

Hey, do you remember Carl Yankowski? You mean *you really don't remember Carl Yankowski*, the CEO who appeared on business TV nationally and whose company was the talk of America about 20 years ago?

Well, the truth is, you would pretty much have to be a real business nerd to remember who Carl Yankowski is—and that's going to be a main part of the point here! But I will tell you this: Yankowski's death in 2023 merited an obituary in the *Wall Street Journal*, so he really was a business-somebody sometime in the past! Here's the point for this episode: Yankowski's story has several lessons for us to consider as we journey through our workplaces striving to live for Christ. So, let's get started—right at the very beginning.

Carl Yankowski was part of what's called the "Boomer" generation in the U.S. because there was a so-called "baby boom" after World War II ended in 1945...that means lots of kids were being born. Yankowski was rather an "early" boomer because he was born in 1948—and he was an only child, growing up in Pennsylvania. He was clearly quite bright and multitalented, ultimately earning degrees in electrical engineering and management at the very highly regarded MIT.

Then Yankowski started his career in a golden era of American economic growth, and he ripped his way through some of the "who's who" of famous companies—filling all sorts of interesting positions. Sometimes those positions were linked to his fascination with tech and gadgets. So, let's do a roll call of companies on Carl's career path, kind of in chronological order as so concisely captured in the WSJ report.

- *Proctor and Gamble*, even then a leading consumer goods company with brands from Ivory soap to Crisco shortening to Tide detergent...working in sales and marketing
- *Memorex*, the recording tape company...specifically working with the world-renowned singer Ella Fitzgerald in the famous "is it live or is it Memorex?" commercial where her tape-recorded voice in a very high register actually shattered glass—and, yes, Memorex's tape was memorable
- *PepsiCo*...how about this one: marketing the up-and-coming soft drink Mountain Dew
- *General Electric*...focused on marketing small appliances...right, like ovens...fridges...dishwashers
- *Cadbury Schweppes*...focused as an executive on candy—and again on soft drinks—at this huge, 200-year-old, illustrious confectionery brand with worldwide reach
- *Sony Electronics*...now at the top, working as President and Chief Operating Officer in 1993 of Sony Electronics, happily commuting in the New York City area in a giant GMC Suburban that itself alone had two television monitors, a fax machine, two cellphones, a compact disc player, and a hookup for his laptop—now *that's* being gadget geeky...then Carl moved five years later to...
- *Reebok International*...working as the brand executive for the entire company, brought in to address Reebok's competitive battering by Nike by working to reconstitute Reebok's entire brand

And that brings us to the company that hired Yankowski to be its CEO in late 1999—and before you know it, that tech company's value on the public stock exchange was \$50 billion! And *that* was a huge sum in the year 2000...*50 billion dollars!* Hey, it *still* is a huge sum, for everyone except the spenders in Congress!

Well, the company led by Yankowski that was pumped up to \$50 billion was *Palm*. Have you heard of it? Well, if you're the right generation, you likely remember the PalmPilot—that was Palm's brand for a genre of handheld tech appliances called Personal Digital Assistants or PDAs. The PalmPilot was on fire for the people who wanted to run their lives with digital capability, yeah...right in the palm of their hand!

A guy named Jeff Hawkins had started Palm with a couple of other folks, and they had invented this device. By the time Carl Yankowski was hired, Palm was a part of 3COM, a tech giant in California. 3COM spun off Palm, and Palm was listed on the stock exchange right when dot.com tech mania was starting to ramp up big-time! And Yankowski's proven executive talent and tech orientation was just what Palm believed it needed. Well, Yankowski was obviously thrilled...he famously appeared on TV for a business program interview in a \$3,000 wool suit with gold threading! And, in Carl's estimation, the key issue to focus on in

the competitive landscape was none other than a company named Research in Motion (“RIM”), a much-smaller Canadian firm that itself was fulfilling *its* reputation with its own handheld tech appliance—the Blackberry! You know—the Blackberry—which quickly became the super-hot, popular personal gadget!

