Selling Books to Scientists

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MANY PEOPLE can write books; it's no great trick to manufacture an attractive book; but it takes a lot of doing to *sell* a book." So I was told many years ago, a few days after entering the employ of Wiley. A member of the staff, a well-known bookman, was repeating to me an observation that he himself had heard over and over again during his half century in the book business.

At the moment the remark seemed relatively unimportant. But, as I grappled with the problems of my new job, I came to understand the hard facts behind the old saw. I gradually got the idea that the unknown (at least to me) individual who had said it first had uttered a truism to which publishers will always give complete assent. In fact, it is safe to say that the observation has become almost a cliché.

I had come into publishing by way of a large industrial company, where I had been exposed to production, sales promotion, advertising, and selling. I had been appalled at the great waste involved in trying to solve advertising and sales problems. This experience had been invaluable, and in my innocence I thought that for my new job the greatest lesson it had taught was what not to do. Some waste was inherent in any distribution system. No one deliberately wasted promotion money. To reach your prospective customers you spent x number of dollars to reach y number of buyers; and, as you did it, you were well aware that perhaps only three quarters of the circulation could by any stretch of the imagination be considered possible purchasers of your product. Well, when I got into specialized book publishing, where every published book had a specific audience, I had the naïve notion that at last here was a business where waste and inefficiency could be reduced to a minimum.

But it just wasn't that simple. I was still confronted with unchanging human nature, habits, social and scientific mores—in fact, all those intangible factors that are so vital a part of modern sales promotion.

Before proceeding to a specific discussion of the subject assigned to me, I should like to make one or two preliminary observations. It is important, for instance, to assume from the start that the book is a good one, that it has had competent editorial direction, and that a market survey of the field has indicated the need for a book of this type, scope, and size. I should also like to suggest that the publisher has other motives in publishing books than to sell them. Without adequate sales, he could not, of course, stay long in this fascinating business. But the publisher worthy of his calling wants above all else to issue books that will make a definite contribution to the literature. He also derives pleasure and stimulation from contacts with his authors, whom he has come to regard as his partners in a worthy enterprise.

I am reminded of a dream recently recounted to me by a publisher. It was a marvelous dream and it gave him considerable satisfaction that he was able to remember it in detail. He had just published an exceptionally fine book on a subject of increasing importance. He had taken a full page of advertising in the only publication reaching this group, and a circular had been sent to a selected list of prospects. He had heard that the reviewer for SCIENCE was one of the leading authorities in this area of knowledge and was sympathetic to the author's views, even those on controversial issues. Up to now there was nothing unusual about all this, but here is where the unrealities of the dream world come into the picture. What a sweet dream it was! He dreamed that on the day the issue of the specialized journal appeared, every subscriber dropped whatever he was doing, took the wrapping from the magazine, and sat back in an easy chair to give complete attention to its pages. And lo, every man jack stopped when he came to the publisher's announcement of the new book and read every single word of copy. Not only that, every interested reader took immediate action: He did not wait; he wrote that minute for an on-approval copy.

The wonderful dream goes on. Our publisher saw vividly a really tremendous miracle happen to the eight thousand circulars his mailing division had sent out. Though the mailing piece was a good one, it actually was not exceptional. Yet this time the incredible, the impossible, was taking place. Every envelope was opened, despite the fact that the recipient knew at once that he was about to read a book advertisement; and, *mirabile dictu,* the reader, instead of throwing it all unopened into the nearest wastepaper basket, avidly read both circular and letter; and those for whom the book was written immediately filled out their order forms and rushed with them to the nearest mailbox.

And now for the final act of this most excellent of dreams. SCIENCE came out with a column-and-a-half review of the book by an enthusiastic critic. He hailed it as "a brilliant piece of expository writing, a classic of its kind," and, most important of all, "an invaluable tool and indispensable source of inspiration to all workers in the field." Again lightning struck. Every reader of SCIENCE turned automatically to the review, read it with enthusiasm, and "all the workers in the field" promptly ordered the book. Of course the

first printing was quickly sold out. Orders for a substantial second printing were about to be issued when our dreamer awoke from his beautiful fantasy.

