

Multinationals and Gender: Singer Sewing Machine and Marketing in Mexico, 1890–1930

Headquartered in the United States, the Singer Sewing Machine Co. did business all around the world in the early twentieth century. It regularly encountered wars, economic nationalism, and revolutions; in response, it normally created subsidiaries or gave in to expropriation. After the revolution in Mexico (1910–1920), Singer’s marketing organization maintained normal operations and even prospered. The company succeeded, in part, by constantly associating the sewing machine with the idea of “modern” womanhood in Revolutionary Mexico. By revealing Singer’s marketing strategies and focusing on gender, this article shows that multinational corporations and Latin American governments were not always at odds and could sometimes forge a profitable relationship.

This article traces the efforts of Singer Sewing Machine, a U.S. company with a global presence, to build a marketing organization in Mexico, starting in the 1890s.¹ It narrates, especially, Singer’s early

¹ Singer’s positive performance in Mexico resonated with increasing sales in other locations in Latin America and in other parts of the world after World War I (see [Appendix](#)). The 1920s were a good decade for Singer in Europe, Japan, and emerging economies such as India, Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. In Latin America, Singer was expanding; Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina became the largest markets in the region during the 1920s. Business was also growing in the company’s home country: Singer’s gross sales in the United States increased from 375,000 sewing machines in 1902 to 534,000 in the first five years of the 1920s. “World Singer Results, 1902–1940,” Singer Sewing Machine Records, Madison, Wisc. (hereafter, SSMC). Until 1910, Mexico had received the largest share of U.S. foreign investments. Some industries (e.g., oil) were overwhelmingly foreign owned by the beginning of the revolution. For information on how the Mexican government began to resent American foreign investments, see Mira Wilkins, *The Emergence of Multinational Enterprise: American Business Abroad from the Colonial Era to 1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 113, 120–22, 134; Linda B. Hall, *Oil, Banks, and Politics: The United States and Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1917–1924* (Austin, 1995); and Jonathan Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico* (Berkeley, 1993). Singer’s organization did face resistance in Japan because of nationalist sentiments and as criticism of American capitalism grew in the 1930s and 1940s; see Andrew Gordon, *Fabricating*

success and its ability to rebound in the years following the Mexican Revolution, which ended in 1920. Key to this story is the role of women, both as employees of the firm and as customers. Up to the mid-1930s, Singer employed female instructors known as *profesoras*. Salesmen and *profesoras* had been marketing to homes in Mexico since the company started expanding its marketing organization in the late nineteenth century. Singer's management in New York and London lauded the company's *profesoras* and Mexican salesmen, whom it saw as the backbone of Singer marketing. Without them, the company's operations in Mexico may not have survived the Mexican Revolution, which unleashed fervent anti-Americanism.

Women were involved in various aspects of the company's strategy. In the late nineteenth century, women within the Singer organization were employed to sew samples using the machines, to advertise the capabilities of the product. The popularity of the machines grew quickly. By 1920, industrial schools for women such as the Escuela de Artes y Oficios para Señoritas had incorporated machine sewing and embroidery as a professional trade for women.² The association of sewing machines with women's culture and work lives, which had begun in the late nineteenth century, took off after the revolution. A similar strategy of using women demonstrators and salespeople had worked well in other countries also. In Japan, for example, the participation of women in the Singer company during the twentieth century created consumers and served to increase "desire for this good and for the modern-style dress that it fabricated," according to historian Andrew Gordon.³ Singer sewing machines became symbols of Japanese modernity.

Consumers: The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan (Berkeley, 2012), 93–100. For more information on the creation of Singer subsidiaries in Europe as a result of economic nationalism, see Robert B. Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854–1920* (New York, 1976), 92–99, 158–60; and Geoffrey Jones, *Multinationals and Global Capitalism: From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2005), 203.

² Timothy Putnam explains that by the twentieth century the sewing machine was "important for conspicuous productive consumption." Putnam, "The Sewing Machine Comes Home," in *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman (Oxford, 1999), 279. See also Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, "Home Sewing: Motivations and Changes in the Twentieth Century," in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 269–84. In Mexico, the Escuela de Artes y Oficios para Señoritas offered machine embroidery as early as 1919. "Plan de estudios," expediente 3, Archivo de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City, Mexico (hereafter, AHSEP). See also Federico Lazarín Miranda, "Enseñanzas propias de su sexo: La educación técnica de la mujer, 1871–1932," in *Obedecer, servir y resistir: La educación de las mujeres en la historia de México*, ed. Adelina Arredondo (Tlalpan, 2003), 249–68; Patience A. Schell, "Gender, Class, and Anxiety at the Gabriela Mistral Vocational School, Revolutionary Mexico City," in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*, ed. Jocelyn H. Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano (Durham, 2006), 112–26.

³ Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers*, 120–30.

There is, however, limited research on the evolution of the Singer company during, and in the aftermath of, war and revolution in a host country. Existing studies of the effects of the revolution on business in Mexico have neglected the sewing machine, focusing on other industries or on the broader economy rather than on a single foreign firm. Historians such as Aurora Gómez-Galvarriato and John Brown have shown how the Mexican Revolution impacted the oil and the textile industries, but they have mostly looked at the economy as a whole and overlooked the effects on individual consumers and suppliers.⁴ Singer Mexico provides us with an extraordinary opportunity to study the development of corporate marketing strategies in Latin America. This article examines one business in a single industry to show how marketing evolved amid political instability and change in Mexico. It also emphasizes transnationalism and consumption, challenging existing scholarship that portrays multinationals and nationalist Latin America as wholly incompatible and providing new insights into the development of multinationals' marketing operations in emerging economies.⁵

