

“Selling U. S. Grant’s Memoirs: The Art of the Canvasser”

[Note: The following paper formed the basis for chapter 2 in Walter A. Friedman, Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America (Harvard, 2004).]

The years after the Civil War saw an increase in the number of specialized canvassers traveling through the landscape, visiting farmers or working out of stores. There were 53,500 hucksters and peddlers in 1880 according to the census: of these, 51,000 were male and 2,500, female (and many of these women were book agents).¹

Salesmen of petty goods—small, inexpensive, and easily manufactured items, like books, atlases, and lightning rods—began to perfect their techniques. Traveling from farmhouse to farmhouse, they gained notoriety, especially in agricultural newspapers, for their aggressive sales pitches. “Atlas men work upon the vanity of the public; book men hold up the attractive bait of pictorial contents, and set forth the fact that the world is simply crazy over the particular work they may be selling . . . ,” complained a contemporary critic. “Then there are the lightning-rod agents. People are often frightened into signing blind contracts full of hidden catches, which these agents present to them for their wares.”²

Itinerant salesmen from other industries joined these petty-goods sellers on the road. Manufacturers of more expensive machinery, such as weighing scales, sewing machines, and harvesting equipment, had begun to deploy canvassers by the mid-nineteenth century. These products were complicated to make and to operate, and they

required explanation and service. The early sales strategies of these machinery manufacturers influenced methods of selling in large companies throughout the twentieth century.³

But petty-goods manufacturers deserve attention, for they were particularly rigorous in working out intricate sales strategies, designed to push farmers, or more often farmers' wives, to make a one-time purchase—or “transactional” sales, as they are known. Several firms, especially in the publishing industry, developed large canvassing organizations that operated in several states.

Manufacturers who relied on canvassers tried to organize and control their sales force as best they could. Supervision of sales agents required the standardization of both “formal” and “informal” processes. Selling, like most aspects of business, was bound by a series of formal relationships—whether verbal agreements or written contracts—between employees and workers. Manufacturers hired salesmen either on salary or on commission and made other formal financial arrangements with them, sometimes paying for a cart or other equipment. Some manufacturers simply sold products to peddlers at a discounted rate. Others allowed them to purchase goods on credit. Such arrangements were common in the sale of items, such as books, that were ordered in advance and then paid for on delivery.⁴

But selling was also about the ability to navigate a series of informal rules, such as codes of human conduct and behavior and customs of politeness and courtesy. Canvassers had to master, and exploit, common customs of human interaction that were part of the contemporary culture. After mid-century, manufacturers and other employers began to rely less on the wit of canvassers to handle the sales process and adopted a

more systematic approach to help them, publishing sales scripts for distribution to their canvassing force. These scripts codified the techniques or, as critics said, the “tricks” of canvassing. The intention of sales scripts was to help canvassers overcome the suspicion and reluctance of farmers. Scripts revealed the canvasser’s shrewd insights into the psychology of selling and, moreover, showed that the clear intent of canvassers was to persuade, rather than merely to provide information about the items they carried.

Book publishers and other manufacturers of small goods gave canvassers elaborate instruction kits, which both described the formal aspects of the job (compensation rates, territories to work, methods of shipping goods) and offered hints on how to handle the informal ones (how to talk to “prospects”). In a sense, these petty-goods merchants were manufacturers not only of products but of sales arguments as well. The sales scripts, with their cleverly imagined dialogue, describe a literary understanding of selling that resembled traditions of folklore and humorous stories, rather than the more analytical and quantitative approaches of sales managers that followed in the twentieth century. These instruction kits, and particularly the sales scripts they contained, were an important step in the development of modern methods of salesmanship. The scripts reveal the need for companies to train large numbers of canvassers quickly, and also, due to their length and complexity, they underscore the difficulty in convincing customers to make a purchase.

Manufacturers also helped develop the idea of a sales campaign. They had learned from the large organization of soldiers, from wartime propaganda, and from efforts to raise money for the Union. During the Civil War, Philadelphia banker Jay

Cooke organized several thousand agents to persuade Americans to invest in bonds in support of the cause.

In the early nineteenth century, the model for organizing large teams of canvassers had often been an evangelical one, based on the work of Methodists and other religious groups that had organized teams of preachers along similar lines. Instructions to book agents and other canvassers often preserved the evangelical language, describing canvassing as requiring faith and a sense of duty. After the Civil War, similar instruction books were also often infused with the language of military campaigns, as manufacturers sought to rally canvassers to conquer reluctant buyers. Mark Twain mounted one of the largest such sales campaigns in his effort to sell the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant.

Canvassers on the landscape

Of the thirteen million adult workers that made up the U.S. economy in 1870, more than half (about 53 percent) worked directly in agriculture, as farm owners, managers, and laborers.⁵ Not surprisingly, much of the commercial exchange of the period involved trading and shipping agricultural products. Farmers, agents, and merchants made use of the telegraph, steamship, and railroad to ship grain, cotton, and food products from individual farms to wholesalers and retailers. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, entrepreneurs and merchants established networks of warehouses and grain elevators and founded commodity exchanges, which facilitated the distribution of agricultural products.⁶

Canvassers frequently sold goods that promised to lighten the burdens of agricultural work, such as mechanical butter churners and incubators. They also sold packaged seeds, bulbs, roots, shrubs, fruit trees, and patent medicines. Printers and publishers, like Jacob Monk of Philadelphia, employed salesmen to sell books, maps, and atlases.⁷

Salesmen went by a variety of names in the years following the Civil War. *Canvassers* and *agents*, the most common terms, usually signified a salesman working on commission. Often, agents were employed to represent a publisher in the book trade, or, as in the case of insurance, to operate a regional office. After mid-century, *canvasser* became the term of choice for salesmen carrying petty goods door to door. These terms were applied loosely, as *peddler*, *canvasser*, or *agent* could refer to any type of itinerant salesman. The overlapping of terms is understandable, for they all had a common goal: selling fairly inexpensive goods directly to consumers.

