

Editor's Note

This issue of *Business History Review* brings together five articles on salesmanship. Two of these pieces were first presented at a 2008 conference on direct selling organized by Andrew Popp and Peter Scott at the University of Reading's Centre for International Business History: Howell J. Harris's "Inventing the U.S. Stove Industry, c.1815–1875: Making and Selling the First Universal Consumer Durable" and Scott's "Managing Door-to-Door Sales of Vacuum Cleaners in Interwar Britain." After the conference, Andrew Popp suggested putting together this special issue of *BHR*, for which he has acted as a guest editor, working with me and Geoff Jones. Two of the other essays were developed after the conference: Andrew Gordon's "Selling the American Way: The Singer Sales System in Japan, 1900–1938" and Roman Rossfeld's "Suchard and the Emergence of Traveling Salesmen in Switzerland, 1860–1920." Popp and Michael French collaborated on writing a new article, "'Ambassadors of Commerce': The Commercial Traveler in British Culture, 1800–1939." Finally, we have included a survey by Harvard Business School's John Quelch and Katherine Jocz of some of their favorite articles published in marketing journals.¹

Over the past several decades, scholars have produced a wide range of studies about the evolution of marketing, advertising, and publicity and their effects on culture and society.² Historians have traced the rise

¹Historians interested in the field of marketing would benefit enormously from reading the *Journal of Marketing* (founded in 1936); the *Journal of Marketing Research* (founded in 1964); *Industrial Marketing Management* (founded in 1971); and *Marketing Science* (founded in 1982).

²See, for instance, Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York, 1983); T. A. B. Corley, "Consumer Marketing in Britain, 1914–60," *Business History* 29, no. 4 (1987); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York, 1989); Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York, 1990); Richard S. Tedlow and Geoffrey Jones, eds., *The Rise and Fall of Mass Marketing* (London, 1993); Geoffrey Jones and Nicholas Morgan, eds., *Adding Value: Brands and Marketing in Food and Drink* (London, 1994); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994); Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Subculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago, 1997); Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, Md., 1998); Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998); Stephen L. Harp, *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md., 2001); Andrew Godley and Roy Church, eds., *The Emergence of Modern Marketing* (London, 2003); Catherine

of marketing up the organizational chart—looking, for instance, at the adoption of the multidivisional structure by Du Pont and General Motors in the 1920s and of brand management by Procter & Gamble in the 1930s. Historians and other scholars have analyzed the creation of a “Pepsi generation” in the 1960s in the United States. Until recently, however, they showed less interest in one of the oldest and most durable components of selling, namely, salespeople—peddlers, canvassers, agents, drummers, door-to-door salesman, and sales reps.³

This situation began to change during the 1990s, and some of the richest studies have focused on peddlers. In 1993, the historian Laurence Fontaine published *Histoire du colportage en Europe: XVe–XIXe siècle*, a work translated into English and published by Duke University Press as *History of Peddlars in Europe*.⁴ This sprawling book describes five centuries of peddlers, whom Fontaine divided into three classes, based on the way they financed their sales trips. Hence, she constructed a typology of salespeople in which she distinguished “half-starved peddlars with nothing to offer from the regular peddlars who had enough of an estate to guarantee their loans and the merchant-peddlars, who with a solid financial base, could travel by cart and who opened shops.”⁵

David Jaffee’s 1991 article in the *Journal of American History*, “Peddlars of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760–1860,” provided a comprehensive overview of peddling activity in the United States, highlighting peddlers’ roles in stimulating consumption of tinware, clocks, artwork, and other items in rural America. Rowena Olegario’s article “‘That Mysterious People’: Jewish Merchants, Transparency, and Community in Mid-Nineteenth Century America” in *Business History Review* (1999) described the place of Jewish peddlers in the larger history of America’s growing credit networks.⁶

Guidis, *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* (New York, 2005); Hartmut Berghoff, ed., *Marketinggeschichte: Die Genese einer modernen Sozialtechnik* (Frankfurt, 2007); and Robert Fitzgerald, “Marketing and Distribution,” in *Oxford Handbook of Business History*, ed. Geoffrey Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin (New York, 2008).

³There are some important exceptions. See, for instance, James Harvey Young’s *Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), which describes the way patent-medicine salesmen developed techniques to brand their concoctions that were similar to those later used in other industries. Also fascinating is Neil Harris’s *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston, 1973), which describes Barnum’s effective, sometimes scandalous, methods of publicity.

⁴The form “peddler” is common in the U.S., and “pedlar” in the U.K., but both forms are acceptable in the two countries.

⁵Laurence Fontaine, *A History of Peddlars in Europe* (Durham, N.C., 1996), 73.

