The Man Makes His Success:  
How Josiah Wedgwood’s Decisions Led to his Company’s Dominance  

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Great Britain, in the eighteenth-century, underwent great social change largely in response to the economic changes occurring from agricultural innovation, the proto-industrial movement, and the expansion of international trade. Luxury goods such as spices, silks, and porcelains from India and China were initially accessible only to the elite and were stigmatized as gluttonous. As people moved to British cities and wages increased, more people had access to these goods and the demand for luxury items spread from the elite into the middling classes. Rising demand was accompanied by the merchants’ desire to capitalize on the market; they sought methods with which to create domestically produced goods that could compete with the imported ones. As accessibility to these products increased, the negative stereotypes eased and disappeared. Experimentation and innovated led to new homegrown products that were similar to Asian merchandise but were more accessible to the British population.

The production of ceramics improved during this era as a result of concentrated technological innovation and change. Staffordshire had long dominated pottery production, but the wares had been utilitarian and simple. Made for the general public, they were not considered to be luxury items. The shift in porcelain production to higher quality items and decorative wares occurred at the time when both the demand for luxury items increased and their decadent connotation decreased, making these products increasingly desirable. Much of the demand for better porcelain, and more porcelain, was created by the producers themselves; in particular, Josiah Wedgwood convinced people that they needed higher quality pottery, the kind that his factory could create.

Josiah Wedgwood was the principal driver of the rapidly increasing demand for pottery in eighteenth-century England, courseware and decorative ware, in large part because of his ability to manipulate both the market for pottery and the consumers. Wedgwood was able to become a macro-inventor (Allen, 239) of porcelain, changing the way the pottery was
produced and, more importantly, the way that it was acquired largely because of how his personal choices affected his business decisions. Wedgwood was curious, but undereducated, and surrounded himself with experts in business and in science to improve his knowledge. Further, he innovated at all levels of production, marketing, and transaction in order to create the best product for his clients. Wedgwood was an autodidactic polymath who developed a high quality product to meet the populace’s demand, which he helped create.

Josiah Wedgwood lived and worked in a commercial society that was experiencing great change. Since its first royal charter in 1600, the British East India Company had been providing luxury goods to the elite in Great Britain. While initially luxury goods that had been created for the Asian market were imported, over time these products changed to meet the demands of the British market. Ultimately, though, British merchants began inventing the products that the home market wanted, domestically. This production required experimentation first, however, because as Maxine Berg points out, Europeans were importing the products from China and India but were not, simultaneously, importing the means with which to independently create those products. This was especially true in the case of pottery, as Asian production methods had been kept from the European traders. As manufacturers experimented, they developed new technologies and products that would ultimately create new demand in the home markets and abroad (Berg 86-87).

These innovations in pottery accompanied economic and social changes that enabled people to participate in the luxury goods’ market. Agricultural innovations resulted in urban migration and created a British society in which the majority of people worked for wages instead of in agriculture or subsistence farming. With wages, workers purchased necessities and, increasingly, the material goods they desired which “transform[ing] both consumption and production” (Berg 87). These goods included cotton fabric and pottery. At the same time as people were earning wages, industrial production increased due to the use of cheap coal as an energy source (Allen), which created products more easily and, consequently, more cheaply.

Berg and others acknowledge that producers will only create a product when they know that there is a market for it, “consumers whose needs and desires are there to be met, or to be fostered by the prospect of new or cheaper commodities” (Berg 91). The appetites of the Europeans had been whetted by the importation of silks, pottery, and spices from Asia. The market was there. People wanted luxuries that would set them apart from the rest of the society (Berg 91). Semi-luxury wares, particularly foodstuffs, were readily available to the middling classes whose habits were changed by these products. Tea sets, teahouses, and
teatime all developed because of the introduction of Chinese tea. Domestic factories developed the products necessary to meet the demands of an emerging market for tea, especially among the middling classes who wanted to show that they were civilized. These changing interests would ultimately lead producers to create merchandise that met more than local consumer demand; they developed an industry that could participate in a global economic system in which the colonies provided both raw materials and markets for the finished products.

Wedgwood developed his family’s pottery interests into a global phenomenon because he chose to improve both his person and his product. Undereducated, Wedgwood spent much of his life learning everything he could about the fields of ceramics and science. His decision to surround himself with knowledgeable people in order to learn what he did not know had the greatest influence on his personal and professional development. He cultivated relationships with people who could help him grow and maintained these relationships as he integrated his new learning into the production of better pottery and better marketing techniques.