The strategy of small manufacturers was often to hire as many canvassers as possible, pay them on a commission basis, and provide them with general instructions to follow. Some of the more established manufacturers, like book publishers, hired general agents to supervise the selection of canvassers in specific regions; others simply advertised for agents in newspapers and hired them by mail. Canvassers went from farm to farm, often targeting the farmer's wife for the sale of their goods.

Book agents

One of the most common figures on the landscape was the book agent. A number of eastern publishers began to hire canvassers to sell books by subscription—

that is, to take orders for delivery at a later date, a practice that stretched back at least to John James Audubon, who sold *Birds of North America* that way.⁸ Tycoon Jay Gould, writer Bret Harte, and President Rutherford B. Hayes all peddled books in their youth. Daniel Webster sold Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* as a canvasser.⁹

Hartford was by far the most important city in the subscription book-publishing industry.¹⁰ At least a dozen subscription houses were located there in the 1860s and 1870s. Together they employed as many as 50,000 agents per year.¹¹ The Hartford-based American Publishing Company advertised for disabled soldiers to act as representatives—it also employed youths, teachers, and retired clergymen.¹²

Books sold by subscription were often long, running 600 to 700 pages, to give readers “their money’s worth.”¹³ The staples of the subscription trade were religious books and self-help guides on home health care and on legal procedures. Canvassers also carried the new “success manuals,” which were large, illustrated, and elaborately bound books that promised to teach young men how to succeed in life. They were written by ministers, educators, and professional success writers and had titles like *The Royal Path to Life*.¹⁴

Book peddlers also sold volumes that had to do with the Civil War and other historical events, such as Horace Greeley's *American Conflict*, Thomas Prentice Kettell's *Rebellion*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Men of Our Times*.¹⁵ Hubert Howe Bancroft hired canvassers to help him sell his multivolume histories of Central America, Mexico, and Texas, to name a few. Bancroft schooled his canvassers in interviewing techniques and supported their efforts through newspaper advertisement and distribution of pamphlets.¹⁶

Subscription book publishers transferred much of the financial risk onto the book agents. Most agents had to pay their expenses, and this entailed not just traveling through the countryside once, but also tracking down customers after the initial sale in order to collect payment.¹⁷

Many canvassers worked part time, having answered advertisements in newspapers. A number of book canvassers were women. Annie H. Nelles, who described her experiences in *The Life of a Book Agent* (1868), began her selling career by responding to a newspaper advertisement. She was given the territory of Peoria County, Illinois. She paid \$2.50 for her first book and received, for free, pamphlets, circulars, and an order book showing different bindings that were available for each book she sold.¹⁸ She then began her rounds. Once a customer agreed to purchase a book, Nelles placed an order with the printer, who sent books via express delivery. Nelles paid for the books at the express office and then went to collect from the customer. She kept the difference between what she paid to the publisher and what she collected from the subscriber, earning about one dollar on each book.¹⁹

The subscription book publishers competed directly with the retail trade. Agents were forbidden by their contracts from selling any copies to store owners. Through their persuasive methods, book canvassers were able to sell higher-priced books, sometimes listed for up to \$5 to \$7, when the retail trade generally sold books for closer to \$3.50.²⁰ In 1874 the retailer George A. Leavitt & Company discussed how the presence of itinerant agents was demoralizing the retail book trade. “Where *we* reach 5 towns, *they* reach 500 or 1,000, and sometimes half-a-dozen agents in a town at once, who, from competition, sell their books at discounts of fifty and sixty per cent.”²¹

Like other petty canvassers and peddlers, the book agent became a subject of criticism. The rural areas, some claimed, were flooded with cheaply made “gyp” books.²² In *The Mossback Correspondence* (1889), Francis E. Clark noted: “Next to the long-suffering mother-in-law, the book agent probably is made a target for more cheap wit of the average newspaper variety, than any other modern mortal.”²³

To train an army of book peddlers, a publisher mailed recruits a packet of instructions. “Canvassing outfits” included a form cover letter, a contract between the canvasser and the publisher; a certificate of agency; a handbill of advice; a description of particular volumes; a number of certificates of agreement and calling cards for the customer; weekly report forms; order forms; envelopes addressed to the publisher; posters; and pamphlets with other titles. They also included sample books and order books.²⁴

The sales scripts, included in the outfits sent to canvassers, mapped out the different directions the sales process could go, predicting various customer objections and providing the salesman with handy responses. *Success in Canvassing; A Manual of Practical Hints and Instructions, Specially Adapted to the Use of Book Canvassers of the Better Class* was originally published in 1875 by Ebenezer Hannaford, who himself wrote books about the Spanish American War. The manual was divided into sections that reveal the tone and direction of the account, taking cues from the military: “Organizing Victory,” “Opening the Campaign,” the “General Canvass,” “Securing the Order,” “General Management,” “Practical Hints on Soliciting,” “Weaknesses to be Avoided,” “Hints for Special Cases,” “Answering Objections,” and “Delivering Books.”