⁶David Jaffee’s “Peddlars of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760–1860,” *Journal of American History* 78 (Sept. 1991): 511–35; Rowena Olegario, “‘That Mysterious People’: Jewish Merchants, Transparency, and Community in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” *Business History Review* 73 (Summer 1999): 161–89. See also Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, 1999) for a description of the peddler as an

Historians also investigated the life and work of specialty salesmen and canvassers, who typically worked on commission and traveled to small towns to sell agricultural tools, books, plants and seeds, and other goods to farmers or rural shopkeepers. These canvassers often developed more standardized approaches to selling than those employed by general peddlers. In an introduction to a published collection of sales-related ephemera, Keith Arbour described the subtlety, and even artistry, of the book agent's formulated sales pitch, which was usually transcribed and handed out to new recruits. In a 2001 article in *Enterprise & Society*, Hartmut Berghoff analyzed the sale of harmonicas by the German company Hohner, which cleverly promoted its musical instruments around the world; by the 1920s, "Hohner" was a household name in the United States and Western Europe. Scholars, including Nicole Wollsey Biggart and Katina Manko, have also described the twentieth-century incarnation of these specialty salespeople: door-to-door sales agents and party-plan salespeople who worked for highly organized companies, including Avon Products (originally California Perfume Company), Fuller Brush, Jewel Tea, Stanley Home Products, and Tupperware.⁷

Historical scholarship, too, has been produced on "drummers"—as traveling salesmen working for wholesale houses were often called.⁸ These salesmen rode the rails, carrying large sample cases and merchandise catalogs; and unlike some types of specialty selling that offered opportunities to women, drummers were almost exclusively men.⁹

essential part of recycling and reusing in early America; and Joseph Rainer, "The Honorable Fraternity of Moving Merchants: Yankee Peddlers in the Old South, 1800–1860" (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2000).

⁷For book agents, see the introduction by Keith Arbour, in Arbour, ed., *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers' Ephemera, 1833–1951 in the Collection of Michael Zinman* (Ardsley, New York, 1996); Hartmut Berghoff, then at the University of Goettingen and now at the German Historical Institute, published "Marketing Diversity: The Making of a Global Consumer Product: Hohner's Harmonicas, 1857–1930," *Enterprise and Society* 2 (2001): 338–72. See also Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago, 1989); Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington, D.C., 1999); Katina Lee Manko, "'Ding Dong! Avon Calling!' Gender, Business and Door-to-Door Selling, 1890–1955" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 2001); Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, "Planting a Seed: The Nineteenth-Century Horticultural Boom in America," *Business History Review* 78 (Autumn 2004): 381–421; Sharon Murphy, "Selecting Risks in an Anonymous World: The Agency System for Life Insurance in Antebellum America," *Business History Review* 82 (Spring 2008): 1–30; and Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed: Brownie Wise, Earl Tupper, and the Home Party Pioneers* (Gainesville, Fla., 2008).

⁸See A. P. Allen, *The Ambassadors of Commerce* (London, 1885).

⁹Commercial traveling was an occupation that defined itself as being "manly" and, indeed, was almost entirely filled by men; according to the 1890 census, 99 percent of those in the profession were male and nearly all (85 percent) were native-born. In contrast, the number of foreign-born among the census's category "hucksters and peddlers" was much higher (53 percent in 1890). A. M. Edwards, *Population: Comparative Occupational Statistics for the United States, 1870 to 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943); Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 28–29.

They distributed the items that stocked country stores, including hardware, dry goods, alcohol, chemicals, and leather goods, such as boots and shoes. Their arduous work is described in minute detail by Timothy Spears in his book *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (1995).¹⁰ Spears wrote about the ways in which drummers, who gained a reputation for storytelling and backslapping, built ties to their customers that could last for years. But they also became a conspicuous, at times uneasy, presence in the larger society because of their association with aggressive commercialism.

The work of British commercial travelers has been analyzed in two recent articles: one, by Michael French, appeared in *Economic History Review* in 2005 and described the careers and culture of the United Kingdom's traveling salesmen in the decades surrounding the start of the twentieth century; the other, by Andrew Popp, which was published in 2008 in *Business History*, explored the success of a group of commercial travelers working out of the city of Wolverhampton, located in the West Midlands region of England.¹¹

Finally, historians have recently written about the rise of professional salespeople who worked for large manufacturing firms, demonstrating the ways these salesmen were integrated into companies that meshed mass production and mass distribution. This was the focus of my book, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (2004), which documented the rise of sales-force management at National Cash Register, IBM, General Motors, and other companies. I argued that selling occupied a unique place in the United States because of its joint centrality to big business *and* to American society. Not only did the trends that occurred in business eventually resonate in the culture, but salesmen also acted as barometers for the country's economic climate.¹² In a 2006 article for *Enterprise and Society*, the historian Andrew Godley, building on the works of Robert Bruce Davis and Fred Carstensen, described the phenomenal success of the Singer sewing-machine company in placing its products around the world by the early twentieth century. And Roy Church, in a 2008 article in *Economic His-*

¹⁰ See also Susan Strasser "The Smile that Pays: The Culture of Traveling Salesmen, 1880–1920," in James B. Gilbert et al., eds., *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination and American Culture* (Belmont, Ca., 1992).