The relationship that most influenced Wedgwood’s personal and professional development was his partnership with Thomas Bentley, a merchant from Liverpool. While visiting the city in 1762, Wedgwood fell, further injuring his right knee that had been damaged during an attack of smallpox when he was young. His doctor, Matthew Turner, introduced Wedgwood and Bentley, who became friends. After seven years, and much persuading, Bentley became Wedgwood’s business partner. Bentley’s skillset and personality were complementary to Wedgwood’s. Thomas Bentley, in many ways, was everything that Wedgwood was not. Mark Dodgson described him as ”cultured, sophisticated, and socially connected” (Dodgson, 1138). Smiles (1894: 60) describes Bentley as “a gentleman of unusual intelligence, an excellent conversationalist, and of a most agreeable manner” (Quoted in Dodgson, 1138). Wedgwood believed that he could learn a great deal from Bentley whose letters he called his “bible” (McKendrick (1963), 12).

Bentley understood both business and people. As Wedgwood’s partner, he helped establish the marketing techniques that would help Wedgwood dominate the porcelain market (McKendrick (1963), 5-6). Bentley also provided Wedgwood with introductions into the upper classes that would be crucial for the company’s success, as Wedgwood decided that in order to dominate the porcelain market he needed to captivate the interests – and purchase power – of the elite. Bentley provided these introductions and, more importantly, helped Wedgwood cultivate these relationships (McKendrick (1963), 20). Bentley was an arbiter of
taste and fashion and it was he who advised Wedgwood of changes in tastes and fashions that necessitated changes in production (McKendrick (1963), 22-24). Theirs was a complementary partnership: “Bentley … was the salesman and merchant, Wedgwood, the inventor and technician” (McKendrick (1963), 14). They worked together, listening to each other, in order to improve the product and the profit of the company.

Wedgwood was a member of several societies for learning, becoming a fellow of the Royal Society and a member of the Philosophical Society, the Society of Antiquaries, and the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce. He was a member of the “Slaughter Club,” named for the coffee shop where philosophical conversations were held. He helped form the General Chamber of Commerce of Manufacturers of Great Britain, and supported the Anti-Slavery Committee (Dodgson 1130). Of all Wedgwood’s memberships it was the Lunar Society that most influenced his business success, his innovations in the production of pottery, and the infrastructure development needed to maximize the profits from the sale of his goods. The men of the Lunar Society were tradesmen, tycoons, artists and artisans who were involved in uniting the arts, design, manufactures and commerce in order to innovate and modernize society (McDowall). They wanted to change the British landscape: “discussing building canals, urging Parliament to build new roads to increase movement of trade to aid commerce, putting in place systems for naming plants, gases and minerals” (McDowall).

Josiah Wedgwood’s autodidact nature led him to experiment throughout his life in order to improve himself and porcelain. This nature was encouraged by what he learned from people with more expertise and enabled him to effect change in all levels of his business. He dominated the ceramics market through a type of vertical integration. Wedgwood innovated in all levels of the company’s activities – from developing new clays and glazes, to improving working conditions in his factories, to advocating for improvements of the infrastructure over which his products moved.

One of the reasons Wedgwood was a successful potter was that he was a scientist at heart. He read about chemical processes and other sciences. He experimented, recording the process and results in his first experiment book in February 1759 (McDowall). He developed new clays, glazes, colors and, later, designs for ceramics. The cream-ware that he developed was highly versatile and could be manipulated on the wheel or lathe or could be cast in molds. He would rename it “Queen’s Ware” after being designated the royal potter (Dodgson 1131-1132). He also created jasper-ware (Hind, 782) and a thermometer, called a pyrometer that measured high temperatures in kilns (Dodgson 1129). According to Dodgson, Wedgwood
was an early adapter of technologies that made his business more efficient. In 1782 he bought his first steam engine from Matthew Boulton, who was a friend and sometime competitor, and his partner James Watt. The implementation of steam power on-site assisted Wedgwood’s production by reducing transportation costs and, also, mechanizing the actual throwing of the pottery which had previously relied upon the personal energy of the potter (Dodgson, 1135).