The manual emphasized that salesmen needed to project a professional image and to consider themselves representatives of the company. It advised that success came only through persistent work and careful preparation. Agents were told to study the eighty short sections of the manual and “mark with pencil on the margin the paragraphs that strike you particularly.”²⁵

The sample books that canvassers carried to show to farmers were designed to whet the appetite. They never contained the entire text. If they had, not only could a customer have demanded to keep the copy, but he or she also would have had the opportunity to thumb through the volume and see the whole of its contents. Instead, by only showing a portion of the book, the salesman sold the mystery of what the book might contain.²⁶

The key to a good canvass, the manual suggested, was to maintain control by holding on to the sample book. The agent was supposed to handle the “prospectus”—the name usually given the sample book—and not allow the prospect to touch it; doing so, according to the manual, would surrender control to the prospect. Language itself was not to be flowery, but “concise, direct, forcible.”²⁷ It was also important that the agent avoid discussion of the price “NEVER mention the price until you have done your best in showing the Prospectus. If previously asked, *pleasantly evade* the question, (or still better, *ignore* it). Say something like this: ‘Well, most books, you know, of this size and finish sell at \$— to \$—; but we don’t ask any such price as that.’”²⁸

If the prospect offered any objection during the sales pitch, the manual contained ready answers. The agent was usually advised to handle these complaints by agreeing with the prospect—by stating that the prospect had a reasonable objection—

but then turning it to advantage. It was not useful to argue with the prospect or to be too eager to dismiss a complaint.

The manual paid particular attention to lowering the suspicion of people who had been cheated by agents before. A number of objections, like the one quoted below from *Success in Canvassing*, indicate the number of cheaply made books on the market.

“I bought (some worthless book) once, and was completely sold.”

“Yes, that was a poor affair. No Agent of good sense and good principle ever could handle that book. That is one of the kinds of books we are crowding out of the market. People discriminate in buying books now, and I am glad of it; for it gives this work the preference. You will see (then go right on to show your book).”²⁹

It is important to remember, in reading the “answer” above, that it was not written about a specific book—in fact, the book itself is irrelevant, as the parenthetical remarks in the script make clear.

The details set forth in these scripts underscore the differences between selling and advertising. Advertising reached a mass of people, delivering the message of the manufacturer or advertising agent. But advertising produced no conflict and demanded no direct response. Selling, on the other hand, was predicated upon give-and-take. Salesmen realized that people expressed themselves in predictable ways that were conditioned by politeness and other social conventions. When a “prospect” said, “I need

to think it over,” it may have meant just that, but it also might have meant that he or she did not want to buy under any circumstance and simply wished the salesman to go away. Salesmen were trained to counter these traditional methods of expression. The salesman might ask, for instance, “Just what is there to think over?”

Sales scripts reveal the types of argument that salesmen found most effective in countering popular conventions of speech. Often, in the years following the Civil War, sales pitches were designed to increase the anxiety of a “prospect,” in particular the fear of loss of property. Lightning-rod salesmen told stories of families left indigent after a house and barn caught fire; life insurance solicitors recounted the plight of widows and orphans left penniless because the family was uninsured. Self-improvement was another popular theme in sales pitches. Book agents sold success manuals, as well as reference books on the law and health. Provoking status anxiety was another common ploy. Frequently when selling an item, salesmen mentioned that the prospect’s neighbors had all purchased it—had all been able to afford it.

Taken together, the sales scripts of petty canvassers show that farmers, and other prospects, were particularly concerned with preserving their property and their status quo. This can be interpreted as a message about a specific historical context: in a time of great mobility, both social and economic, the fear of loss seemed to have a stronger appeal than the promise of riches. But it also indicates a tendency that salesmen continued into the twentieth century (and one recognized by psychologists and behavioral economists): people are more risk averse when faced with the prospect of a loss than with the promise of a gain.

Sales scripts were heuristic devices, written to help salesmen solve the “problem” of selling. The scripts also reveal, however, that selling was hard and that mere memorization of pat answers was not enough. The seller had to have something else—something harder to define: an energy, confidence, and enthusiasm. This was at the very heart of selling; the salesman had to be part “soldier,” following orders, and part “evangelist”—not only a believer, but also one who would get others to believe. The salesman’s tone was important, for it needed to be cheerful and not tiresome; the agent could not appear awkward or indifferent.³⁰ “Aim to make your influence a *controlling* one,” the manual advised.³¹ Persuasion was a subtle art; gesture and nuance were critical. Little things, like twitches or hesitations, could break the sale.

The campaign to sell Grant’s memoirs

All the elements of standardized canvassing were employed in the campaign to sell the Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs. Mark Twain helped to orchestrate the sales effort. It was one of the largest and most successful sales campaigns of the nineteenth century.

For the first thirty years of his writing career, Twain sold his books entirely by subscription, including *Innocents Abroad* (1869), which won him a national reputation, *Roughing It* (1872), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), and *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). Twain was not a sequestered writer but was actively involved in marketing of his books. He paid attention to the cost of production and to the illustrations, making sure the final product would be appealing, or at least intriguing, to the public.³² Twain’s nephew, Charles Webster, served as the general agent for some of Twain’s books, and

the author occasionally wrote him about canvassing strategy. On April 14, 1884, Twain instructed Webster:

Get at your canvassing early, & drive it with all your might, with the intent & purpose of issuing on the 10th (or 15th) of next December (the best time in the year to tumble a big pile into the trade)—but if we haven't 40,000 orders then, we simply postpone publication till we've got them. It is a plain, simple policy, & would have saved both of my last books if it had been followed. There is not going to be any reason whatever, why this book [*Huck Finn*] should not succeed—and it shall & *must*.³³

Subscription selling could bring high financial returns. Twain's contract for *A Tramp Abroad* (1879) called for him to receive 50 percent of the profits. The American Publishing Company printed and sold 62,000 copies of the book. The price of these books was \$3.50 apiece, bringing in a total revenue of \$218,000. The company paid out to its general agents \$112,000 of this; that is, they paid them on average around 51 percent; the general agents then passed along a portion of this to the canvassers they had hired to actually sell the book. The company itself earned \$106,000 from the book, or about \$1.70 per copy. Out of this \$106,000, the company had to pay its manufacturing costs, which were \$41,540. This left a profit of \$64,450, which, in turn, was split with Twain, who received about \$32,000.³⁴

