

Dean Nelson

Dean's Natural Food Market

Interview by Lee Wolfe
Photo by Pasquale Serrani

Celebrating twenty years since he opened his first Dean's Natural Food Market in Ocean Township, this self-proclaimed "zealot," who grew up outside of Asbury Park and still reveres "The Boss," is the rock star of the natural food industry. Passionate about community, organic produce, and the planet, his commitment to serving others and putting people before profit seems to defy conventional business wisdom, but for Dean Nelson, being a fierce competitor and uncompromising small business leader doesn't mean he has to put aside his Buddhist philosophies and altruistic principals, after all, it's all about karma... We caught up with Dean in the produce department of his new store in Chester, New Jersey (he's also passionate about salad), where he showed up in shorts and a sweatshirt after his daily run. He was in the middle of a conversation with one of his "coworkers" (he won't say employee) about the Bruce Springsteen song that was playing on the store's sound system.



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"Produce is my first love. In the first store I was the produce guy, I displayed it, I merchandised it, that's all I did. I love produce. It's art," he said.

So, *what is it about Springsteen?* It's the raw sense of energy that he brings to what he does and why he does it. It's the same reason that I do what I do. It's just so authentic. It's just so real. How do you not aspire to it?

You scored a 760 on your SATs? "That is true. That's my claim to fame. I was not a great student, I struggled through high school, didn't make it through college. Luckily my high school sweetheart, who is now my wife, has always been this super-intelligent, super-smart person. We kind of counter-balance each other. I don't think I would be anywhere without her.

What is a conscious consumer? A conscious consumer is a consumer that is knowingly picking up a product or knowingly

coming to a place where they're going to pay more money but they believe in it enough where it's a driving force in their lives. It's important enough for them to say, instead of paying \$1.99 at a supermarket for a conventional apple, I'm going to \$2.49 a pound because it's better for me, it's better for my family, it's better for the planet. People come here because they want something different.

At the same time, you've stated that one of your goals is to continue lowering the price of your products? We should never be successful at the expense of our customers, it should be about execution and efficiency, we shouldn't charge more to be more profitable, that's not conscious business.

The people who work at Dean's are a key component of your customer first policy. We've heard that your interview process can be grueling. Where did you hear that? We've done our research. It's a long interview, it's a grueling interview. Most people say it's the most

intimidating experience of their lives. I don't want to be an intimidating person but at the same time I have a responsibility to the consumer, to the community, to the people within this company that work really hard for it to be successful. My responsibility is to serve those three groups and the planet. So I can't compromise.

Is everyone at Dean's expected to be a "zealot"? I hope that if they're not going to be, which I understand that not everybody is going to have the same purpose and meaning in life that I have, that they respect it enough to practice it while they're here and be ambassadors and role models when they're not here for us...it's my role to inspire them to try to drive them to be better people and to be more aware of how we interact with one another...These are all real passionate people. You work here because you want to be in this environment.

Service seems to be a driving force in your business philosophy. You have to serve. Rule number one in life is you serve people. We're put on this planet to serve without expecting anything in return and the universe will provide for you if you do that. When we make it about others, life becomes much more meaningful, more purposeful.

When did you adopt this philosophy? There was a transition in my life where the stress of business, the stress of keeping up with the Jones', the stress of competition all these things were destroying me and then one day I just said that's enough, I'm going to let go of all those things and just serve people.

So, how do you be the kind of person that serves people and profits? It's easy, it's so easy, because it's what we are as human beings. It's the true essence of who we are, so it's being yourself... but I would not be forthright if I did not say that I'm a fierce business person as well, and that's really important to me, the profit is how you go to \$12 an hour minimum wage in our stores, that's how you donate a thousand dollars to the SPCA...

What's the current climate like for small businesses like Dean's? It's a good time and it's a challenging time. The evolution is happening faster than small people like us can keep our arms around it. Our Ocean Township store is 200 yards from Wegman's, which is a great supermarket. Our Shrewsbury store is sandwiched between a Trader Joe's and a Whole Foods, two great companies... there's more customers coming in all the time but there's also more competition. So, you put your heart out there and you do your best...and then you hope everything else works and it does, it has to, because that's the way the universe works, that's karma.



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