In 1766, Wedgwood bought the 350-acre Ridgehouse Estate on which he built his factory, Etruria (Reilly). He was a fair employer who created good working conditions in order to maximize production. He used division of labor and assembly line techniques to create more products faster. Following the experiences of Thomas Whieldon and, also, Matthew Boulton and James Watt, he incentivized wages in order to encourage worker productivity (Dodgson, 1141-42). His employees had to meet high expectations in punctuality, cleanliness and self-care, and attendance (Quoted in Dodgson, 1141), but Wedgwood looked out for their well-being. He experimented to find alternative glazes to prevent the lead-poisoning that was common and deadly, provided training for his employees, hired women, and created “Potters’ Instructions” manuals for his staff which included explanations of processes and, also, rules and regulation.

Finally, he worked to improve the country’s infrastructure in order to improve his business costs. Wedgwood promoted the construction of canals and turnpikes (McKendrick (1960), 429), becoming the spokesperson in 1763 for the Staffordshire businessmen who petitioned Parliament successfully to build a turnpike to Liverpool (Dodgson, 1139). He worked to influence government policies that affected potters by appealing to the government directly and, also, by appealing through his aristocratic contacts and customers (McKendrick (1960), 431). He demanded the best materials for his products and sourced them from global markets as far away as America and Australia (Dodgson, 1139). His success necessitated a reliable infrastructure, both to bring raw materials to his factory and to ship products to his warehouses and his customers.

It also required advertising. Wedgwood’s success has been largely attributed to the marketing techniques he employed, among them, advertising in newspapers and magazines, creating illustrated catalogues, and sales promotions (Quoted in McKendrick (1982), 141). Many of these methods were not unique to Wedgwood, however, and were practiced by merchants in a variety of fields. Wedgwood’s success was the result of his ability to create demand for his product, a brand he created by becoming the first potter to mark his name in the clay in 1759 (Dodgson, 1134).
To create demand for Wedgwood porcelain, he targeted a clientele of people who were famous in the nobility. In 1765, Wedgwood created a tea set for Queen Charlotte, wife of King George III. He received a royal endorsement, which he displayed prominently. He renamed his cream colored porcelain Queen's Ware, creating a symbolic connection between his pottery and the elite (Dodgson, 1136). Wedgwood later made sets of dishes for King George III and the Russian Queen, Catherine II. Wedgwood courted the elite, focusing his attention on them and developing products to suit their tastes. Making items that could only be bought by the nobility was expensive and risky, but success would ultimately bring great wealth by creating demand first and foremost among the aristocracy and, ultimately, the general public (McKendrick (1960), 414). This is exactly what happened. After the showing the royals’ tea service demand for Wedgwood products increased. Developing the aristocracy as a market also served as a form of advertising as the elite would show off their purchases and shared his name with friends (McKendrick (1960), 423).

Josiah Wedgwood marketed his product as an “indispensable, fashionable object” within the realm of interior design (McKendrick (1960), 412). Fashion-consciousness was increasing in the eighteenth-century partly because of the increasing presence of books and magazines that presented the latest styles. France set the fashion trends in the 18th century (Robinson, 99). The London fashion season was inspired by the French fashion scene and, in turn, influenced the rest of England. During the season, which ran from fall until Easter, producers presented new designs in both clothing and home-goods and novelty was important (Robinson, 103-104). According to McKendrick, Wedgwood participated in this fashion season by indirectly advertising his products; he convinced artists like George Romney and George Stubbs to use his wares in their paintings (McKendrick (1960), 416).

In the eighteenth-century the aristocracy began to pay more attention to the design of their homes' interiors, particularly to the neo-classical inspired layouts created by architects like Robert and James Adam, James 'Athenian' Stuart and William Chambers after 1760. These new designs contrasted sharply with the earlier ornate rococo interiors and demanded new decorations. Vases had been popular as decorations since the first imported Chinese vases arrived in England, though domestic vases had also become popular. It is likely that Wedgwood’s decision to create vases in the neo-classical fashion came from Bentley. He would have been knowledgeable about the Greek and Roman cultures that inspired the neo-classical style because of both his classical education (Dodgson, 1138). More importantly, his membership in elite society suggests that he would have known the trends in fashion. This move to create neo-classical designs influenced Wedgwood's decision to name his company
Etruria so that his customers would associate the product with the Etruscan culture and with neo-classical design (National Museums Liverpool).