From our point of view, the publisher's dream has many omissions and comes to an end all too quickly. But why not continue the dream for him? We can envision, for example, a situation where the hundreds of libraries and educational institutions throughout the world take immediate cognizance of our new book, and all the leading bookstores display it prominently. In our dream it would seem appropriate for all foreign-language journals in the field to publish good reviews within six months after publication. Any good bookman could go on in this fashion ad infinitum, but I am sure enough has been said to suggest some of the marketing problems of importance to the technical and scientific publisher.

Why is this dream so distorted a picture of what actually takes place? The reader of this article can supply his own answer. He knows precisely what in his own experience deters him from doing what every magazine publisher and advertiser wants him to do. Someday an unbiased research agency will make a study of a subscriber's reading habits with regard to advertising. Of course, continuous studies are being made on various aspects of the problem. Publishers of mass media hire experts to appraise the readership appeal of their editorial content, and advertising agencies are constantly trying to measure quantitatively and qualitatively the effects of various copy techniques. But no one, so far as I know, has asked the pertinent questions that will tell us even approximately how much profit an advertiser gets for his advertising dollar.

Book publishers, too, at one time or another conduct research to get answers to promotion problems. Many of them are routine checks to determine the selling power of specialized journals in which they advertise, and the efficiency of mailing lists, etc. But we know also that publishers, even those who have been in the business a long time, are trying to find the answers to still more fundamental questions. What sells a book? Who buys books, and how many? Where are they bought? If these questions seem naïve, even ridiculous, remember that research has never provided answers we can regard as definitive. We make studies and we think we have the answers. We try out the new formula, which seems to work for a time; then, six months later, we discover that it does not work at all. New studies reveal a contradictory answer, and we start all over again. But research is by no means fruitless. If nothing else, results of such studies reveal the hard and humbling fact that there are no absolute answers.

Big advertising agencies have always insisted that they have the correct answer to book promotion. They smile at our small budgets and actually believe they could make book publishing as big and profitable as any other type of business—cosmetics, cigarettes, etc. From time to time trade publishers have listened to this siren song and have risked the thousands of dollars necessary to advertise in large-circulation media. But we notice that the gamble is not repeated, and that their advertising subsequently follows accepted book advertising standards. The old hackneyed retort, "Ours is a different kind of business," certainly applies to book publishing. If we manufactured clothespins, there would be no question as to our profound faith in continuous promotion of the product. But the book publisher has not one product, one book. He has a hundred or more products, each requiring a special kind of promotion if it is to be sold successfully. He has to use all the known techniques that apply to the distribution of other products: journal advertising, direct-mail, book displays, publicity, sampling, and personal selling. How he uses them, and in what proportions, largely determine his efficiency as a publisher.

Here is as good a place as any to state categorically that advertising can point out the merits of a book, but it cannot add a single virtue that is not already there. For example, to say that a book of only 116 pages is "without question the most comprehensive treatment of the subject now in print," is likely to be an unwise overstatement. Perhaps the author intended the book to be merely a summary of important research going on in the field—significant, yes, but not "comprehensive." Naturally, the publisher is enthusiastic about his book because he has backed his judgment by a substantial investment. But he is also well aware of the necessity of adhering strictly to the truth, as he sees it, in his advertising. Moreover, he knows that there is no advertising in the world that can give to a book a quality or a superiority it does not possess.

In a journal such as SCIENCE, it is not out of order, it seems to me, to make some comments on the part played by the review in selling books. Two years ago Wiley ran a study on the effectiveness of various selling methods. The results showed that critical reviews ranked immediately behind direct-mail advertising. I use the word "critical" advisedly in describing a book review. Too many reviews consist of a summary of the book's contents; others repeat the publisher's jacket blurb or his circular copy. The review that really is significant and useful to potential readers is the one that can be written only by an authority in the field who has given the book careful study. He must even read the preface to make certain he understands what the author has tried to do, and above all what he has intentionally omitted. The signed review, the practice of most of the better scientific journals, is usually a much better performance than the unsigned one. If a book reviewer knows that his comments will appear over his name, he will in the nature of things exercise more care and will be more thorough in evaluating the book. In the final analysis, he is working for the prospective user, and stating as frankly as he can whether a book should be bought or avoided.