⁴ Brown, *Oil and Revolution*; Aurora Gómez-Galvarriato, *Industry and Revolution: Social and Economic Change in the Orizaba Valley, Mexico* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013). María del Carmen Collado's work on entrepreneurs in Mexico offers an excellent analysis of how the revolution affected one family business; see "Entrepreneurs and Their Businesses during the Mexican Revolution," *Business History Review* 86 (Winter 2012): 719–44. For information on foreign capital and railway firms, see Sandra Kuntz Ficker, "La mayor empresa privada del Porfiriato: El Ferrocarril Central Mexicano (1880–1907)," in *Historia de las Grandes Empresas en México, 1850–1930*, ed. Carlos Marichal and Mario Cerutti (Nuevo León, Mexico, 1997). Until recently, Latin Americans were not seen as consumers. Heidi Tinsman's new book, *Buying into the Regime: Grapes and Consumption and the United States* (Durham, 2014), is an extraordinary start, as it shows how Chileans became avid followers of U.S. consumption practices at the same time they supplied labor to U.S.-owned grape producers in Chile. See also Jones, *Multinationals and Global Capitalism*, 209–12, 162.

⁵ Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells, *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850–1930* (Austin, 2010). New work that concentrates on Latin Americans' experience of modernity demonstrates the important role of foreign modern consumer goods in shaping the region's consumer identity in the twentieth century; see Joe Wolfe, *Autos and Progress: The Brazilian Search for Modernity* (Oxford, 2010); and Tinsman, *Buying into the Regime*. The scholarship on the emergence of Mexico's consumer society is growing. Steven Bunker shows that Mexicans were avid consumers of European and U.S. products, especially in the late nineteenth century, when President Porfirio Díaz adopted foreign technology to "modernize" Mexico. Among other consumer goods, new household appliances—and sewing machines in particular—made homes "modern" and "industrial" spaces. Bunker, *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz* (Albuquerque, 2012), 7–9. See also Jürgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865–Present* (Albuquerque, 2004), 28; and Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home! Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

Singer Goes to Mexico

American business spread relentlessly across Mexico in the mid- to late nineteenth century. By 1910, Mexico received more U.S. investment than did anywhere else in the world. Except in the henequen industry in Yucatán, where International Harvester paid local elites to oversee production, most U.S. investment was managed by foreign capitalists, which provoked immense resentment among Mexicans.⁶

Although Singer did not move production to Mexico, its retail division, Singer Mexico, was selling sewing machines in every Mexican state by 1905 (see [Figure 1](#)). Singer opened stores beginning in the 1880s, and although there are references to women working for Singer in shops and traveling, no extant sources list them as company employees. Singer was also active in other parts of Latin America, but its marketing system was less developed in those areas than in Mexico (see [Appendix](#)).⁷ Singer's Export Agency, a department in the company's New York headquarters, serviced most regions in South America, while it operated as a branch in Mexico.⁸

Singer's supply chain was well established across Mexico by the mid-1890s. Since 1860 the company's distribution organization in San Antonio, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, exported machines across the U.S.-Mexican border and to the Mexican port of Veracruz, where Singer employees and independent merchants unloaded the cargo and delivered it to other independent sellers and Singer salesmen throughout the country. As demand increased, veteran Mexican and U.S. salesmen opened new corporate offices in Veracruz, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato, León, Guadalajara, Pachuca, and Toluca, operating under New York direction.⁹

Singer Mexico hired an independent German hardware firm, Casa Böker, beginning in 1876. Casa Böker, headquartered in Mexico City, had agents who could distribute Singer products throughout central and northern Mexico. As historian Fred Carstensen explains, Singer's relationship with merchant companies was very "strict"; they had to

⁶ Wilkins, *Emergence of Multinational Enterprise*, 113–26; Allen Wells, *Yucatan's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and International Harvester, 1860–1915* (Albuquerque, 1985); Thomas O'Brien, *The Century of U.S. Capitalism in Latin America* (Albuquerque, 1999).

⁷ "United States Sewing Machine Exports, in Cases," *Weekly Sewing Machine Journal: Devoted to the Sewing Machine and Kindred Interests* (1882–1883), and "Value of Sewing Machine Exports," *Sewing Machine Times: Devoted to the Sewing Machine and Allied Interests* (1900), both in Imprints Collection, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Del. (hereafter, HML).

⁸ Other regions where Singer had created partnerships instead of national sales companies (as in Germany and Great Britain in 1905) were Spain, the Balkans, and South Africa. Davies, *Peacefully Working*, 113–15. For more data on Singer sales in Latin America, see [Appendix](#).

⁹ Mexico correspondence, 1887, box 103, folders 5 and 6, SSMC.



Figure 1. Singer sewing machines sold in Mexico (net), 1902–1937. (Source: “World Singer Results, Mexico, 1902–1940,” unprocessed microfilm, AP 93-0444 reel 1, source 2, project 56, Singer Sewing Machine Company Records, Madison, Wis.)

maintain sufficient stock of Singer sewing machines and, when possible, offer credit options.¹⁰ Casa Böker could sell Singer’s sewing machines, but not anyone else’s.¹¹ Singer Mexico did not want to be compared to other brands, and although Casa Böker was cooperative, Singer had to expand its business to avoid dependence on independent sellers.

By 1900, Singer Mexico had triumphed over its rivals—such as Household, Standard, and White—thanks in part to Singer Mexico’s first general manager, or *gerente*, Louis Harnecker. Like Singer’s best marketing agents, Nusserwanjee Merwanjee Patell in India and Edmund Adcock in Spain, Harnecker had prior experience, in

¹⁰ Singer contracted Bassett and Company to exclusively distribute its machines in Peru and Chile. Fred V. Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets: Studies of Singer and International Harvester in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 18. Franchises were a common practice before Frederick Bourne became Singer’s president in 1893. After 1893, exclusive Singer sales organizations were established throughout the regions where the company had already expanded.