In 1884 Twain formed his own publishing house in Hartford with his nephew, naming it after Webster.³⁵ Twain was eager to earn more money off of his own works and to publish and promote other projects—the first of which was Grant’s memoirs. Twain had learned that General Grant had agreed to publish, with the Century Company, an account of his experience during the Civil War but had not yet come to final terms with them. Grant’s motives for writing the memoirs were largely financial; his brokerage company, Grant & Ward, had failed in May 1884 after his partner Ferdinand Ward engaged in fraud, and the failure had left Grant nearly broke. Twain visited Grant in New York to try to get the rights to the memoirs for his own company and told the former president that the terms offered by Century were inadequate. Continuing his own feat of salesmanship, Twain eventually, persuaded the general to sign with Webster, promising him an amazing 70 percent of the profits.

Grant started writing his memoirs in the summer of 1884, after learning he had cancer, and finished the two-volume project in less than a year. It was an amazing feat. He worked on them, initially, at his house on 66th Street in New York City and, as his health declined, at a resort outside Saratoga Springs, New York. He wrote them himself, often in longhand; at other times he dictated passages to a member of his family. He was assisted by his son, Frederick, and by Twain and Adam Badeau, a former aide to Grant and an author of military histories. While there has been speculation about the role of Twain and Badeau in writing the text (Badeau himself brought an unsuccessful lawsuit, claiming he should have received greater credit and a larger share of the profits), most historians have concluded that Grant completed the task largely by himself. The *Memoirs*, which tell in great and personal detail of the

Mexican War and the Civil War, are of outstanding literary merit. Twain himself, hardly impartial, called them “ [t]he best [memoirs] of any general’s since Caesar”—and others have agreed.³⁶

While Grant wrote, Webster took long trips to secure agents in cities throughout the country. He sought out information on the character and financial standing of potential general agents, dismissing one who seemed “like a drinking man” and another who already seemed to have “too much on his hands.”³⁷ Finding good salesmen who would stick with a campaign even after facing numerous rejections was difficult and would remain a constant problem for sales managers. Twain instructed Webster to pay special attention to hiring veterans, who supposedly would be harder for prospects to turn away, given the subject matter of the book, and who would be encouraged to wear their Grand Army badges. He wrote to Webster, for instance, to make one well-known war veteran the general agent of the state of Kansas: “There are 80,000 Grand Army veterans resident in Kansas & Homer Pond is *Grand Commander*.”³⁸ Webster and Company ended up employing sixteen general agents and roughly 10,000 canvassers, 200 of whom worked in New York and Brooklyn.³⁹ Twain wrote: “Canvassers must be given streets or *portions* of streets in New York—all outlying districts to be canvassed *first*—then the cream of the city to be given to those canvassers who have done the best.”⁴⁰ Twain also advocated for a script: “Furnish canvassers a list of truthful & sensible things to say—not rot.”⁴¹

Canvassers took orders for the sets beginning in March 1885. The situation for Grant and his family became increasingly dire as Grant’s cancer advanced. Throughout the spring, the public was acutely aware of Grant’s declining health. Grant hurried to

get the book done, once dictating 10,000 words in one sitting. When he died that summer, the nation went into mourning and canvassers were at work throughout the country.

Canvassers working for Webster and Company carried a manual entitled *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, which outlined a series of sales arguments. It was a thirty-seven-page booklet of instructions, which, the company advised, should be kept out of the prospect's sight.

"I called to give you an opportunity to see General Grant's book, of which so much has been said in the papers," the canvasser was instructed to begin.⁴² The booklet told the canvasser to produce the prospectus, which showed the illustrations and sample text—but not, again, the whole thing. The pitch continued: "Each volume will contain 600 large octavo pages. Here is a fine steel portrait of the General, from a daguerreotype, taken when he was twenty-one years of age, and Second-Lieutenant in the United States Infantry."⁴³

The canvasser then went on to discuss binding options, which began at a few dollars and went all the way up to \$12.50. "I presume it is simply a question with you as to your choice of bindings, as no American will want to have it said that he has not read General Grant's book, a work that will descend to your children and will increase in value with every generation."

Canvassers could offer terms for partial payment and were instructed to remind the prospect of the pitiful need of the Grant family. "Get the prospect seated, in a fence corner, behind a stump, on the plow beam. Put the book right in his lap, but *you* turn the pages."⁴⁴ Remember, the manual advised: "In leaving a house be careful not to turn

your back to the family; retire sideways, keeping your eye on the good people, and let your last glance be full of sunshine.”⁴⁵ The booklet advised the agent to have “complete confidence” in himself and to remember that “[e]nthusiasm is an essential ingredient in the composition of a salesman”—information repeated in almost every manual on selling.⁴⁶

It also suggested that the canvasser compliment the farmer on his home and possessions, and it gave other general advice:

One of the strongest arguments that can be used to get a man’s order is by telling him of his influence, and other means of flattery, or rather compliments, which should always be used in such quantities as will take well, and to be successfully done you must thoroughly inform yourself about the man before calling on him. If he has fine stock that he is proud of, mention what you have heard about them. Take a great deal of interest in them, and even express a desire to see them. Find out a man’s weak points, and you can work upon them; and men who would not at first listen to you can often be thus interested.

Avoid men in groups as you would poison. It is better to lie still and do nothing than to go into a group of men to canvass. You seldom sell to a man you meet away from home or his own neighborhood, as when you call upon a man at home he is personally addressed, especially called

upon, and his attention required, which is not the case if you run across him away from home.

