

Les Schwab

By Oregon Journal Collection

This 1979 photograph of Les Schwab is part of the *Oregon Journal* Collection at the Research Library of the Oregon Historical Society.

Les Schwab, a native of Bend, Oregon, is best known for the tire company that bears his name. He entered the tire business in Prineville when he purchased a franchised store from the now-defunct O.K. Tire Company in 1952. A year later, he opened a second O.K. Tire store in Redmond. Schwab wanted to expand his operations further, but the proliferation of O.K. franchise stores promised to lock him out of markets in places like Bend and Madras, so in 1954 Schwab made the decision to lend his own name to his growing business venture, giving birth to the Les Schwab Tire Center. At the same time, Schwab made the decision to include his employees in a profit-sharing business structure that awards the employees of each store for the profits it earns.

Schwab envisioned his businesses as “supermarket tire stores,” where warehouse supplies were moved into the showroom. In the showroom, his employees would be better able to educate their customers about tires and help them buy the appropriate tires for their cars and trucks. Over the years, the company has attracted customers through a variety of marketing strategies, most notably, since 1963, through yearly meat giveaways, designed to “beef up tire sales during the slow winter months.” According to Schwab, his company’s offer to fix flats for free has also gone a long way to attract clientele, although at first, the free service was only offered to women.

As of 2004, there are more than 300 Les Schwab Tire Centers across the Pacific Northwest, making the company one of the largest independent tire dealers in the country. In his book, *Les Schwab, Pride In Performance, Keep it Going!*, Schwab credits much of his success to his ability to seek out advantageous relationships with foreign companies such as the Japanese Toyo Tire Company. According to him, “The foreign tires have saved the life of our company, and many other independent tire dealers. I thank God for the opportunity to sell foreign tires, I don’t feel one bit bad about selling them over American made tires.”

Further Reading: Schwab, Les. *Les Schwab, Pride In Performance, Keep it Going!* Bend, Oreg.: 1986.

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