¹¹ Singer agreement with Casa Böker, 1876, Micro 2014 P92-9494, reel 255, and Micro 2014 P92-9495, reel 257, SSMC; correspondence from Casa Böker to New York, 1879, box 103, folder 5, SSMC; Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 28–38. In the late 1870s in England Singer agent William Woodruff developed the canvasser-collector system, by which the same canvassing salesmen promoting sewing machines door to door could also open credit accounts and collect installment payments. Mark Casson and Andrew Godley, “Revisiting the Emergence of the Modern Business Enterprise: Entrepreneurship and the Singer Global Distribution System,” *Journal of Management Studies* 44, no. 7 (2007): 1071–72. Based on these contracts, Singer retained ownership of the sewing machine until the borrower had made all the payments.

Germany and also in the United States, where he had learned how to manage a business. His mission in Mexico was to develop a well-coordinated retail system that could overwhelm Singer's competition, especially in rural areas. Singer already had a contract with Casa Böker, but Böker's presence was limited to Mexico City and the northern states.¹² Singer Mexico wanted to expand throughout the country, but the company's salesmen complained that transportation to the south was too costly and argued that they needed to open shops to avoid extra expenses. As the company expanded, detailed bookkeeping and administration was also needed, as agents reported incomplete books and accounts.¹³ Depending on the size of the market, shops generally employed one to three clerks and a number of salespeople to attend to the public. Canvassers—Singer employees who traveled door to door and to rural areas promoting the sewing machine—were also assigned to shops.

To improve Singer's selling organization, Harnecker had to open new branches, known as *encargadurías*, in remote places such as Yucatán. Harnecker inspected underperforming *encargadurías*, like the one in Guadalajara, where he directed salesmen and managers (*encargados*) to improve their bookkeeping. He also instructed them to monitor leased merchandise. Since the median household income in Mexico was relatively low, the company set up hire-purchase accounts, known as *contratos de alquiler*. Mismanaged *contratos de alquiler* threatened to undermine profits.¹⁴ Mexico's gerente also emphasized good customer service, which gave Singer an edge over its competition. Singer wanted its salespeople and canvassers to know their customers well in order to specially market machines to their specific needs. Singer's local representatives made repairs and collected unpaid balances. Hence, customers became increasingly dependent on company employees who were readily available.

By 1905, Singer Mexico had established a reliable selling organization that incorporated every state. The system was managed vertically, with Harnecker at the top. Singer had at least one shop, or *expendio*, in every state—nearly three hundred *expendios* in all. Salesmen could attract new customers at the *expendios*, which were normally in well-

¹² Correspondence from Casa Böker to New York, 1879, SSMC; "Competition Sales," *The Sewing Machine Advance*, Apr. 1887, and "Monotonous Mexico," *Sewing Machine Times*, 10 Feb. 1899, both HML. Traveling agents known as *agentes viajeros* were common in Mexico's commercial culture. For more information about their routes, see Patricia Arias, "Rutas comerciales y agentes viajeros," *América Indígena* 17, no. 3 (1982): 454–56. Singer, however, was unique in that its salesmen worked exclusively for the company.

¹³ Harnecker began his time as head of Singer's organization in Mexico in 1893. Correspondence from Mexico City, 1879–1888, box 103, folders 5 and 6, SSMC.

¹⁴ Correspondence from Mexico City, 1894, box 103, folders 6 and 8, SSMC.

trafficked locations in urban centers. Harnecker commanded fifty managers in charge of approximately 350 store salesmen (*dependientes*) and clerks (*empleados*), and more than 350 canvassers and collectors, known as *vendedores* and *cobradores*.¹⁵ There is very limited information about how salesmen were recruited. While several of the encargados were foreign, like Harnecker, most employees were Mexicans. Hence, many customers perceived Singer as a local company.

Expendios also employed saleswomen who encouraged potential customers to try each machine. Although references are scarce, the description of store window displays and the importance that the company assigned to home sewing activities in postrevolutionary Mexico implies that women were an important part of the company's marketing strategy before and after the revolution. Female instructors, or profesoras, produced samples on the spot that were then set on display. Managers saw these profesoras as experts in domesticity. Outside the expendio, profesoras normally accompanied their male counterparts on trips into the countryside to reach remote communities.¹⁶ Managers believed the profesoras had a special connection with women consumers since they shared the same responsibilities in the home.¹⁷

Singer's marketing emphasized that the sewing machine was a household technology that would enhance women's artistic creativity without undermining Mexico's embroidery traditions or threatening gender norms.¹⁸ In Mexico, women normally sewed and embroidered at home. As in Europe and the United States, sewing practices in Mexico were closely attached to domesticity and prescribed women's roles in society.¹⁹ Sewing kept elite and middle-class women occupied so that they would not "stray." In working-class families, however, sewing provided households with a second income. Mothers and

¹⁵ In addition to its three hundred shops in Mexico, Singer had about 450 shops elsewhere in Latin America; most were in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. "Expendios en la República Mexicana, arreglados por Divisiones y Encargadurías," and "Directory of Shops for the Sale of Singer Sewing Machines throughout the World," 1905, box 109, SSMC.

¹⁶ Luis González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin, 1974), 99.

¹⁷ "Shop Appearance," *Red S Review* 2, nos. 3 and 4 (Nov. and Dec. 1919), West Dunbartonshire Libraries and Cultural Services, Dunbarton, U.K. (hereafter, WDL). Sources about the place of women within the company are scarce. Beyond their key role in the decoration of expendios, there are some examples of women joining Singer managerial ranks by the beginning of the twentieth century. *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Oaxaca*, 1912, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <http://www.hndm.unam.mx/> (hereafter, HNDM).

¹⁸ Elizabeth Q. Hutchison, *Labors Appropriate to their Sex: Gender, Labor, and Politics in Urban Chile, 1900–1930* (Durham, 2001).

