



Burton Snowboards: Passion, Innovation, and Profit

By Russ Edelman. *CNBC*, Nov. 22, 2011

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Viewed from its headquarters in Burlington, Vermont, Burton's is a revenue producing machine that is driven by the passion of its people.

Guest columnist Russ Edelman explains how Burton Snowboard employees' passion for what they do go a long way toward making it a profitable and innovative company.

While recently vacationing in Stowe, Vermont, my wife and I had an opportunity to swing by the Burton Snowboards world headquarters for a visit. I've been an avid snowboarder for 15 years and have been riding Burton boards since the beginning. My wife has been riding for about 10 years, albeit, on a competitive manufacturer's board. In short, at the end of our visit, we decided that my wife must switch to Burton and I will continue to remain true to the Burton product line and vision. Why does this story matter in the context of business?

Passion—It is undeniable when you walk into Burton's headquarters. Everyone not only wants to be there, they seek the place out. Granted, this is a generalization and represents a sampling of only a few of the people we met there; however, there was no mistaking what we experienced. The people of Burton are impassioned by the products, the founder—Jake Burton Carpenter—and their ability to have an impact on the company and the people that use their products. They are almost innately and most certainly environmentally committed to the relentless pursuit of leadership in their industry. And yes, they have an awesome lobby with a great fireplace, where more than 100 dogs, pets of employees, can play. However, beneath the genuine fun and "Zen" spirit, there lies a revenue producing machine that is driven by the passion of its people.

Nice—Burton's headquarters is located in an industrial section of southern Burlington, which is in itself a pretty vibrant and funky place. Admittedly, I was excited to be there and as soon as I walked in, it was clearly a bit of a snowboarder's oasis.

When my wife and I approached the front desk at Burton, we were greeted by a very pleasant young woman named Sandy Noheji. We asked if tours were available. Sadly, the answer was no; however, the lobby and adjacent flagship store hooked us in, and we walked into the store.

With each person that greeted us, they were genuine and impassioned by their employer. One of the sales associates, Aiden, was quick to offer any assistance needed, but also recognized that we wanted to walk the store in our schedule. However, the true test that Burton cares about its customers came when Sandy searched us out in the store to let us know that she had arranged for a short tour. We were both blown away by her actions and also, very appreciative. We were introduced to Zach Nigro, a young guy who lives for snowboarding and the guy that showed us the company's Craig Kelly Innovation Center and a gave us an interesting perspective on how it designs and produces its snowboards. The tour and the knowledge about the process and working environment were incredible.



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Innovation—This company is completely wired not just for innovation, but for the immediate realization of that innovation. Everything that the company does leads to the most advanced and cutting-edge snowboarding products in the industry.

This was taken to an even higher level when Burton recently opened a state-of-the-art innovation center named after the late Craig Kelly, a pioneer in the snowboarding industry. And then there are the people and the creative process. Nearly everyone, if not all the people who work there are riders (the term for snowboarders) rather than skiers (scoff!!). Second, my understanding is that many employees start their mornings with a few runs on the local mountains near Burlington before heading into work. Third, and most importantly, this leads into a continuous loop of product innovation as the feedback that they get from their morning jaunts on the mountains immediately finds its way into new product ideas and enhancements.

On our tour, Zach told us that anyone in R&D or any of the Burton pro-riders can come to Craig's advanced snowboard prototyping facility in the morning with an idea. Within 24 hours, they can produce a working prototype of a snowboard or binding parts for testing and refinement. Once they perfect the design, they pass the methodology for commercially approved products to their manufacturing partners around the world.

Revenue—At the end of the day, businesses must not only be a fun and cool place to work. They also must make money. The kind gesture that Sandy and Zach had performed in giving us a tour is representative of how Burton views its mission and its involvement in the business. However, it also translated into an enhanced passion for my wife and me regarding Burton, a few hundred dollars in sales at its retail shop, our unending commitment to its product line, and this story. For the record, Burton is the largest boarding company in the world, it has many other successful product lines, it is profitable and it is still privately held.

Russ Edelman is the President of the Corridor Company, a company focused on Mission Critical SharePoint applications and services. He is also a frequent contributor to InformationWeek, CIO Magazine, CNBC, Huffington-Post as well as a sought out speaker in the content and social space.



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