

"Ingvar Kamprad's story" for About.IKEA.com (no longer live as of Sept. 2023)

From child entrepreneur to IKEA founder: the story of Ingvar Kamprad's early years

Like most entrepreneurs, Ingvar Kamprad's vision started with a spark – lots of them. In 1931, the five-year-old began selling matches, an essential item in every home. So how did a boy from the Swedish countryside become a teenage founder of a global enterprise?

Circumstances made a smart kid smarter

Ingvar Kamprad did things differently from the start. Instead of selling matches for pennies, he should've been working hard on his father's family farm in Elmtaryd. It was the depression. Poverty was widespread. People queued for food, for jobs, for everything. Everyone, children included, should waste nothing – not even time.

In the Swedish province of Småland where Ingvar lived, the stony land produced poor crops. Farming wasn't enough to survive. People had to be innovative, creative, strong and stubborn. Families were thrifty, and many became entrepreneurs to make ends meet, selling homemade goods or preserved foods.

This was true for his family, too. His mother started a guest house. Her father owned the largest country store in Älmhult, a town 20 km from Elmtaryd. Before moving to the farm, Ingvar often spent whole days in the shop, playing and running errands (when he wanted; his grandfather was more buddy than boss).

Ingvar understood his family's hardship and wanted to help. But rather than doing farm chores, he focused on helping the family finances. Whether or not his small contributions made a difference, his family did the unconventional and supported their little match-selling entrepreneur. The future IKEA founder's first customer was his father's mother.

A keen eye for an opportunity

Good with numbers and a quick learner, Ingvar realised he might be able to sell more things. Farmers who didn't have fishing rights needed fish. Christmas cards, magazines and garden seeds were must-haves too. To reach as many customers as possible, he rode his mother's bicycle to farms until he earned enough to buy his own bike.

When angling for fish didn't bring a big catch, Ingvar persuaded his father to buy nets for a greater yield. He sold the fish he caught, shared the profits with his father and put his fishing earnings in a cigar box.

He figured out how to help his customers by creating low prices while still making a profit for his family.

As for matches, he figured out how to help his customers by creating low prices while still making a profit for his family. He enlisted his aunt in Stockholm to buy big, less expensive cartons and send them to him. Then Ingvar split the matches into smaller packages and resold them. Despite the cheaper cost, matches weren't a great business. So he stopped selling them after a couple of years and followed advice to save his small profit to invest later.

At 14, he moved to attend boarding school nearby. Ever the entrepreneur, he kept a stock of pens, watches, wallets and belts under his bed. (His classmates needed these!) Too young to

set up the firm he wanted, his father gave legal consent and paid the registration fee as a graduation present in 1943.

So, the IKEA name was born using Ingvar Kamprad's initials plus Elmtaryd, the family farm, and Agunnaryd, the farm's parish in Småland. But the 17-year-old IKEA founder didn't sell furniture – yet.

An experiment that improved lives

Ingvar continued his business and his studies at college. His future took shape as he realised success depended on the simplest, most cost-efficient distribution from factory to customer.

For IKEA then, this meant direct import and mail order, mainly of watches and pens. But pens had issues, so Ingvar saw they didn't have a future either. Like his match money, he saved to invest in something else.

Furniture would be the something else – offered as a sensible experiment. The post-war Swedish government had built lots of housing and offered home furnishing loans. Plus, Småland had many small furniture factories.

When furniture debuted in the 1948 brochure, Ingvar wrote IKEA would offer more if customers showed "reasonable interest."

They did.

In the next brochure, the entrepreneur described his focus with the headline "to the people of the countryside." The IKEA founder refined this into the company vision "to create a better everyday life for the many people." Who are these many people? They're anyone, like Ingvar and other frugal, practical Smålandians, who value products with low prices and high quality – things made from being smart with resources and never tolerating waste.

That's how Ingvar Kamprad, the rebel-hearted, clever-minded boy, got started in business. With humble roots, useful (and affordable!) matches, and the desire to help his family, he would eventually change millions of lives worldwide with home furnishing.