Nancy F Koehn summarizes Wedgwood's efforts in her book, *Brand New: How Entrepreneurs Earned Consumers' Trust from Wedgwood to Dells*. Wedgwood knew he had to create a market that would sustain his product over the long-term and so courted his target audience, the aristocracy. By building a relationship of trust with the aristocracy, and ensuring that his products were unique and distinguishable, he could ensure their repeated business (Lagace). Later, extending product offerings to the middling classes would further enhance his business. Focusing on fashion was an important strategy because it helps maintain the status quo and the hierarchy of social classes while “at the same time persuad[ing] members of the middling classes and even of the lower orders that they could at least to some extent imitate their social betters” (Robinson 107-108). An awareness of fashion and social status existed in eighteenth-century England. The nobility and aristocracy wore styles that were then copied by their servants, due to their close proximity, and, later, by the rest of society (Robinson 111). Similarly, material culture spread throughout society. The middling class was unable to purchase goods at the prices the nobility paid. Nor did they desire the same thing. Wedgwood met this challenge by creating both ornamental and useful products, “The upper classes bought both, but mainly the expensive ornamental wares, and in imitation of their social superiors the lower classes bought the useful” (McKendrick (1960), 429).

While persuasive advertising is often considered twentieth-century phenomena, Wedgwood and Bentley were clearly utilizing the intention if not the techniques of a form of modern advertising in the eighteenth-century. They connected Wedgwood products in the minds of their European consumers with an ideal lifestyle; the product is a manifestation of the owners’ achievement of the desired lifestyle (McCall 45-46). Wedgwood copied the Portland Vase not to sell, but to serve as an example of other products he would sell and as a symbol of the quality of his products (McCall, 40). For the middling classes, purchasing Wedgwood porcelain connected them to the cultured elite.

Similar to the twentieth-century, during which advertising campaigns changed as new media were developed, Wedgwood and Bentley employed a variety of new techniques, such as developing the first market research group to market their products and cultivate influential patrons. Wedgwood opened warehouses and showrooms in London where he showed new collections and hosted ticket-only shows and exhibitions, the timing of which he manipulated to have the greatest impact on sales. He created pattern books for the customers in his warehouses and showrooms to peruse and, ideally, to make purchases. He used new
standards of display, advertisement, free shipping, and traveling salesmen to expand the Wedgwood message and product line. To encourage sales he advertised in English papers and in continental European papers. Ralph M Hower states the Wedgwood and Bentley offered the "first recorded example of a satisfaction-or-money-back policy. Not only is this the first of its kind to be discovered in Europe or America but also it antedates John Wanamaker-who is normally given the credit for this innovation-by nearly a century" (Quoted in McKendrick (1960), 424).

After reaching out to the elite and Middling classes in Great Britain, Wedgwood turned to the international market because his system had become so productive that he needed to sell his surplus stock (McKendrick (1960), 425). He was more than willing, and able, to create new product lines to meet the tastes of foreign countries, among them Russia, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey, Naples, Turin and even China (McKendrick (1960), 427). Bentley was critical in extending the Wedgwood line internationally. He introduced Wedgwood to foreign ambassadors who would ultimately serve as the ambassadors for the company's products.

Josiah Wedgwood’s strategies worked; he turned Wedgwood into a brand that people demanded and repeatedly purchased. His greatest professional success came as a result of the innovations he made in marketing his product to the aristocracy and, later, the middle class. This was only one decision which propelled his company into the top of the ceramics market. Wedgwood’s porcelain company rose to dominance at a time when consumption of material goods was rising as a result of higher wages, increasing standards of living associated with the industrial revolution, and the wider availability of products. Wedgwood successfully took control of this consumption by creating a market for “things never before needed or even desired” (Berg, 87).

Wedgwood’s success is frequently explained as the result of better clay, better advertising and his efforts to improve the country’s infrastructure. These, however, were not beneficial only to Wedgwood. His primary strategy was to create the best product, but not the cheapest product. Many of his experiments were geared toward creating this better product, however, these efforts required great expense and were easily reproduced by his competitors, causing him to lose his advantage and a need to continually innovate and spend more money on research and development. Many of his marketing techniques, including advertising in newspapers and changing his product to meet the demands of international markets, were employed by other producers, such as Matthew Boulton, further reducing the company's strategic advantage. Finally, his quests to improve infrastructure, such as building a canal and
a turnpike to his factory, would have certainly benefitted his company and reduced transport costs. However, they would have also benefitted his competitors (McKendrick (1960), 410).

And yet, Wedgwood out-produced his competitors, primarily because of the innovations he created. These innovations were strongly influenced by the guidance and encouragement of Thomas Bentley and other leaders of industry and science. Josiah Wedgwood intentionally surrounded himself with people from whom he could learn. Wedgwood’s intention to improve himself and his product ultimately turned Wedgwood’s company into the leading porcelain producer well into the twentieth century.

WORKS CONSULTED


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