¹⁹ William E. French, "Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work, and the Family in Porfirian Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (1992): 529–53.

grandmothers usually taught young girls to sew garments and house linens. By the late nineteenth century, many women used these skills in textile factories. Others participated in a putting-out system, working at home and selling linens to a nearby factory, or going to upper- and middle-class houses to take on their regular sewing (a practice called *cosiendo ajeno*).²⁰ Girls also learned embroidery in school. In Mexico, embroidery as a gender-specific domestic activity dates back to colonial times, when the Spanish elites promoted it in convents and schools for girls. It was an opportunity to demonstrate dexterity, grace, and dedication to domesticity. But embroidery was also important in indigenous communities, which introduced unique patterns—patterns that the Creole elite eventually appropriated and presented as elements of Mexico's national culture.²¹

Singer used embroidery, dressmaking, and plain sewing in marketing their sewing machines to potential customers. When Mexico celebrated its centennial, in 1910, Singer invited Mexicans visiting the capital from other areas to its Mexico City headquarters, where it hosted free demonstrations in its store on the central San Francisco Street. In the newspaper *El País*, Singer announced that the event was open to “anyone that visited the city for the centennial.” Whoever entered the store could receive “a free demonstration” of the company's sewing machine “for all (household) purposes.”²² Singer's expendios offered individual instruction, which was one of the strategies that made the company wildly popular. It was no surprise that the foreign company's shops would eventually become a target for revolutionaries.

²⁰ Although concentrating on Mexico City, the literature on women's work in nineteenth-century Mexico is extensive; see, for example, John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln, 2001); Susie S. Porter, *Working Women of Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879–1931* (Tucson, 2003); Edward Beatty, *Technology and the Search for Progress in Modern Mexico* (Berkeley, 2015).

²¹ Elisa Ramírez Castañeda, *La educación indígena en México* (Mexico City, 2006); Mary K. Vaughan, “Introduction: Pancho Villa, the Daughters of Mary, and the Modern Woman: Gender in the Long Mexican Revolution,” and Julia Tuñón Pablos, “Femininity, ‘Indigenismo,’ and Nation: Film Representation by Emilio ‘El Indio’ Fernández,” both in Olcott, Vaughan, and Cano, *Sex in Revolution*, 81–98; Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson, 1997); Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, 1996), 204–11. The historiography on women's education in Latin America and Mexico is very extensive; see, for example, Anne Staples, “Una educación para el hogar: México en el siglo XIX,” and Valentina Torres Septién, “La educación informal de la mujer católica en el siglo XIX,” both in Arredondo, *Obedecer, servir y resistir*, 85–98 and 117–34; Martha Eva Rocha, *El álbum de la mujer: Antología ilustrada de las mexicanas* (Mexico City, 1991); and Schell, “Gender, Class, and Anxiety.”

²² *El País*, 9 Nov. 1910, HNMD.

Singer during the Revolution

Different political groups seriously challenged long-time president Porfirio Díaz in various anti-reelection campaigns starting in 1910. Unsuccessful, some of the leaders of these groups, such as Francisco Madero, formed armies to oust Díaz, who had been in office for thirty-four years. Soon, Madero, who became president of Mexico in 1911, faced political opposition as well. As historians have shown, the first two years of armed conflict, although increasingly violent, affected businesses only incidentally.²³ Regardless of the escalation of the armed conflict, Singer's sales grew between 1911 and 1913.

Nevertheless, mounting violence created numerous problems for Singer. The chaos unleashed by the revolution disrupted payments on Singer's *contratos de alquiler* (Figure 2). Many customers returned their machines because the economy was unstable; they could not find work and they could not afford to make the installment payments. The war also impeded the company's ability to collect payments, since many states were marred by violence. Delinquency was common, and many Singer products started to appear in secondhand stores.²⁴

As the revolution intensified between 1914 and 1917, Singer's sales quickly declined. Agents reported that war was adversely affecting the company's selling organization. Madero was assassinated in 1913, and his successor, military officer Victoriano Huerta, also did not last long in office, as the Constitutionalist under the lead of Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón defeated the Huertistas. After 1914 the fighting increased between the Constitutionalist and the armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, mostly rural groups in the north and south fighting for agrarian and radical social reforms.²⁵ Singer's net sales dropped nearly 50 percent between 1913 and 1914. According to the company's management, salesmen were "soon completely out of touch" with many customers who had leased machines. Revolutionaries robbed

²³ Stephen Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890–1940* (Stanford, 1995); Jeff Bortz, *Revolution within the Revolution: Cotton Textile Workers and the Mexican Labor Regime, 1910–1923* (Stanford, 2008); Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens*; Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 1, *Porfirians, Liberals and Peasants* (Lincoln, 1990), 230–48.

²⁴ During the revolution, Singer Mexico had high levels of delinquent accounts, but they were not higher than those in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Colombia, or Peru. After the revolution, between 1918 and 1929, Mexico's reverts were over 7 percent on average—still less than in Cuba (20 percent), Peru (9.4 percent), Puerto Rico (16 percent), and Chile (13 percent). The lowest levels during the 1920s were registered in Argentina (1.8 percent), Uruguay (2.3 percent), Brazil (4 percent), and Colombia (6.7 percent). All countries' balances of delinquent accounts skyrocketed after 1930, however, with Cuba again being the highest and all the rest exceeding 25 percent.

²⁵ Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 2, *Counter-Revolution and Reconstruction* (Lincoln, 1990), 1–100.