A man living on a four corners or a crossing is quite an important man to get, for you can go in three different directions and you have an order from the last house.⁴⁷

There were also instructions for collecting the money when the book was finally delivered. Here, the canvasser encountered an imaginary “Mrs. Higgins.”

Mrs. Higgins: “You will have to take it along with you, sir, as I haven’t the money to pay for it, and can’t get it.”

Salesman: (Who has previously refused to be seated on the plea that he had some thirty or forty to deliver that day, and must be very expeditious). “Very well, Mrs. H., I will sit down and rest a moment, while you go or send little Johnnie back to Mrs. Smith’s and borrow the amount. Mrs. S. has just paid me for her copy and seemed to have plenty of money. She appears to be a most estimable lady, and is, no doubt, an intimate friend of yours, and would take pleasure in accommodating you. I can assure you, Mrs. H., that it would seriously inconvenience me to call again, and a number of my subscribers have borrowed the money for me, rather than put me to any trouble, or disappoint me.” With this last

remark, the salesman settles himself down into a chair, crosses his legs, takes his order book and pencil, and begins figuring up his accounts, as if he had not time to lose, and yet was determined to sit there all day.⁴⁸

A strange and irritated man, camped out in the house, was no doubt threatening—and effective.

The campaign was a great success. Sixty thousand two-volume sets had been ordered by May 1885.⁴⁹ Two hundred thousand copies were at the disposal of agents on publication day: 19,000 were shipped to San Francisco, 60,000 to Chicago to service the Midwest, 40,000 to New England, 50,000 to Delaware and Pennsylvania.⁵⁰ By early 1886, the sale of Grant's memories had reached 325,000 in the United States. The sale in the South was moderate but in the West was enormous. Much of the profit went to Grant's widow. Twain wrote in December 1885: "We've bound & shipped 200,000 books; & by the 10th shall finish & ship the remaining 125,000 of the first edition . . ." ⁵¹ In 1886 Charles Webster gave Julia Grant a check for \$200,000; the family eventually received a fortune of between \$420,000 and \$450,000 from sales of *Personal Memoirs*.

Other petty canvassers

Canvassers of other small goods received advice from their employers much like the instructions publishers gave to book agents. Dewey's *Tree Agents' Private Guide: A Manual for the Use of Agents and Dealers* (1876) included a dictionary of horticultural terms and a guide to the pronunciation of the names of plants and flowers. It instructed agents on the rudiments of salesmanship, which, the manual suggested,

required making a good impression and the ability to separate oneself from the typical peddler: “An agent should feel the nobleness of his vocation, as if he was conferring a benefit rather than asking a favor” It reminded the agent that his “time belongs to his employers” and that he must not be “lazy.” The canvasser’s goal, the manual suggested, was to create a desire for planting various fruit trees by describing their beauty and value and by showing pictures of the trees in plate books. “Your *success depends* not on the demand which you may find for trees, but on your power to *convince* your fellow-men that it is the all important work of life, and one that should not be neglected another day.”⁵²

Some veterans formed canvassing companies. Captain T. H. Thompson and Major L. H. Everts started an atlas business at the end of the Civil War; they hired canvassers to travel through counties in Iowa to sell county maps—each map, upon purchase, could be personalized with a depiction of the farmers’ houses and land. The Thompson & Everts Company later expanded the business to other states and advertised heavily in newspapers, selling not only maps but also drawings of farmhouses and property.⁵³

Other industries that employed canvassers also went through growth and standardization and conceived of selling as a military-style campaign. Henry B. Hyde, founder of the Equitable Life Assurance Company, devoted a great deal of time to developing the competitive spirit of his agency force. Once employed, agents received a stream of inspirational letters. Hyde gave special incentives to agents for developing new business, as he did in this 1869 letter, in which he promised a gold watch to the agent subscribing the most insurance. “The importance of making the new business of the

Equitable Life Assurance Society for the year 1868 much greater even than it was last year, cannot be properly estimated,” wrote Hyde. “My only solicitude is lest our matchless company of Agents, like a valiant army flushed with victory, should lapse into a condition of inactivity, through the very sense of invincibility, and make no steps in advance. . . .”⁵⁴

Letters continued to press home the same theme: persevere.

To gain further control over the sales process, Hyde and other insurance executives provided their agents with advertising support. Among the most common forms of advertising were short pamphlets published by independent insurance writers or trade magazines. These pamphlets told short, usually tragic, stories in which the main character suffered dire consequences for failing to purchase life insurance—wives ended up in the poorhouse, children were forced to forfeit an education. They were purchased in bulk by the major insurance companies, which would stamp their own name and logo on the cover sheets and distribute them to potential customers.⁵⁵

In his letters and his own book, Hyde warned of the dangers of remaining idle and reminded his agents that life solicitation was “dignified” and “important.”⁵⁶ He equated sales success with extraordinary effort. In his own book, *Hints for Agents* (1865), Hyde wrote out sales pitches to match every imaginable situation and instructed agents to insure all their friends, to persuade local clergymen to help insure their flock, to view all marriages and funerals as possible sales situations.⁵⁷

One of the most well-known figures on the road was the patent-medicine salesman, who carried such items as Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound, Bliss Cough Syrup, Merchant’s Gargling Oil, and Herrick’s Sugar Coated Pills. These peddlers greatly increased in number following the Civil War. Medicine salesmen had

been frequent visitors to the battlefields, hawking their remedies, which often contained a fair amount of alcohol, to wounded or traumatized soldiers. After the war's end, patent-medicine salesmen sought customers among the troubled, incapacitated, ill, and forlorn in both northern and southern society.⁵⁸ Some medicine salesmen worked as mere canvassers, carrying their products door to door, but others were entertainers who presented elaborate Wild West shows, menageries, bands, and pie-eating contests, which allowed them to deliver their message to crowds. The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company held elaborate torch-lit shows that featured impassioned orations on the curative capabilities of ancient Indian remedies.⁵⁹ In 1859, the patent-medicine industry's output was valued at \$3.5 million according to the census figures; by 1904, it was more than twenty times that figure.⁶⁰ As historian James Harvey Young noted, these salesmen were true pioneers in modern advertising, handing out almanacs, putting up roadside signs, printing their claims in joke books and songbooks. "The big-scale patent medicine maker . . . was the first promoter to turn out a multitude of psychological lures by which people might be enticed to buy his wares."⁶¹