¹¹ For Great Britain, see Michael French, "Commercials, Careers, and Culture: Travelling Salesmen in Britain, 1890–1930s," *Economic History Review* 58, no. 2 (2005): 352–77; Andrew Popp, "Building the Market: John Shaw of Wolverhampton and Commercial Travelling in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Business History* 49, no. 3 (2007): 321–47.

¹² Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). Only in the U.S., for instance, did you get both iconic sales forces at places like NCR and IBM and highly influential works like Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Both "Babbit" and "Willy Loman" have entered the American lexicon.

tory Review, looked at the sales strategies of three makers of nondurable products (Isaac Reckitt & Sons, Lever Brothers, and Burroughs Wellcome & Co.) and argued that product characteristics were a central factor in shaping sales strategy.¹³

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The essays collected in this special issue contribute further to the subject of selling by placing in an international context three major themes of salesmanship. The first is that salespeople promoted innovations. Thought of in this way, salespeople embodied the Schumpeterian creative-destructive aspects of capitalism.¹⁴ They pushed hard, for instance, new cash registers, adding machines, and refrigerators—in each case, advocating the replacement of older items that had withstood years, or even centuries, of use. The essays describe the salesman's role in distributing cast-iron stoves in nineteenth-century America; in introducing sewing machines to Japanese households; and in selling vacuum cleaners in post-World War I Britain. But they also reveal the ways in which organized sales forces could lose their innovative edge, by failing to adapt to changing conditions and neglecting to alter their strategies according to regional circumstance. The salesmen for Singer in Japan, for example, found themselves facing stiff competition from domestic sewing-machine producers.

The second theme is that salespeople were not only distributors of products but also brokers of information. They added their own distinctive tools to the marketing arsenal of advertising, direct mail, and other forms of promotion. Sales agents could point out differences between products that customers might have found hard to discern. They talked face to face with “prospects” about a particular item and its features, and they brought information back to managers at the company. This information gathered from the field could bring about significant improvements in product design and sales strategy, and it could provide

¹³See Robert Bruce Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854–1920* (New York, 1976); Fred V. Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets: Studies of Singer and International Harvester in Imperial Russia* (1984); Andrew Godley, “Selling the Sewing Machine around the World: Singer's International Marketing Strategies, 1850–1920,” *Enterprise & Society* 7, no. 2 (2006): 266–314; Roy Church, “Salesmen and the Transformation of Selling in Britain and the US in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Economic History Review* 61, no. 3 (2008): 695–725. There is also a fine literature on department-store selling. See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, Ill., 1986); and Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York, 1989).

¹⁴On Schumpeter, see Thomas K. McCraw, *Prophet of Innovation: Joseph Schumpeter and Creative Destruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

clues about the appropriateness of extending or withdrawing credit. In supervising their sales forces, sales managers often found that “selling” or motivating salesmen was a more difficult endeavor than formulating a sales message. They had to develop managerial strategies to push salespeople, such as using quotas and commissions or holding sales contests in which agents competed for prizes. At the same time, managers had to avoid pushing their employees too hard, causing them to rebel or engage in behavior that would damage the firm’s reputation (as occurred in the case of interwar British vacuum-cleaner salesmen).

The third theme is that the activities of salespeople embodied the spirit of capitalism in popular culture. In the United States, salesmen caught the imagination of major fiction writers, including Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Eudora Welty, Arthur Miller, Joseph Heller, and David Mamet.¹⁵ During the nineteenth century, Yankee folktales described peddlers as shrewd traders who outfoxed locals.¹⁶ Theodore Dreiser, in *Sister Carrie* (1900), portrayed the commercial traveler Charles Drouet, one of the book’s main characters, as a masher and a womanizer. In 1922, the realtor George F. Babbitt came to the fore as a self-aggrandizing booster of modern society in Sinclair Lewis’s acclaimed novel, *Babbitt*; and, after the capitalist system came crashing to a halt during the Depression, Arthur Miller dramatized the tragic character of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949). These fictional creations illuminated the context in which salespeople operated, making them a subject of interest to popular audiences and businesspeople alike.¹⁷ In a concluding essay in this issue, Michael French and Andrew Popp look at the representations of traveling salesmen in Britain and consider whether the trends in the United Kingdom corresponded to those in the United States.

Taken together, the essays help to make sense of the salesperson within the larger story of the ascent of marketing. They also supply an international context for the development of sales methods and strategies. I am pleased to present these five articles, which are symptomatic of the rising interest in the subject of selling.

Walter A. Friedman

¹⁵ See Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York, 1900); Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York, 1922); Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York, 1949); Eudora Welty’s story “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (New York, 1941); Joseph Heller’s book *Something Happened* (New York, 1974); and David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* (New York, 1983).

¹⁶ On the shrewd trader, see Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Clockmaker, or, The Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick of Slickville* (1837; edition used, Toronto, 2007).

¹⁷ On the image of the salesman in U.S. fiction, see Spears, *100 Years on the Road*, preface, and Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman*, pp. 29, 191–92, 249–50.