So Yankowski attempted a hostile takeover of RIM in order to dominate the space for handhelds. But RIM’s executives spent an inordinate amount of time trying to make sure RIM and their Blackberry were *not* acquired by Palm. Not to mention, the CEO of RIM was a huge hockey fan and was very distracted, spending a huge amount of time trying to purchase a National Hockey League team. Meanwhile, the markets for handhelds were not developing exactly as everyone involved wished they were...and the legendary dot.com tech-stock market bust blew away the stock value of Palm in very quick fashion.

So what were the fates of both RIM’s Blackberry and Palm’s own PalmPilot? Well, truthfully, in the big scheme of things, they both had little to virtually no impact in *lasting* fruit. You see, these two companies were focused too much on each other rather what really mattered...*which was lasting innovation*. While Yankowski was being interviewed in his wool suit, a guy in a tech-cool black t-shirt named Steve Jobs was starting to change the music world with iPods and then moved right on to the appliance that would soon render both the PalmPilot and the Blackberry irrelevant. Yeah, you got it, *the Apple iPhone!* And the rest is history. RIM faded. And the RIM executives and their Blackberry faded. Also, Palm and its PalmPilot faded. And, of course, Carl Yankowski faded. And in due course, Apple became the most valuable company in the history of stock markets...and Steve Jobs’ reputation in tech and business history is uniquely great.

And there are five lessons here from all this for our purposes, mostly centered on Carl Yankowski.

1. A leading executive with much success even on a national and international scale does not always prove successful in every industry or in every company. Yeah, like Yankowski. *Do not deify CEOs.*
2. Personal affinity for tech gadgets doesn’t make someone a great tech CEO or innovator any more than an avid football fan will succeed as an NFL football coach. *Consuming isn’t innovating.* Duh.
3. When it comes to executive positions, taking a key role in an existing, successful operation is quite different than taking a position in a firm both needing and driving innovation in fast-growth tech.
4. In big-picture strategy, what you *can’t see* often matters a lot more than what you *can see*. Unlike Jobs, Carl focused on acquiring the RIM he saw rather than the real innovation Palm truly needed!
5. Legacies are built from many things, and failure in one thing doesn’t equate to failure in all things.

So, what was Carl investing in outside of Palm? His family? Church? Neighbors? We can’t know for sure, but let’s ponder a few things. Remember Abraham in Genesis? No human in history has the unique story that he does, that of having many millions of physical descendants and also many millions of people of faith who look to him as a father...*yes, Father Abraham!* From obituaries and internet evidence, it looks as if Carl Yankowski, an only child, was divorced and had no children. His parents departed long ago. So...Carl had no apparent physical descendants. As to the other parts of his life, Carl forged years of fruitful workplace stewardship...but then he essentially failed at his adventure at Palm! And Carl the public figure showed no obvious faith posture. But one thing is certain: Christ’s judgment of Carl Yankowski—or anyone else—is *totally just* as to what *really* mattered. Same for RIM execs. Same for Steve Jobs. Same for *us*, too.

Yes, *first and foremost*, Christ put this question to His disciples: “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered Him, “You are the Christ!” (Mark 8:29 ESV) Likewise for us. And *only from that vantage point*, He examines the fruits of our focus on our families...yes, our physical families...and also that of our “going forth and making disciples” in the Kingdom. And our workplace lives are deeply intertwined with all that!

And we *know* that, *if* we indeed worked to pursue faithful, Christ-grounded stewardship, it won’t matter if we have a Palm-type event in the flow of our lives. For believers, 1 Corinthians 3:9-16 reveals the joyful plan of Christ...mercifully burning up our ungrounded deeds while rewarding faithful stewardship! ...Hey, 100 years from now, no one will remember Carl. *Except, we hope, maybe in his eternal presence with God!*