In making textbooks known to teachers, the complimentary copy distribution system is, despite its obvious limitations, an effective selling technique. Publishers' representatives and the office staff use the utmost care in placing on the "comp list" only those teachers who are logical potential buyers of the book for classroom use. Nevertheless, we know from our talks with other publishers, and from our own experience, that copies are too often given away to those who cannot possibly adopt the book. Teachers commonly assure us when we submit a sample copy for inspection that they require no follow-up. Teachers, however, are subject to the same human frailties as publishers and need to be reminded by personal calls, letters, advertising, etc., that the publisher is interested in their opinions and decisions. Perhaps we shouldn't mention it but we have known professors who have not even taken the book from its wrapper, and on a subsequent call our disappointed traveler has found it on a convenient catchall table in the harassed professor's office, along with his unread journals and catalogues.

In a recent *Wiley Bulletin* editorial, our copy editor made some comments on this matter that I think deserve repeating:

> Complimentary copy distribution is undertaken by textbook publishers, as most readers know, with two major purposes in mind. First, we hope that a textbook will be adopted, after full consideration, in enough educational institutions throughout the world to justify the time, effort, and money invested in it. Second, and just as important, we should like as many opinions as to the quality and usefulness of our books as can be obtained for our future guidance.
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> We look upon the opinions we receive on our books as an important part of our continuing survey of textbook needs. Travelers, editors, consultants, and reviewers quite naturally give us much helpful information about our books. But also of great importance to us are the comments from teachers who are vitally interested in the publication of good textbooks.

No discussion of book promotion is complete without a passing reference to a publisher's traveling sales staff. It has been said more than once that the representative is the company's eyes, ears, and voice. In his visits to colleges, libraries, bookstores, laboratories, and industrial plants, he is indeed the company, interpreting its policies and selling its books. He is more than that, however. As he makes his rounds he becomes aware of new trends in teaching and in education, which he reports faithfully to headquarters. His effectiveness depends on more than a winning personality. The good traveler has a specific knowledge of his own and his competitors' books, and can provide assistance in solving teaching problems. He must know which books are suited to the instructor's needs and which will not apply to them; frequently he can provide information on the experience of other teachers in similar situations. As he develops experience and judgment, he becomes a valuable link between potential authors and the company's editors. The competent traveler, and there are more than a few, becomes a friend and counselor to many. As such, he is appreciated as much by his clientele as he is by the home office.

Throughout this paper I have referred to a number of techniques used by the specialized publisher in promoting his books. There are other ways to sell books, and it must be stressed that today's publisher is not satisfied to depend on, say, the use only of circulars and the services of his traveling sales staff. He must use all the available methods, or he may be overlooking a technique that might be the one superior method for promoting that particular book. In selling his product, the publisher is judged by how well he performs the tasks involved in the intelligent use of the known selling methods. For example, in writing advertising copy for circulars, it is fairly easy to write according to a pattern, making use of the clichés of high-pressure salesmanship. But it is much more difficult to prepare copy that tells accurately, simply, and succinctly the important features of a new book. Superlatives are not needed to impress the scientist. He wants primarily the salient information about the book and its author. He does respond to informative and arresting headlines, and to sound and interesting writing and attractive layout. In advertising he appreciates the allover good taste that is an integral part of the important job of publishing high-quality books in the several fields of modern science.

Occasionally a book does not sell because it is ahead of its time. No amount of promotion, no amount of critical praise, will help it much until the field has caught up with it. A book like Getman's *Theoretical Chemistry* is a good case in point. When it was published in 1913, few colleges offered formal, systematic courses in the subject. Gradually, with a good book available, courses were established, and soon after World War I it was used in practically all the major colleges in the country and in many foreign universities. Today Getman's pioneer text has now become Farrington Daniels' *Outlines of Physical Chemistry,* undoubtedly still the largest-selling textbook in the field. Another title that started off with many of the characteristics of a failure was Coffin's *Vector Analysis.* In 1909 mathematicians were little interested in this subject, but as time went on the book sold in increasing numbers. An interesting fact is that it had its best sale in 1947, thirty-eight years after publication. In such instances one cannot say that these books were not good ones from the very beginning. They were, but for their complete acceptance both authors and publishers had to rest their souls in patience until the time was ripe.

