

## **In-n-Out Burger: A Behind-the-Counter Look at the Fast-Food Chain that Breaks All the Rules**

**by Stacy Perman**

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Reviewed by David W. Gill [www.ethixbiz.com](http://www.ethixbiz.com)

Stacy Perman is a serious and accomplished business writer whose work has appeared in such outlets as *Time*, *Business Week*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Her new book *In-n-Out Burger* is a 345-page account of the history of an amazing business. In-n-Out Burger was the only fast food company that earned the approval and praise of Eric Schlosser in his great book *Fast Food Nation*.

In-n-Out Burger has been a family-owned business ever since it was started by Harry and Esther Snyder in southern California in 1948. It is now owned by the sole surviving heir, Lynsi Martinez, now in her late twenties. Television journalist Huell Howser recently devoted a one-hour episode of his "California's Gold" (program #146; [www.calgold.com](http://www.calgold.com)) to In-n-Out Burger, a fascinating program that got some inside access to In-n-Out leadership. Stacy Perman, however, was stonewalled by the secretive In-n-Out leadership and had to do all her research from outside the organization, without any cooperation from its leadership. Despite this handicap, Perman did a thorough job of finding out the history and character of this business. Her verdict on the business is very positive and it is sad that In-n-Out's leaders are so cautious, even paranoid, that they don't share more openly about what has made their company so great. What's to lose? Why not help other businesses learn from In-n-Out's great example?

Perman does a great job of piecing together the drama of the Snyder family over the past sixty years. Harry and Esther Snyder had a simple approach to healthy food, hard work, accessibility to travelers, low prices, consistent ethics and values, and organic growth that preserves company culture. As noted earlier by Eric Schlosser, In-n-Out uses only high quality, carefully chosen fresh ground beef (maintaining its own butchers and refrigeration facilities so that no frozen products are used), real, quality potatoes crafted into French fries in the store (not in a factory somewhere), and real ice cream and dairy in its milk shakes (not the artificial industrial ingredients requiring other fast food outfits to call their stuff simply "shakes" because there is no dairy in them!). The quality of the food is the first distinguishing characteristic of In-n-Out. This is not artificial industrial, mass production like you get from most of their competitors.

In-n-Out keeps the menu short and simple, and the prices low. They invest very little in advertising – their customers are an army of advocates and publicists. In-n-Out also is distinguished by the relatively high pay for their workers and managers at every level. The restaurant workers don't start at minimum wage but a couple bucks higher. Talk about happy, loyal workers: just visit any In-n-Out and ask the people how they like working there. Same for managers. Good pay, good career prospects. And from day one, In-n-Out has refused to give up control of its now more than 200 restaurants scattered across California and the Southwest. Growth and expansion are slow and deliberate; quality and consistency are carefully maintained.

Harry Snyder died in 1976 at age 63. His 56-year old widow Esther was named secretary-treasurer, number two son Rich (age 24) was named president, and number one son Guy (age 25) was named executive vice-president. Rich did not graduate from college but grew into the job and provided great leadership from 1976 until his own death in a plane crash in late 1993. It was Rich who, with his mother, became a passionate Christian at Calvary Chapel, and began putting the Bible references on the bottom inside lip of the beverage cups. Guy became President after Rich's death until his own death in 1999. Guy's life revolved around drag racing and drugs and he was rarely able to contribute positively to the company over the years. The one thing he did contribute was to produce the only grandchild of Harry and Esther, his daughter Lynsi who now owns the company. It is not always clear how it happened but somehow Rich and his mother (who died in 2006) managed to instill a set of values and nurture a set of leaders that quietly, despite Guy's craziness and Lynsi's youth, have managed to keep In-n-Out on track with the same excellence over the past seventeen years since Rich's death.

In-n-Out is one of the great business stories of our time. In-n-Out fans are legion, from Hollywood and sports celebrities to great chefs like Thomas Keller of the French Laundry. I love their ethics and values and how they treat customers and employees. Stacy Perman has done us all a great favor by writing this intriguing account.