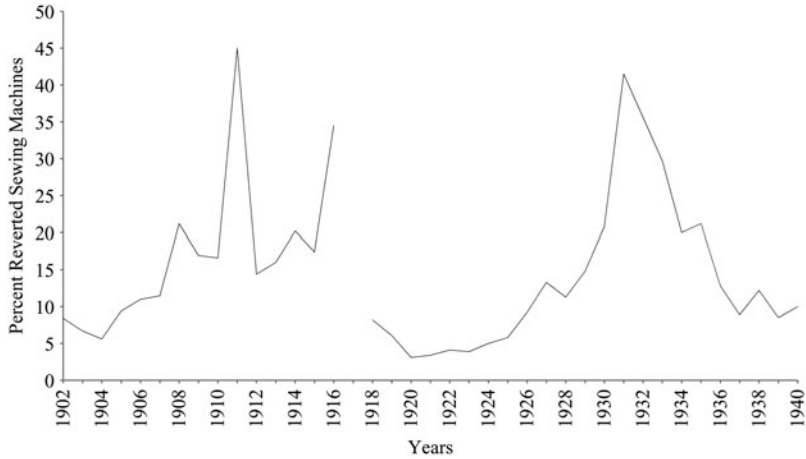


Figure 2. Percentage of reverted or returned Singer machines in Mexico, 1902–1940. Reverted machines were those that consumers could not pay for; the company reserved the right to take them back. (Source: “Machine Reverts,” “World Singer Results, 1902–1940,” unprocessed microfilm AP 93-0444 reel 1, source 2, project 56, Singer Sewing Machine Company Records, Madison, Wisc.)

company agents who tried to check on customers; agents were arrested and their horses and company funds taken from them. The first report of such an incident came in October 1913, when Zapatistas stopped a salesman in Cuatla and took his money and possessions. Meanwhile, many customers who owed Singer money stopped paying and disappeared. Singer tried to take the defaulters to court but was rarely successful. As a result, the company had to close some of its *expendios*, especially in areas where business and communications had become limited, such as in the state of Tabasco.²⁶

As the revolution turned into a civil war, the situation worsened for Singer. The revolutionaries “completely looted” the branch office in Morelos, south of Mexico City. The Constitutionalist army stole 196 sewing machines, various parts, the branch’s furniture, and its cash. Constitutionlists also raided the Singer store in Zacatecas, to the north, and pressured the company’s salesmen to lend money. Both

²⁶ “A Letter from Mexico,” *Red S Review* 4, no. 1 (1922), and “Revolutionary Experiences,” *Red S Review* 4, no. 9 (1923), both WDL; “Singer Sewing Machine Company Protecciones y Reclamaciones,” 1924, Expediente NC 634-12, Departamento Diplomático, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada, Mexico City, Mexico (hereafter, AHGE); *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Yucatán*, 1911, 1913; *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Tabasco*, 1912; *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Morelos*, 1911, 1912; *Periódico Oficial del Estado de San Luis de Potosí* 1914, and *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Yucatán*, 1917, 1918, all HNMD.

Villistas and Constitutionalist “borrowed” company horses and never returned them. Sales reports became increasingly discouraging, as the revolutionaries seized company ledgers and other products as they advanced across the country.²⁷ Singer sold fewer than one thousand machines in 1916, and in 1917 the company in Mexico did not even send reports to New York.

In 1916 the Constitutionalist Venustiano Carranza became Mexico’s president. Although Villistas and Zapatistas continued fighting through the end of the decade, the 1917 constitution was enacted and peace was gradually restored. In this context, Singer Mexico bounced back quickly. The company’s monthly magazine explained how the “Central Agent lost no time in getting into touch with the shops.” Although “morale’ had fallen,” Singer’s sales team was able to retake its lost market share in less than a year.²⁸ In 1918, Singer Mexico sold 10,816 machines, and the number of annual reverted or returned machines decreased by 26.3 percent the next year (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)).

Recovery came faster than compensation for damages and lost property. To reclaim the money lost during the revolution, Singer sued the Mexican government. The company demanded US\$20,266 in damages, but received only US\$8,130 a generation later, in 1944.²⁹ By the beginning of 1919, the company had resumed normal operations and got to work restoring its marketing structure and reaching consumers as soon as possible. Although there are no records of expenses for 1917, by 1922 the annual investments in marketing exceeded those of 1914. Such investment in rehabilitating the company’s retailing organization soon began to bear fruit, as revenue exceeded the levels of the early years of the revolution.³⁰

Modern Sewing for Modern Mexican Women

Singer increased its marketing budget after the revolution, as well as expanding the scope of its marketing strategies. The company sought to reach more consumers by opening sewing schools, yet it continued to follow the principle that sewing machines were household appliances and ideal for home-based work. Singer continued to market its products to elite and middle-class households, but after 1918, the company also

²⁷ Reports from Mexico City, Aug. 1914 through Nov. 1914, Expediente NC 634-12, AHGE; Mexican claims, box 161, folder 6, SSMC.

²⁸ “Revolutionary Experiences,” WDL.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; Mexican claims, SSMC.

³⁰ “Revolutionary Experiences,” WDL; “World Singer Results, Mexico, 1902–1940,” unprocessed microfilm, AP 93-0444, reel 1, source 2, project 56, SSMC.

focused on lower-income women and ideas about domesticity and gendered modernity after the revolution.³¹

In prerevolutionary newspapers, the company's advertisements explained how sewing machines were "indispensable" to households. The *Mexican Herald* featured the launch of the new Singer 20, with an article recommending this new model as the best Christmas present for wives and daughters in well-off families.³² Singer's advertisements and marketing strategies were directed mostly toward middle-class women who could afford to buy the sewing machine for personal use. In 1888 an announcement in the *Diario del Hogar* called for ladies (*señoras*) to visit Mexico City's downtown store and receive a personalized bookmark embroidered by the Singer sewing machine.³³

Singer's sales agents also marketed the sewing machine to lower-income families as a labor-saving device, offering machines on credit. Families could pay for their new household appliance in installments while enjoying full access to Singer's maintenance and supply service. In both urban centers and more rural locations, Singer's sales teams tried to accommodate local customs about women and domesticity. It helped that 95 percent of the company's salespeople were Mexican.³⁴ In rural areas, Singer representatives also took into account local conditions. For example, in the small town of San José de Gracia, the Singer salesman visited the nearby school to observe the everyday responsibilities of young girls. When the salesman returned to the school, he brought along a female employee who showed the girls how to use the company's technology to do household chores.³⁵

As historians of women and the Mexican Revolution explain, the revolution provided women with an opportunity to overcome gender stereotypes by serving in the army and working as journalists. As Sarah Buck demonstrates, female Mexican activists wanted to make sure their male counterparts did not define them as a "repository of traditional values."³⁶ Throughout the broad spectrum of the political realm, the

³¹ In other countries, such as Japan, Singer also developed a marketing system with women at its center; see Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers*, 195–212.

