Steve Jobs Leaves A Legacy For Manufacturing

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I've been reflecting on the life and passing of Steve Jobs. While we all knew he was ill and likely suffering a setback, news of his death shook me harder than I expected.

For me, it feels similar to the JFK and MLK assassinations but different at the same time. Like a slow, simmering introspection – but with the same gravity. Like losing John Lennon, without the flash of powder burns. Like "Uh-oh, this one's really gonna hurt."

So I've found myself thinking about this man and what he left us. There will be so many more eloquent eulogies for this brash, tyrannical, brilliant, honest, spiritual, creative, flawed, and perfect soul. But whenever we lose something like Steve Jobs, we have a responsibility to translate what we had and lost into terms that make sense to ourselves. To grow and build on. Personally.

Here are some thoughts about his life and passing and what they maybe mean for our unique place in this world.

- **Innovation Comes From The Least Expected Places** – Born out of wedlock. Adopted. Estranged from his father. Dropped out of college after one semester. Wanderer. Experimented with psychedelic drugs. Hung out in a garage with friends (more on that in a second). Questioned authority of all kinds. What sort of challenges and image and opinions from others did this man overcome to change the world? When we as manufacturers complain

that others think we're toothless mouth-breathers, or that we can never climb out from underneath the burdens of labor shortages or disrespect or currency manipulation, we should think of Steve Jobs. His vision took him beyond his own 'liabilities.' So can ours.

- **Manufacturers & Engineers Are Born With 'It'** – Many among us believe that manufacturing's road to renewal in this country begins with education. And they're right – to a point. Steve Jobs rebuked the common road to create his own, one that matched his voice and strengths. He didn't find what he needed in convention, so he created it in a garage (like many others, like Edison or Hewlett & Packard). Resuscitating technical and trade options for students is only part of the solution – the small machining & manufacturing shops in this country act as incubators for honing craft and spurring innovation in those that need that stimuli. They are the 'garages' that nurture risk and spur creativity in the natural world. Imagine if we committed ourselves to rebuilding a base that welcomed the future Steve Jobs, rather than just expecting them to find their own way alone.
- **Don't Speak In A False Voice** – I got wind of Steve's passing from a friend. I immediately went online, and found the word spreading at an amazing rate of speed and at an even greater volume. Twitter was lit up like a Hadron Collider. I was touched by the warmth of the messages, the realization that many others felt the same significance in losing this cat that I do. But among the outpouring of sympathy and the sharing, guess what else I saw? Automated tweets & messages that pushed product, promoted webinars, and relayed innocuous news items. At a time when the world was fixated on the loss of one of its most valuable, creative assets, these automatons came off as soulless, out-of-touch Luddites, without a clue about what was happening around them. Whether you're an industrial marketer, a small manufacturer or you're with a vast, multinational manufacturing powerhouse, think twice about taking the human element from your company's voice. Because if you do, even in moments less important than the passing of an icon, you come off just as disconnected, dense, and unapproachable as you did that night. Stop it. Be human.

In a few weeks, we'll have moved on some. It's what we do – we don't say the things we should while someone's around, we scream them once it's too late (like I suppose I am now), then we drift back into our comfort zones, waiting for the next savior to come along. And there will be one. There always is, I suppose.

But I think manufacturers would do well to reflect on what this man did with what he had, how grateful we should be that he didn't wait for someone to follow, and how maybe it's not too late for any of us to do the same. That's the best way I can think of to honor such a rich, valuable legacy.

What thoughts do you have about Steve Jobs' legacy to manufacturing? What do you believe are the most lasting of his contributions?

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