

How We...Avoid Corporate Culture

By Grace L. Williams



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Courtesy of CSN Stores

Steven Conine and Niraj Shah

Who: Niraj Shah and Steven Conine

What: CSN Stores LLC, an online retailer of home furnishings and housewares

Where: Boston

Web site: www.csnstores.com

Year founded: 2002

Number of employees: More than 500

Annual revenues: More than \$200 Million

It's a challenge that many successful entrepreneurs face: How do you keep that friendly, small-business feel when you're

hiring more and more employees?

For Niraj Shah and Steven Conine, co-founders of CSN Stores, an online retailer that now employs more than 500 workers, the solution was simple: No walls or cubicles. And no private offices, even for themselves. Instead, they opted for a casual, open-space environment, where even interns have access to senior leaders. "The primary reason for this is really around communication," Mr. Shah says.

The brightly lit office with numerous windows and high ceilings made sense to Shah and Conine, who met in college nearly 20 years ago and wanted a hard-working but congenial workplace. They say it also makes logistical sense, as the open layout maximizes the number of people who can fit (comfortably) in one space. Also, the company is able to expand and reshuffle quickly, as there are no walls or cubicles to move – just computers and the materials on peoples' desks.

Shah and Conine also say they were able to rapidly grow their company, which competes with giants *Ebay* and *Amazon*, by seeking out high-end brands that generally prefer working with brick-and-mortar stores. Figuring there were enough discount sites on the Internet, they created high-end boutiques such as *AllModern.com*, which sells upscale furniture. "We were good about not selling knock-offs and low-value versions of designer things," says Mr Conine. "It was the right thing to do from the get go. We cast our net early on a venue that was more unique."

Boutique sites have proven to be the magic touch for CSN Stores. With more than 250 unique home-goods sites under its umbrella, the company sees around 7 million visitors each month and was named to the Hot 100 list for 2009 by the Web site Internet Retailer.

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