After we have mentioned most of the known ways of selling a book, the fact remains that the most effective, and to authors and publishers the most cherished, of all the various kinds of advertising is the one that cannot be bought—word-of-mouth advertising. This, of course, is not a technique at all. It is a result

brought about by a happy combination of circumstances where many people spontaneously and voluntarily talk enthusiastically about a book. The publisher cannot arrange such things. They just happen.

In prewar days it was fairly common practice to use the so-called saturation method of book promotion. This can be likened to the use of a shotgun in covering broadly every possible segment of a given area. With current high costs, it is becoming more and more necessary to use the rifle. Today, the publisher must be more selective in the use of media. He cannot afford to try to reach every single possible purchaser of a given book. It simply is not sensible to spend one hundred dollars to get back five. Fortunately, there are other methods, direct and indirect, as previously mentioned, to reach the fringe prospects.

If you have concluded from the foregoing comments that publishing scientific books is a difficult, unpredictable, and hazardous venture, you will be right. It is a satisfying business, however, with its own special rewards. The publisher does his best to put out good books, books which experience and research tell him can be sold with mutual benefit to an intelligent and highly specialized audience. But that audience must be reached, and the publisher is ever reminded that "it takes a lot of doing to sell a book."

News and Notes

Scientists in the News

President Eisenhower has accepted the resignation of **Allen V. Astin,** Director of the National Bureau of Standards. The resignation was requested by the Secretary of Commerce, Sinclair Weeks, one reason given being the bureau's adverse report on a substance designed to prolong the life of electric storage batteries. Secretary Weeks has stated that the bureau's tests on the products are not "sufficiently objective because they discount entirely the play of the marketplace." Dr. Astin has stated, however, that the bureau made several exhaustive tests of the product and found it to be of no value. The Bureau of Standards has a Board of Visitors established by law to advise the secretary regarding the operations of the bureau. This committee, which was not consulted in the matter by Secretary Weeks, consists of Robert F. Mehl, Carnegie Institute of Technology, chairman; Detlev W. Bronk, president, Johns Hopkins University; M. J. Kelly, president, Bell Telephone Laboratories; Donald H. Menzel, Harvard Observatory; and J. H. Van Vleck, Harvard University. A new committee is being set up by Secretary Weeks "to evaluate the present functions and operations of the Bureau of Standards in relation to the present national needs." The situation thus created is one of great concern to American science. All facts on both sides should be presented to the public in the interest of both scientific integrity and national welfare.

W. I. B. Beveridge, head of the Department of Veterinary Pathology, University of Cambridge, has been appointed visiting professor of bacteriology for the spring quarter at the Ohio State University.

Walter S. Coe, assistant professor of medicine, University of Louisville, has been awarded an A. Blaine Brower Travelling Scholarship by the American College of Physicians. The scholarship will permit Dr. Coe to spend a month visiting a medical center of his choice.

Gordon Covell, director of the Malaria Laboratory, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Eng., will deliver the Harvard School of Public Health's Cutter Lecture on Preventive Medicine in Boston on May 6. The subject of the lecture will be "Current Research toward a Global Control of Malaria."

Hardy Cross, Strathcona professor of civil engineering, **Walter R. Miles,** professor of psychology, and **Herbert Thoms,** professor of obstetrics and gynecology, will retire from the faculty of Yale University at the end of this academic year.

Walter W. Dalitsch has been named associate director of the Northwestern University Cleft Lip and Palate Institute, effective Sept. 1. Dr. Dalitsch is a staff member of the institute and associate professor of oral surgery at the dental school.

Donald A. Davenport has been appointed chief engineer of Associated Research, Inc., of Chicago.

Benjamin M. Duggar, consultant in mycological research at Lederle Laboratories, and discoverer of aureomycin, has received the Rho Chi Citation at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science. Following the presentation of the citation, Dr. Duggar delivered the first annual Julius W. Sturmer Memorial Lecture, in which he outlined the procedures for the development of new antibiotics.

Allen S. Dunbar, formerly senior research engineer for the Stanford Research Institute, has joined Dalmo Victor Company, San Carlos, Calif., as assistant director of research. Mr. Dunbar previously has been a consultant to Dalmo Victor in the field of microwave optics and the theory of doubly curved antenna reflectors.

Hubert and **Mable Frings,** of the Department of Zoology and Entomology, the Pennsylvania State College, have been invited by the government of France to discuss with workers in a number of French laboratories, during April, May, and June, the results