Canvassing and "how 'tis done"

As these examples, and the case of Grant's memoirs, show, the formal and informal aspects of door-to-door canvassing were well worked out by the 1880s. The decades after the Civil War saw not only attempts to standardize selling but also a growth in the literature warning against canvassers and increased legislation to address petty swindling. South Dakota, for example, passed a statute against wearing a badge of the Grand Army of the Republic "if not entitled to."⁶²

Yet, underlying much of this criticism was a growing interest in standardizing methods of canvassing—and, more broadly, techniques of persuasion, or as it was most often called, “influence.” The word was a common one in late-nineteenth-century sales manuals. One book agent’s manual pressed this point home: “It is recorded of St. Augustine that being asked, ‘What is the first step in religion?’ he replied, ‘Humility.’ ‘The second step?’ ‘Humility.’ ‘The third step?’ ‘Humility!’ If you should ask the progressive steps of success in canvassing, we should have to answer with similar iteration, *influence*, Influence! INFLUENCE!! You can convince the most obstinate, mollify the most prejudiced, and win the most crabbed, if you can only bring to bear *enough Influence of the right kind.*”⁶³

There were practical steps to gaining influence. One was to get a few leading names to head your list: “The majority of people are afraid to trust their own unaided judgment about buying a book; but show them that Dr. A. and Rev. Mr. B., or Judge C. and Professor D., or Colonel E. and Squire F—have taken your work, and you will decide them immediately.”⁶⁴ The manual advised securing orders from prominent townspeople and securing testimonials.

It also contained a theory, called “the philosophy of canvassing,” about the basic steps of selling which conceived of selling as a three-step process:

First—Gaining a Hearing

Second—Creating Desire

Third—Taking the Order.⁶⁵

The “philosophy” is of interest because it assumes the need to “create” demand. The economy, from the viewpoint of the book agent, did not follow Say’s Law, which states that supply creates its own demand. Demand was generated through the use of rhetorical argument and the exertion of class pressure.

But in most late-nineteenth-century writings, the word “influence” had negative connotations. “Influence” was a common subject in advice manuals written by clergymen and other moralists early in the nineteenth century to warn country boys who ventured to cities of the impending danger that awaited them, and to suggest ways that they might avoid trouble. These advice books offered lessons on morals and personal appearance and, as well, gave tips on where to live and eat. They warned, in particular, about the dangers of confidence men and “painted” women and of the negative “influence” these types could have on their lives. Wrote historian Karen Halttunen: “As a force for good, influence was spoken of as a moral gravitation, a personal electricity, a cosmic vibration. But as a force for evil, influence was compared to a poison, a disease, a source of contamination and corruption.”⁶⁶ Under the wrong influence, young men could fall to a life of luxury and sin.

The subject of influence was also a common one in books on pseudoscientific subjects like mesmerism. Itinerant mesmerists were familiar figures in nineteenth-century America. Loosely following the teachings of the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), who speculated that a person’s health was affected by the flow of an invisible fluid throughout the body, mesmerists claimed to have the ability to heal. In highly dramatic and even emotional ceremonies, they would pass magnets or wave their hands over an individual to gain control of the magnetic fluid within.

Talented mesmerists could sometimes lead their clients, often women, into trancelike or hypnotic states. Mesmerists, like confidence men, were often dismissed as masters of influence. In “*Confessions of a Magnetiser*” *Exposed!* (1845), for instance, La Roy Sunderland claimed to “set forth the real nature of that form of human *influence* hitherto most generally known under the name of ‘Mesmerism,’ and the useful purposes to which it may be applied.”⁶⁷

“Influence,” like salesmanship, was a subject of fascination for critics as well as proponents—for many, the curious part was figuring out how it worked. This simultaneous fascination and criticism was apparent in Bates Harrington’s *How ‘Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers* (1879). On one level, it read like the standard complaints of the agricultural press. “For years designing men have preyed upon the rural sections of the country, draining it of a large proportion of its wealth, as tribute to the cunning, lazy canvassing agents and downright criminal swindles of all kinds,” Harrington wrote. “These men have become adept in the business of hatching schemes and setting traps, that are so shrewdly manipulated that their victims are in every community and almost every household in the land.” Harrington described in detail the tricks of the subscription-book agent, the patent-right sellers, the fruit-tree vender, and the jewelry peddler.⁶⁸ The nature of the crime rested not only in the choice of victim (the poor farmer, mechanic, and laboring man) but also in the calculated effort on behalf of the salesmen. “The work of canvassing has been reduced to a *science*,” wrote Harrington.⁶⁹ He used the word “science” ironically, indicating either a carefully calculated “swindle” or else the mastery of techniques of exerting “influence.”

On another level, Harrington's book was as much an instruction manual (as its title, *How 'Tis Done*, suggests) as an exposé. While the book was *presented* as an antidote to designing men, it also served as a guide for would-be salesmen and swindlers.⁷⁰ While condemning the work of canvassers, Harrington's jeremiad revealed a great interest in making sense of salesmen's methods. He viewed selling as a step-by-step process, much like subjects described in the how-to manuals that were so popular in the late nineteenth century.