³² *El País*, 16 July 1910, and "Among the Shops," *Mexican Herald*, 22 Dec. 1911, both HNDM; "The Singer Boardwalk Shop in Atlantic City," *Red S Review* 4, no. 12 (1923), WDL.

³³ *El País*, 16 July 1910, and "Among the Shops," *Mexican Herald*, 22 Dec. 1911; "Gacetilla," *Diario del Hogar*, 14 Feb. 1889, all HNDM.

³⁴ "A Letter from Mexico," WDL.

³⁵ González, *San José de Gracia*, 99.

³⁶ In *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman: Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910–1940* (Denver, 1990), Shirlene Ann Soto describes women's contributions to the Mexican Revolution in more detail. See also Martha Eva Rocha, "The Faces of the Rebellion: From Revolutionaries to Veterans in Nationalist Mexico," and Sarah A. Buck, "The Meaning of the Women's Vote in Mexico, 1917–1953," in *The Women's Revolution in*

revolution was an opportunity for women to make their claims more visible.³⁷

The home, however, continued to be seen as women's natural space. Mexican women, and those who advocated for their rights, also fought for their role in the domestic sphere to be redefined and modernized. As historian Patience A. Schell explains, Catholic women publicly strove to define women's role in the new Mexico through a focus on their "essentially domestic" sphere. Far from undermining the significance of women's activities in the home, their roles as mothers and wives were fundamental to the building and stability of the new state.³⁸ The Unión de Damas Católicas worked to gain public acknowledgment and recognition of women's gendered work and daily activities. Although the Unión's religious stance was against the revolutionary ethos, government-driven programs for the improvement and modernization of women's social and economic situation in postrevolutionary Mexico had much in common with the Unión's goal.

Revolutionary Mexico upheld domesticity, but it acknowledged "women's work" in the home as important to the nation's "modernization." In 1921 the revolutionary government created a new department of education, the Secretaría de Educación Pública, to promote national unity and strengthen nationalism. The Secretaría created new industrial schools that trained students to become laborers and adopt revolutionary virtues. It also supported cultural missions that traveled throughout the country "teaching revolutionary citizenship" and created schools to address women's responsibilities in society.³⁹ The new vocational schools showed women how to use "modern" technology that would help them be more productive and independent, thus rescuing them from a state of cultural, political, and economic backwardness. At the

Mexico, 1910–1953, ed. Stephanie Evaline Mitchell and Patience A. Schell (Lanham, Md., 2007), 15–36, 73–98; and Olcott, Vaughan, and Cano, *Sex in Revolution*.

³⁷ As Anna Macías explains, Mexican women's struggle for civil rights dates back to the late nineteenth century, when women's groups opposed the 1884 Civil Code, which restricted women's property rights. During the early twentieth century, women's organizations quickly expanded and pressured for the legalization of divorce and reform of the Civil Code. Women would have to wait until 1958, however, to gain the right to vote. Anna Macías, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (Westport, Conn., 1982). See also Jocelyn H. Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, 2005).

³⁸ Patience A. Schell, "Of the Sublime Mission of Mothers of Families: The Union of Mexican Catholic Ladies in Revolutionary Mexico," in Mitchell and Schell, *Women's Revolution in Mexico*, 99–101, 107. The literature on the Mexican Revolution's effects on gender relations in Mexico is extensive. For a start, see Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*; Smith, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution*; and Olcott, Vaughan, and Cano, *Sex in Revolution*.

³⁹ Olcott, *Revolutionary Women*. For information on female education in Brazil, see Susan K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1910–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

same time, however, the schools perpetuated the idea that women's place was in the home.⁴⁰

To make women more productive and thus contributing to the improvement of the economy and the nation, vocational schools trained women in trades related to the home or in activities formerly considered appropriate. Women's vocational education emphasized machines, but technology did not disrupt women's domestic responsibilities.⁴¹ For example, women were trained to use technology to make dresses and hats. At vocational schools women studied and practiced the latest advances in making and cutting patterns, learning all aspects of modern Western garment making. Sewing machines were to be available for students. Home economics was also taught, to make mothers into home "managers." In all the industrial certificates it offered to women, the Secretaría's Department of Industrial and Technical Education provided additional courses in "feminine labors" (*labores femeniles*), which included lessons on basic embroidery, cooking, and childrearing. It also created Escuelas de Hogar, or Household Schools, which trained women in professions such as cooking, cleaning, and clerical work.⁴²

Within evolving definitions of the modern woman in 1920s and 1930s Mexico, technological know-how was important, too. Teachers especially promoted sewing machines, which would make "women's work" more efficient. Since the nineteenth century, Mexican leaders had promoted technology as a means of advancement for the nation. Likewise, they had looked to Europe and the United States as models of technological progress.⁴³ The element of foreignness that came with the use of modern technology, and with the use of foreign manufactured sewing

⁴⁰ Smith, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution*. By 1926 the federal government had opened thirteen vocational schools for women in Mexico City; see Schell, "Gender, Class, and Anxiety."

⁴¹ The literature that analyzes the relationship between gender and technology, and the ways technology gets absorbed within society, is vast. For an introduction, see, for example, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas Parke Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 261–80; Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, 1996); and Nina Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen P. Mohun, eds., *Gender and Technology: A Reader* (Baltimore, 2003). On Mexicans' relationship with technology in historical perspective, see Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*; Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*. For a gender perspective on the use of technology in twentieth-century Mexico, see Sandra Aguilar-Rodríguez, "Cooking Technologies and Electrical Appliances in 1940s and 1950s Mexico," in *Technology and Culture in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, ed. Araceli Tinajero and J. Brian Freeman (Tuscaloosa, 2013).

