

Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America. By Walter A. Friedman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 368 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN: 0-674-01298-4.0

Reviewed by Daniel Pope

Compared to the rapidly mounting stack of books on the history of American advertising, the topic of the evolution of personal selling has inspired only a small number of volumes. Walter A. Friedman's new book makes a sizable contribution to righting that balance. Broadly conceived and engagingly written, *Birth of a Salesman* is likely to stimulate further study of this important element in the marketing mix.

From nineteenth-century peddlers and book canvassers through the National Cash Register Company's squads of business-machine salesmen to the "party plan" saleswomen for Avon, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics, several dualities in personal selling have been recurrent themes. For John H. Patterson of NCR, "scientific selling" was a watchword. He and his acolytes prepared scripts that not only gave the salesmen words to utter but also provided instructions for accompanying the pitch with appropriate bodily gestures. By 1904, the company's sales manual had swelled to almost two hundred pages. Systematic management of selling was a corollary of the scientific rhetoric, as NCR built a near-military model of organizing its sales force. At the same time, however, Patterson incorporated popular occult beliefs into his selling philosophy—notably, a faith in the power of pyramids. He employed pyramids in his organization charts and in his prescriptions for the psychological traits of successful salesmen. Here, as later, the drive to rationalize salesmanship ran up against a sense that personal selling was an art, perhaps even a mystery. By the 1950s, as Friedman shows, critics like William H. Whyte were deploring the stultifying effects of corporate culture that could turn dynamic salesmen into pallid bureaucrats.

John H. Patterson figures prominently in *Birth of a Salesman*. In studying the work of large manufacturing firms' sales forces, it is inevitable that the subject of Friedman's story shifts somewhat from salesmen to sales management. Training methods, commission and salary systems, sales conventions, territorial assignments all

loom larger in this account than the face-to-face encounter. (Research on the sales organization of the F. and J. Heinz Company even took the author to the company's piquantly named house organ, *Pickles*.) However, Friedman wisely notes that the shift to scientific salesmanship was not complete. The new methods themselves often called for elements of the peddlers' arts—notably, their ability to think on their feet and to probe customers' defenses strategically. The experiences of individual salesmen wearing down prospects' objections for Ford or demonstrating Fuller Brushes are among the most engaging sections of the twentieth-century chapters.

Another ongoing theme in the history Friedman recounts is that the salesman's work is classically an American occupation. In a society that prided itself on eradicating class barriers and offering opportunity to self-made men, selling was an honorable way to translate effort into success. Where political and religious identifications were up for grabs, selling could serve as a model for recruiting political loyalists or denominational adherents. At the same time, however, selling was gendered work. In most of the situations he analyzes, men were selling to women, and the sales encounter was fraught with the cultural baggage of relations between the sexes. To complicate matters, in a society where a producer ethic weighed heavily throughout the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth, men were expected to make things. It is hardly coincidental that a sales job title, "ribbon clerk," often denoted someone whose masculinity was suspect. Meanwhile, selling often entailed what sociologist Arlie Hochschild has tellingly called "emotion work," managing the prospect's feelings to promote the sale. This kind of labor is typically coded as women's work. How could the job of selling be redefined so as to give it appropriately masculine connotations?

One duality that is given relatively little attention is the sometimes uneasy relationship between personal selling and advertising. In some cases, advertising served as a framework for salesmanship. Advertisements could introduce a product, associate it favorably, attract inquiries, and generate prospects for the salesman. At times the distinction between advertising and sales blurred. Salesmen distributed advertising trade cards and helped set up point-of-sale displays in retailers' shops. They might weave advertising slogans and appeals into their pitch. Yet, as advertising developed into a tool for distributing the output of big business, some in the advertising industry wanted their

craft to supplant personal salesmanship. More open, more professional, and, above all, more efficient in reaching the mass market, advertising could build brand loyalty far better than the blandishments of a drummer.

Manufacturers' sales representatives, business-to-business salespeople, independent canvassers—the workers we read of here—are only a small minority, about ten percent, of the sixteen million workers the Census Bureau classified as salespeople in 2000. Over forty percent work in retail establishments, and almost half are women. Friedman's book thus complements, rather than replaces, excellent studies such as Susan Porter Benson's *Counter Cultures* or Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*. Nevertheless, this is a wide-ranging study, ingeniously conceived, and thoroughly researched. If I were one of the itinerant book canvassers whose world Friedman so ably recreates, I would be delighted to have the opportunity to present *Birth of a Salesman* to my territory.

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