Harrington's book was similar to a handful of other confessional accounts intended to make money through public curiosity. These books included S. James Weldon's *Twenty Years a Fakir*, J. H. Mortimer's *Confessions of a Book Agent, or Twenty Years by Stage and Rail*, and Jack Greenberg's *Confessions of an Industrial Insurance Agent: A Narrative of Fact*.⁷¹ Weldon's *Twenty Years a Fakir* celebrated his years as a lightning-rod salesman, book agent, and dealer in "notions." The choice of "fakir" for the title suggested Eastern opulence and mysticism as well as "fakers." A fakir, he informed, was anyone who can "talk up" such products without knowing much about them. Together, these books defined tactics for one-time selling: asking open-ended questions, using descriptive language or anecdote to raise the anxiety of prospects, citing various prices (both high and low) to arouse desire, and holding or displaying in ways to excite curiosity.

Harrington's book summed up the ambivalence about salesmanship in this period. It showed the interest in methods of selling—out of which would grow the explosion of interest in selling in the 1910s and 1920s—but also the need to cover over this interest in moral outrage. Here the outrage was about the assault of urban values on

rural life, about the rehearsed and calculated nature of the salesman's assault, and about the larger issues of consumption—a continual contest pitting neighbor against neighbor in an endless circle of envy.⁷²

¹ The census also listed other types of salesmen: agents (33,989), commercial travelers (28,158), and salesmen and saleswomen (32,279). Census of the United States, Statistics of the United States at the Tenth Annual Census (United States: Government Printing Office, 1883).

² Bates Harrington, *How 'Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers Together with Advertising Dodges for Swindling the Public* (Chicago: Fidelity Publishing Company, 1879), pp. 14–15.

³ Most manufactured products in the nineteenth century were generic, unbranded goods that supplied the farming population. Hinges, textiles, barbed wire, furniture, and other items were sold to wholesalers, who then set about the task of selling these goods to retailers. Like agricultural merchants, wholesalers of manufactured goods found their work facilitated by the growth of the railroad and improvements in the telegraph. Wholesalers created their own distribution networks to supply goods to country stores, and depended on the work of traveling salesmen, or drummers, to forge long-lasting trade connections with rural retailers. Some manufacturers, as noted, preferred to hire itinerant salesmen to sell directly to the farming public, rather than sell in bulk to wholesalers or retail shops.

⁴ On the importance of credit networks to peddlers, see Laurence Fontaine, *History of Peddlars in Europe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 121–39.

⁵ Alba M. Edwards, *Population: Comparative Occupation Statistics for the United States, 1870 to 1940* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 104. Excludes figures for the extraction of minerals and for forestry and finishing.

⁶ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 209.

⁷ See court case of *Jacob Monk v. Henry Beal*, Supreme Court of Massachusetts, Plymouth, 84 Mass. 585; 1861 Mass. LEXIS 391; 84 Allen 585.

⁸ John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. 1 (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1972), pp. 238–40.

⁹ Madeline B. Sterne, *Books and Book People in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1978), pp. 166–7.

¹⁰ Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing*, vol. 1, pp. 238–40.

¹¹ Judy Hilkey, *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 16–17.

¹² Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing*, vol. 2, p. 106.

¹³ Hamlin Hill, “Mark Twain: Audience and Artistry,” *American Quarterly* 15:1 (Spring 1963), pp. 28–9.

¹⁴ Historian Judy Hilkey wrote of the sale of these books: “[The] model sales pitch was designed to play on people’s hopes for success and fears of failure. According to one guide to canvassing, the question a book agent must ask a potential customer to consider

was not ‘Can I afford it?’ but ‘Can I afford to be without it?’” Hilkey, *Character is Capital*, p. 18.

¹⁵ See Joe L. Norris, *Pioneer Marketing Associations of the American Book Trade* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1939), p. 103; see also *The Trade Circular Annual for 1871* (New York, 1871), p. 110.

¹⁶ John Walton Caughey, “Hubert Howe Bancroft, Historian of Western America,” *American Historical Review* vol. 50, no. 3 (April 1945), pp. 461-470.

¹⁷ Keith Arbour, “Book Canvassers, Mark Twain, and Hamlet’s Ghost,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 93 (March 1999), p. 9.

¹⁸ When Lindley signed on, she was charged \$3.00 for a sample copy and guaranteed a salary of \$35.00 per week, though her employer refused to pay her salary when she was unable to sell in her first days out. She was peddling an edition of Shakespeare’s works. She also sold “Gleams of Hope and Tidings of Woe” and “The Success of a Self-Made Man.” Elizabeth Hobson, *Diary of a Book-Agent by Elizabeth Lindley* (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1912), p. 23.

¹⁹ Dumond, Annie Hamilton Nelles, *Annie Nelles: Or, Life of a Book Agent* (Cincinnati, The Author, 1868), pp. 240–62.

²⁰ Norris, “Pioneer Marketing Associations,” p. 105.

²¹ *Publishers’ Weekly*, 21 March 1874, p. 291.

²² *Publishers’ Weekly*, 10 July 1886, p. 38.

²³ Francis E. Clark, in *The Mossback Correspondence* (Boston: D. Lothrop Co., 1889), p. 117. Clark wrote, p. 118, “Suppose he does ring your door-bell, good housewife, when

your hands are in the dough and your cakes are frying, he is at least worthy of a polite refusal, if you do not wish his wares, rather than a metaphorical slap in the face and an actual slam of the door.”

²⁴ See 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 : The Haydn Foundation for the Cultural Arts, 1996), pp. xiv, xv.

²⁵ E. Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing; A Manual of Practical Hints and Instructions, Specially Adapted to the Use of Book Canvassers of the Better Class* (originally published 1875; revised edition, New York: E. Hannaford, 1884), p. 2.