⁴² Schell, "Gender, Class, and Anxiety."

⁴³ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 22–37; Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 3, 40–52; Edward Beatty, "Patents and Technological Change in Late Industrialization: Nineteenth-Century Mexico in Comparative Context," *History of Technology* 24 (2002): 121–50; and Beatty, *Technology and the Search for Progress*.

machines, thus contributed to making the appliance a wanted commodity at a time when Mexico's leaders were redefining the nation.⁴⁴

Singer Mexico supported the state's endeavors to "modernize" work in the home as the company expanded its marketing. It supplied public schools and private sewing schools with sewing machines. Private schools or *academias*, which still exist today in some parts of Mexico, were generally directed by women and concentrated their lessons on dressmaking. Singer supplied the Secretaría's new vocational institutions and even opened its own schools; at times, it converted some of its stores into private academies, where women learned how to use the company's machines and possibly start their own businesses.

Besides dressmaking, Singer Mexico also promoted embroidery. Embroidery became a key component in Revolutionary Mexico's gendered *mexicanidad*—the cultural representation of indigenous traditions integrated into nationalist narratives. In both public and private schools, as well as at Singer's schools, female students learned how to make traditional Mayan embroideries. Revolutionary Mexico appropriated indigenous culture as an alternative to its European inheritances. Unlike in the nineteenth century, when the middle class tried to emulate European fashion trends, Mexicans now turned to Mayan-inspired designs to promote an independent Mexican modernity—and Singer followed suit.⁴⁵ As a photograph of mestiza students in Mérida, Yucatán, shows, Singer's schools, known as *Academias Oficiales*—which followed the Secretaría's educational curricula—and *Academias Afiliadas*, or affiliated schools, offered specialized lessons on how to machine embroider and how to make Mayan embroidery patterns.⁴⁶

Like the state, and as the company had done in the nineteenth century, Singer wanted potential customers to associate the company's products with the home and not with the industrial space. In the women's magazine *La Familia*, for example, the company announced free sewing and embroidery lessons. To attract students, another ad claimed that "*la Singer*" was "the most preferred [brand] in every household." Another ad invited women to come learn the "beautiful art of machine embroidery" at Singer's *academias*. Singer marketed its

⁴⁴ Other home appliances defined gender-specific activities, like cooking, as modern in twentieth-century Mexico. See, for example, Aguilar-Rodríguez, "Cooking Technologies"; and Joanne Hershfield, *Imagining la Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917–1936* (Durham, 2008).

⁴⁵ Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, vol. 1; Jorge Coronado, *The Andes Imagined: Indigenismo, Society, and Modernity* (Pittsburgh, 2009), 1–25; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*. Hershfield, *Imagining la Chica Moderna*; "Pupils in the Merida Embroidery School in their Holiday Attire," photograph, *Red S Review* 15, no. 10 (1934), WDL.

⁴⁶ "Yucatan-Mexico," and "Pupils in the Merida Embroidery School in their Holiday Attire."

schools not only to women who sewed at home for the family and for personal purposes, but also to those who may have wanted to sew professionally and those who wanted to earn money from their home sewing.⁴⁷

This strategy was part of a Singer global approach to marketing. In the United States, Singer's embroidery department had been created in the 1890s after having organized very successful exhibits of home-like ornaments and garments that Singer instructors had made.⁴⁸ According to company executives, the sewing machine was "truly a representation of education and culture."⁴⁹ In Mexico, Singer encouraged girls to display what they made in the company's stores and schools. As the company explained in *La Familia*, machine embroidery should not replace ornate hand sewing but instead improve its complexity and beauty.⁵⁰

Dressmaking and embroidery were politically and culturally in vogue, and Singer Mexico was well positioned to supply the necessary technology and expertise.⁵¹ Singer thus marketed its products as ideal additions to a "decente" home. In *La Dama Católica*, a Singer advertisement emphasized how convenient the Singer sewing machine table, with drawers on each side, was for *labores domésticas* (domestic chores). In *La Familia*, Singer explained how its new electric sewing machine had "attractive designs" and a "perfect finish"; it was "solidly built," with "the most carefully selected woods."⁵²

Singer also translated its embroidery manuals to appeal to Spanish speakers in Latin America. *La Familia* recommended Singer's manual to every woman who wanted to learn how to make tablecloths, pillow covers, or embroideries for curtains and bed sheets. Every embroidery style or pattern—including Richelieu, Tenerife, and Mexican calados—was in Singer's manuals. For example, the Richelieu style of embroidery was recommended for simple tablecloths (Figure 3). Like professionally handmade embroideries, the tablecloth would be "laborious and

⁴⁷ Libro "Singer" de Bordados (n.p., 1922), 3. I found this book and another (1948) edition in a secondhand bookstore in Mexico City. *La Familia: Revista de labores para el hogar* no. 62 (1 Mar. 1937): 29, 67; and no. 63 (15 Mar. 1937): 53, both at Hemeroteca Nacional de México, Mexico City (hereafter, HNM).

⁴⁸ Libro "Singer" de Bordados, 3; Paula A. de la Cruz-Fernández, "Marketing the Hearth: Ornamental Embroidery and the Building of the Multinational Singer Sewing Machine Company," *Enterprise & Society* 15, no. 3 (2014): 442–71.

⁴⁹ Libro "Singer" de Bordados.

⁵⁰ *La Familia: Revista de labores para el hogar*, no. 67 (July 1937), HNM.

⁵¹ Schofield-Tomschin, "Home Sewing," 97–110; Carol Tulloch, "There's No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to 1960s," in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 111–25.

⁵² *La Dama Católica*, no. 29 (Feb. 1923); "Singer Electric Machines," *La Familia* no. 63 (15 Mar. 1937): 53, both HNM.

