

Lean In 1908: One of the first businesswomen in the United States began working out of her home in the 1870 local glove industry of upstate New York, placing silk stitches on the backs of gloves. By 1925 she oversaw her own company worth \$1 million. She once said, “Every woman, if forced to, can do more than she ever thought she could.” She could lean in.

Rose Markward (1857-1950) born in Ohio moved with her family to upstate New York as a teen where she met the dashing Charles Briggs Knox at a local dance. They married in 1883, she took his name, and they took a trip to New York City. The new Mrs. Knox said all Mr. Knox had in his pockets when they married was \$11 and their train tickets.

Their marriage was a true partnership. Charles was one of the highest paid salesmen of knit goods, and Rose ran their household on a portion of his salary appropriated to her for that purpose. When his salary increased, so did her portion as in any business partnership. Anything she saved was her fund and if Charles borrowed from that fund, it was a business transaction to be repaid.

Rose was an avid cook and developed many recipes in her own kitchen using gelatine. As women homemakers of the era would do, Rose made her own gelatine by cooking the shinbones of cows for long hours until they fell apart, then straining the liquid, re-cooking it and finally clarifying it with egg whites. Only special occasions or holidays justified this laborious effort to produce gelatine.

Charles watched Rose and her gelatine-producing efforts. In 1889 with her at his side, he set out to create a product that was granulated and convenient for easy mixing. He did and together they set out, to set up a business. Choosing financial independence from lending institutions, they decided to use Rose’s fund which she had grown to \$5K and strike out for themselves. They purchased a discontinued gelatine business in Johnstown, NY and formed their partnership.

Rose decided to promote their fledgling business by writing a cookbook. She spent all that first summer writing her own gelatine recipes for the company. “Dainty Desserts for Dainty People” became a staple give-away item in grocery stores. The use of gelatine became popular. To market their product, Rose continued to write her recipe booklets, distributing over a million annually.

Charles’ marketing was more unorthodox and flamboyant. His brash slogans and innovative advertising, earned him the title of the Napoleon of Advertising. He expanded their business into a highly profitable collective that included Spim Soap, Ointment and Tonic; a small hardware store; and a power company; plus Knox Gelatine. But very sadly, and very suddenly, in 1908, Charles unexpectedly died of a heart condition.

Devastated by the loss of her husband of 25 years, and confronted with daunting problems of the business, Rose was advised to “sell everything or find a manager.” But she boldly decided to lean in and take over the reins of the business.

Unthinkable as it was in 1908 for a woman to be active in, let alone head of, a business, Rose sent black-bordered cards to all her husband’s customers and associates announcing his death and stating their son Charles would takeover the business. In truth, Charles was still in school and fifty-year old Rose ran the company.



The first day behind her husband's desk Rose issued a statement that the back door to the plant would be closed permanently. "We are all ladies and gentlemen working together here," she announced, "and we'll all come in through the front door."

Before the end of her first day she politely "requested" the resignation of one of her husband's top administrative executives who admitted to her that he absolutely would not work for a woman. The only complaint she ever had about being "bossed" by a woman.

She re-evaluated her husband's business methods and elaborate advertising stunts. She sold off his many peripheral ventures and concentrated on selling gelatine to America's housewives.

She completely revamped her husband's sales campaign. She emphasized high nutrition at low cost, improved sanitary production conditions, and continued writing new recipes for convenient, appealing dishes. She reasoned, gelatine was bought and used by women who were interested in foods that were economical, nutritious and easy to prepare.

Under her direction, the company expanded enormously. She opened a larger plant in 1911, and she made a number of pioneering and revolutionary changes previously unheard of involving labor relations. In 1913, she instituted a five-day workweek along with two weeks' paid vacation a year and paid sick leave. She rode out the Depression by smartly cutting costs, not laying off employees. In fact, her business grew a rate of five percent per year during that desperate time.

She set up a test kitchen and developed hundreds of recipes that were printed on Knox packages, on leaflets, and in illustrated cookbooks. They also appeared in newspapers and magazines under the heading "Mrs. Knox says..." Her savvy marketing efforts transformed gelatine from a delicacy and invalid food into a common household staple.

Rose also established experimental kitchens to invent and test new uses for gelatine in business and medicine. And in the 1920's she produced the first pharmaceutical gelatine used to encapsulate vitamins and medication. In other words, the first "gel caps." A "plasma extender" developed for use in an intravenous solution as a blood plasma substitute was used during World War II.

In 1916, she bought a half interest in the Kind and Landesmann firm from which Knox had been buying gelatine. By 1925 the new firm was capitalized at \$1 million, and in 1930 she became vice president of the Kind and Knox Gelatine Company. In 1936 she built a new plant to produce "flavored" gelatine. The Knox Company became and remains today the leading manufacturer and distributor of gelatine, selling 60% of its product to home and institutional consumers and 40% for industrial and medical use.

By 1918 Rose Knox was one of the country's most respected and successful businesswomen. Rose Knox received numerous honors and awards. A 1922 Pictorial Review carried an article that stated that next to Jane Addams, the name of Mrs. Charles B. Knox appeared most frequently on the list of prominent American women.

Her community gifts and donations were numerous and generous. The year before Charles' death, he and Rose purchased the Livingston Mansion in Johnstown to be used as a home for aged women. Rose served as its President of the Board of Managers the rest of her life.

Rose Knox joined Charles quietly on September 28, 1950 from her home at age 92, while still serving as Chairman of the Knox Company Board. "My life has been made up of sunshine and shadows," she said, "but the glory of work in the home and out of the home has had a very interesting side and has helped to keep me young." Indistinguishably lean in 1908.

Sources:

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