²⁶ Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, xxi. “The canvassing book’s lacunae . . . created doubt; and with this doubt publishers required book agents to work and, if need be, play the confidence man,” wrote historian Keith Arbour. “Men and women who could charismatically spin their targets’ doubts into positive daydreams had the makings of successful book agents.”

²⁷ Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing*, p. 5.

²⁸ Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing*, p. 6.

²⁹ Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing*, pp. 13–14.

³⁰ Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing*, p. 5.

³¹ Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing*, p. 6.

³² Hamlin Hill, “Mark Twain: Audience and Artistry,” *American Quarterly* vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring, 1963), p. 25.

³³ Samuel Charles Webster, ed., *Mark Twain, Business Man* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1946), p. 249.

³⁴ See Hamlin Lewis Hill, *Mark Twain and Elisha Bliss* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1964), pp. 156–7.

³⁵ Joseph B. McCullough, “Mark Twain and the Hy Slocum-Carl Byng Controversy,” *American Literature* vol. 43, no. 1 (March, 1971), pp. 42–59.

³⁶ See Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*. A helpful edition is edited by E. B. Long, with an introduction by William S. McFeely, pp. xox-xxiv, and published by De Capo Press, Cambridge, Mass (2001).

³⁷ Webster, ed., *Mark Twain, Business Man*, p. 279.

³⁸ Mark Twain, *Notebooks & Journals*, vol. 3, 1883–1891 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1979), Notebook 23, p. 101, fn112.

³⁹ Webster, ed., *Mark Twain Business Man*, p. 312.

⁴⁰ Twain, *Notebooks & Journals*, Vol. 3, 1883–1891, Notebook 24, p. 142.

⁴¹ Twain, *Notebooks & Journals*, Vol. 3, 1883-1891, Notebook 24, p. 131, fn 16.

⁴² *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (Hartford, Conn.: Webster & Co., 1885), p. 2. The Mark Twain Project, University of California, Berkeley; see also Gerald Carson, “ ‘Get the Prospect Seated . . . And Keep Talking,’ ” *American Heritage* vol. 9, no. 5 (August 1958), pp. 38–41, 77–80.

⁴³ *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Carson, “ ‘Get the Prospect Seated . . . And Keep Talking,’ ” pp. 38–41, 77–80.

⁴⁵ *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, p. 30.

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- ⁴⁶ *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, p. 26.
- ⁴⁷ *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, pp. 16–19.
- ⁴⁸ *How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, p. 33.
- ⁴⁹ Mark Twain, *Notebooks & Journals*, Vol. 3, 1883-1891. Notebook 24, p. 141-2.
- ⁵⁰ *The Publishers' Weekly*, 5 December 1885, p. 886.
- ⁵¹ Mark Twain, *Notebooks & Journals*, Vol. 3, 1883–1891, , Notebook 25, p. 175.
- ⁵² D. M. Dewey, *Tree Agents' Private Guide: A Manual for the Use of Agents and Dealers* (Rochester, N.Y.: Dewey, 1876), pp. 17, 20.
- ⁵³ Harrington, *How 'Tis Done*, pp. 29–30.
- ⁵⁴ Henry Baldwin Hyde Letters, March 1, 1868. The Equitable Life Assurance Society Archives, New York, New York.
- ⁵⁵ R. Carlyle Buley, *The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States, 1859–1964*, 2 vols., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p. 70. According to Buley, in footnote 131, the leading publisher of these in the 1860's was Gilbert E. Currie of the *United States Insurance Gazette*. Located at 79 Pine Street, New York City.
- ⁵⁶ J. Owen Stalson, *Marketing Life Insurance: Its History in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 509.
- ⁵⁷ Burton Hendrick, *The Story of Life Insurance* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1907), p. 244.
- ⁵⁸ James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 97.

⁵⁹ Young, *Toadstool Millionaires*, p. 193.

⁶⁰ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, p. 110. Young wrote: “An observer reckoned that the value of cocoa and chocolate, blacking and bluing, flavoring extracts and axle grease, beet sugar and glue, castor oil and lard, kindling wood and cosmetics, could all be added together, and still the total sum would not bulk so large as the \$74,500,000 which was the manufactured value of American patent medicines. At retail prices, the nostrum-taking American public paid many millions more.”

⁶¹ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, p. 42.

⁶² Lawrence M. Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 195.

⁶³ Hannaford, “Success in Canvassing,” p. 2.

⁶⁴ Hannaford, “Success in Canvassing,” p. 3.

⁶⁵ Hannaford, “Success in Canvassing,” p. 4.

⁶⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Story of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 4.

⁶⁷ La Roy Sunderland, “Confessions of a Magnetiser” Exposed! (Boston, Mass.: Redding and Co., 1845). See also Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ Harrington, *How 'Tis Done*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Harrington, *How 'Tis Done*, p. 98.

⁷⁰ Harrington, *How 'Tis Done*, preface.

⁷¹ See S. James Weldon, *Twenty Years a Fakir* (Omaha, Nebraska: Gate City Book and Novelty Company, 1899); Dumond, *Annie Nelles: Or, Life of a Book Agent*; J.H.

Mortimer, *Confessions of a Book Agent, or Twenty Years by Stage and Rail* (Chicago: Co-operative Publishing Co., 1906).

⁷¹ See Jack Greenberg, *Confessions of an Industrial Insurance Agent: A Narrative of Fact* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1911).

⁷² The development of methods for managing canvassers and the evolution of sales arguments into elaborate sales scripts was an essential step toward modern selling. The sales arguments found in scripts were precursors to what Roland Marchand called the “parables of advertising”—that is, they were simple, repeatable narrative arguments that could be used to sell a variety of items. See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985), pp. 206–234.