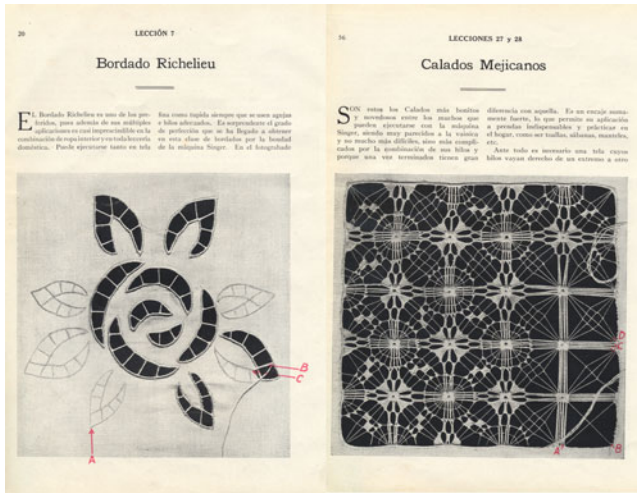


Figure 3. Bordado Richelieu and Calado Mejicano. A sample of the embroidery patterns included in the *Libro "Singer" de Bordados*, 1922. (Source: Author's collection.)

beautiful," Singer promised.⁵³ In 1922, Singer Mexico compiled a special color manual titled *Libro "Singer" de bordados* and distributed it to schools and stores. The company promoted it as "indispensable for the making of underwear and almost any domestic lingerie." The girls at the Mérida Embroidery School also used the *Libro* to make "holiday attire" and Maya-inspired dresses.⁵⁴

Conclusion

While the Mexican Revolution temporarily disrupted Singer sales in the country, the U.S.-based company was able to expand and increase profits afterward. Just five years after the end of the revolution, 1925 was Singer's most successful year in Mexico up to that time. Its employment of Mexican salespeople who knew how to market the company's technology to women proved to be an effective strategy, just as it had prior to the revolution. The symbolism of the Singer sewing machine as a modern household technology enabled the company to play a part in Mexico's growing nationalism.

⁵³ *La Familia* recommended Singer's "exclusive book to embroider." "Bordado Richelieu," *La Familia*, no. 67 (Apr. 1937), HNM; *Libro "Singer" de Bordados*, 20, 22, 56, 58.

⁵⁴ *Libro "Singer" de Bordados*; "Yucatan-Mexico," *Red S Review* 15, no. 10 (1934), WDL.

The historiography of Singer has long acknowledged the importance of Singer's selling system in distributing the sewing machine around the world. The effect of war and nationalism on such a successful marketing organization, however, has never been examined before. Through the examination of Singer's selling system in Mexico before and after a decade-long revolutionary war, this article demonstrates that business permeates everyday lives.⁵⁵ The company's strategy enabled it to survive the violence, destruction, and widespread anti-Americanism of the Mexican Revolution.

In line with the Mexican government's actions against foreign business after the revolution, especially in the oil industry, Singer never received full compensation for the damages it suffered during the war. However, there is no evidence of reaction against Singer's personnel during the thirty years after the revolution. To the contrary, Singer worked hand in hand with government officials in their education programs for women. The company also endorsed private initiatives that promoted the ideal Mexican woman as a mother, wife, and homemaker, and created new marketing spaces and tools—such as schools and manuals in Spanish—to support that ideal. This continued to be an effective strategy for Singer for many years after the revolution, as both company and country shared overlapping visions of Mexico's future.

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⁵⁵ Kenneth Lipartito, "Business Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Business History*, ed. Geoffrey Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin (Oxford, 2007), 603–28.

Appendix
Singer Sewing Machine's Sales in Latin America, 1906–1936
 (Number of Machines)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Cuba</i>	<i>Colombia</i>	<i>Peru</i>	<i>Mexico</i>
1906	14,032	9,782	4,658	–	4,565	33,087
1907	14,728	22,784	6,916	–	6,289	31,567
1908	15,378	22,165	8,720	–	7,656	23,365
1909	20,478	28,064	10,010	–	4,763	24,951
1910	22,978	39,638	7,875	–	9,310	26,810
1911	23,447	51,204	7,606	4,658	9,449	18,907
1912	30,139	63,088	–	6,916	7,789	30,912
1913	44,682	79,168	7,331	8,720	9,423	29,177
1914	21,618	67,742	8,937	10,010	8,523	14,205
1915	11,301	29,445	10,199	7,875	6,363	3,763
1916	13,458	22,399	4,616	7,606	7,635	958
1917	–	–	5,393	–	–	–
1918	13,126	48,275	9,061	7,331	10,094	10,816
1919	17,615	43,288	8,757	8,937	13,499	13,951
1920	26,300	38,479	13,970	10,199	13,915	19,169
1921	26,960	17,127	20,240	4,616	9,091	21,139
1922	33,565	24,338	24,877	5,393	4,586	20,864
1923	40,429	40,631	26,587	9,061	7,004	25,261
1924	46,503	39,231	23,523	8,757	9,781	28,879
1925	53,913	40,374	8,317	13,970	9,602	35,485
1926	49,068	40,833	2,555	20,240	11,522	33,745
1927	48,735	50,536	1,980	24,877	10,621	25,104
1928	50,469	61,479	3,250	26,587	10,611	26,756
1929	49,027	60,969	5,922	23,523	11,336	25,686
1930	41,909	34,632	6,841	8,317	9,267	24,275
1931	24,644	24,644	8,314	2,555	2,401	8,677
1932	8,383	16,278	4,658	1,980	1,291	7,115
1933	9,096	19,482	6,916	3,250	868	8,332
1934	13,000	29,618	8,720	5,922	1,669	11,947
1935	16,170	36,968	10,010	6,841	4,163	12,832
1936	19,838	40,509	7,875	8,314	6,138	18,456

Source: "World Singer Results, 1902–1940," unprocessed microfilm AP 93-0444 reel 1, source 2, project 56, Singer Sewing Machine Company Records, Madison, Wisc.