ratcheting adapter, a speed device that allowed the handle and socket to disengage and slip until pressure was applied, demonstrated Snap-on's commitment to continuous improvement and addressing the practical needs of mechanics.

The No. 6 Ratchet, with its internal mechanism of spring-loaded paws and a rotating knob, was an early indicator of Snap-on's dedication to robust and functional design. Though it would evolve through several versions in the 1920s, the initial patent application was filed in July 1920, just months after the company's founding, and granted on January 30, 1923. This patent marked Snap-on's formal entry into the world of protected intellectual property, laying the groundwork for a century of innovation and a vast portfolio of patents.

Joseph Johnson's influence extended beyond his inventive genius. He would later become president of Snap-on in 1939, a position he held until his retirement in 1959. He remained an active member of the company's board of directors until 1975, leaving an indelible mark as an inventor, founder, and business leader. His initial insight, coupled with William Seidemann's partnership and their shared dedication to bringing a superior product to market, created the strong foundation upon which Snap-on Inc. would build its enduring legacy. The stage was set for a company that would not only sell tools but would also redefine how professional mechanics worked and acquired their essential instruments.

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