

A Star Fades for Entrepreneur Sagan

Carl Sagan, the Cornell astronomer who searches out strange new worlds for public television, has taken a wrong turn while exploring the formidable realm of consumer fancy. His latest entrepreneurial venture, a Los Angeles publishing concern known as The Cosmos Store, is saddled with a warehouse full of unsold books and items of science that were meant to appear under Christmas trees across the nation. A shake-up of the product line and the importation of professional managers may take place in January.

"We will consider future projects," says the 46-year-old prince of popularizers from his Cornell office, "or we might stick with what we've got and let the line run out. The economy is such that established businesses are failing left and right. Considering that, we've done extremely well."

Less sanguine is B. Gentry Lee, the 39-year-old executive vice president of Carl Sagan Productions Inc. "I guess we've sold \$600,000 or \$700,000 of the stuff," says Lee from his Los Angeles office. "We thought the items would be in virtually all the stores, but we have to remember that this is our first year of publishing with a somewhat specialized point of view, although I think the popularization of science is something that appeals to everybody."

Sagan's career as a scientific superstar took off after he produced the "Cosmos" television series, which is now shown in 40 countries. The book *Cosmos* has been on the *New York Times* best seller list for a year.

The Cosmos Store is but one division of Carl Sagan Productions Inc., a thriving concern that produces records, movies, and television shows. Like Sagan, second-in-command Lee is deep into science. He is the project engineer for the Galileo mission to Jupiter, a role that keeps him running to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Caltech. Indeed, the lack of sales expertise may have contributed to the problems at The Cosmos Store. "Businessmen are a special breed," says Sagan wryly. "It takes certain skills that even famous academics might not have."

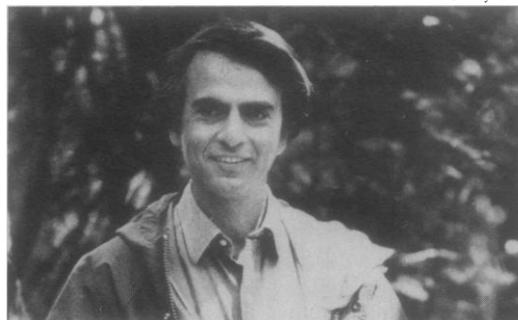
Piled high in the Los Angeles warehouse are items from The Cosmos Store including *Visions of the Universe* (\$29.95), which, according to a publicity release, contains "46 stunning large-format portraits of the Cosmos." There is also the Cosmic Calendar 1982 (\$7.95) and the Cosmo-sphere (\$19.95), an old-fashioned star finder that the release calls a "metal analog computer."

Carl Sagan Productions Inc. did not set out to be the wunderkind of science marketing and gadgetry. It was formed in 1976 by Sagan and Lee as a way to gain control over the production of "Cosmos," for which Lee was co-producer and series manager. On the heels of their success, however, came a host of new projects. The company produced with RCA records "The Music of Cosmos." Early in 1981, Sagan and company closed a deal with Simon & Schuster for a novel called *Contact*. Lee calls it "a good scientific look at first contact with extraterrestrial intelligence." The book went for \$2 million, which, according to *Publishers Weekly*, is the largest sum ever advanced for a work not yet in manuscript. Lee says the book may be out by the spring of 1983, and a movie spin-off of the same title probably will be released by Columbia in 1984. The movie is budgeted at \$20 million. Sagan is executive producer of the movie and will receive a share of the

profits. He will be the sole author of the novel. Sagan has yet to fulfill a contract with Random House to write two more nonfiction books.

The idea for The Cosmos Store, says Sagan, came when he and his wife were promoting "Cosmos" in Japan. (Sagan and his wife, New York novelist Ann Druyan, 32, met while working on the script for "Cosmos.") Druyan saw a star finder and thought it would sell in the United States. The marketing effort for this and other items got under way in July 1981 at stores in California, and went nationwide in time for the holiday season, with products appearing in Waldenbooks and Brentano's. Rather than pay salesmen, Sagan and company placed ads in national publications and hoped name recognition would result in demand and sales.

Sagan says his scientific soul has weathered this journey



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into material realms, and that he really is not out for big profits. "In every case, our main function is to communicate science. . . . Anything that does not teach science is not worth doing. The credo of The Cosmos Store explicitly says that we will forgo large amounts of money. It was written for new employees who wanted to know why we don't sell T-shirts or Sagan soap on a rope." Sagan says he has received tempting offers to promote the products of other companies, but in every case has turned them down. "My point is that if I were into this for the money, I would have just endorsed the product." He concedes that Sagan soap on a rope might affect his scientific credibility.

Though the production company has signed millions in contracts, Sagan says the cash flow is not yet great. He would not discuss overall numbers, but gave one example of tight finances. "Cosmos," the TV series, "itself is still in the red. It ran over \$1.5 million in production, and because it is doing so well worldwide it looks like it will just break even in another year or two. We got a salary from the 'Cosmos' series, but it's less than either Lee or I could have gotten doing other stuff." The production company is wholly owned by Sagan, Druyan, and Lee.

After a 2½-year leave from Cornell University, mostly to produce "Cosmos" but also to work with the imaging team on the Voyager encounters, Sagan, so to speak, came back to earth this summer to the shores of Lake Cayuga in upper New York State. He is still the director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell, and holds a part-time teaching position, this past semester doing a seminar on the Saturn system. And he still performs research.

—WILLIAM J. BROAD