Wholesalers’ CATALOGUES

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EARLY IN November, 1882, retail tradesmen in the Northwest received a twelve-page circular listing various household products for sale at low prices. The circular bore the title Our Leader and was sent by the firm of B. Sommers and Company (later G. Sommers and Company) of St. Paul. This event marked the beginning of a wholesale business which flourished for nearly sixty years.

The activities of this enterprise are revealed by a set of circulars and catalogues preserved in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The set extends from the founding of the company in 1882 to 1940, shortly before the business was liquidated. The seventy-seven bulky volumes mirror the changes in the way of life over six decades and reflect the evolution of wholesale trade practices during the same period.

During this period, Our Leader was both a source list of merchandise and a challenge to the storekeeper. Its copy went to great lengths to induce, cajole, and persuade the retail merchant to purchase freely and promote his wares effectively. It emphasized constantly the firm’s basic policy of low price—a policy which led the company to call itself the “Western Bargain House.” Low prices, good quality merchandise, strong mail-order advertising, and a growing reputation for honest dealing were the foundation stones of the concern’s success.

The role the company was to play was clearly indicated by statements on the opening page of the first issue. A “Salutatory” under the masthead is addressed “To the wide-awake merchants of the Great Northwest who are always ready to seize every opportunity to save time in getting their goods to their stores and to save money on freight.” By continuing below the reader
learned that “We are glad to announce to the Trade that we have made special arrangements with eastern manufacturers, whereby we are able to furnish all kinds of Bargain Goods for cheap counters, department stores, and for ‘leaders’ among regular goods, F.O.B. at St. Paul, at exactly Chicago prices, Or Lower, thus making a great saving in time and freight bills to northwest merchants. The success of Bargain Goods, for cheap counters and leaders, has been proved beyond a doubt.

. . . Our goods sell themselves and help sell other goods.”

The Sommers’ line was a diversified group of household products. Notions and fancy goods were “the principal department in our business.” Tinware items were “strictly first quality and . . . lower priced than they can be bought at from any stamping company.” Glassware was presented as an effective leader: “The goods take but little room on the shelves, need no care whatever and sell themselves.” Hardware, kitchen and tableware, woodenware, stationery, and toilet goods were other important lines.

Although the prospects for a successful mail-order business appeared to be good, and the second issue of Our Leader referred to “hundreds of letters and orders received from all parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Dakota,” there were serious competitive problems. Crossroads merchants were a little dubious about this unknown mail-order house. Most of them preferred to deal with the friendly drummers sent out by other wholesalers.

This situation necessitated frequent references to the low cost (and the resulting lower prices) of mail-order selling compared with personal selling. Thus, in the 1885 spring edition: “It costs us a trifle over three cents to visit you with the aid of our carefully compiled price list.” And a few months later: “Every intelligent merchant knows that it costs large sums of money to keep the bright, well dressed, smooth tongued, but expensive traveling fraternity on the road, that salaries, railroad fares, cigars, and ‘sundries,’ make up a very formidable sum at the end of a season.”

Gradually, storekeepers came to accept the company and its method of doing business, although at times drummers were sent into the more distant markets. In the summer of 1889, Pacific Coast customers were advised that “Mr. Baldwin” would be at a particular hostelry on a given date to show samples. Customers were assured that there would be no increase in prices, an indication that the mail-order business must have become fairly profitable.

Very early in its growth, the company took advantage of the opportunities afforded by holiday trade and began to issue a series of supplements for the Christmas and Fourth of July trades in particular. The introduction to the first Christmas holiday supplement illustrates the promotional concepts of the company: “Christmas comes but once a year, and when it comes it ought to make merchants, as well as other mortals, happy. . . . Every merchant ought to lay in a small stock of Toys and Fancy Goods. Low priced Toys not only bring in good profit, but they advertise your other goods and double your sales. Our Toys are selected for this trade and will bring success to every man who tries them.” The contents of the holiday supplements are almost
enough to make one nostalgic for the old-time Christmas and Fourth of July.

In addition to the holiday supplements, Sommers published special issues of Our Leader to stimulate off-season buying. These included “cold-weather” supplements and “spring fancies,” which featured bargain-counter merchandise and special “drives,” a term for a featured promotion which seems to have passed out of use. The winter issue of 1886 highlighted “zero pointers,” and recommended a five and ten cent counter “to keep your trade warm in cold weather.”

If it was difficult to motivate the older tradesmen, it was possible to get additional orders by encouraging clerks to go into business for themselves. This encouragement was given in several issues of Our Leader by printing such statements as: “Young men! If you have been working for others and have saved up a few hundred dollars, this is your opportunity for independence. A cash bargain store as described above needs but little capital and with brains and energy you can double your capital within a short time. Hunt up your town and send to us for an assortment of goods with which to stock your new store.”

THE COMPANY soon discovered for itself, and very effectively used, the principle that wholesalers cannot sell unless the retail tradesmen move their goods into the hands of consumers. Consequently, most issues of Our Leader, particularly in the early years, contained simple selling suggestions which merchants were strongly urged to try. This was a forerunner of similar practices which wholesalers of the present day frequently find necessary and profitable.

These “merchandising helps” took many forms. One device was the assortment, which eventually was used in nearly all lines. The first issue of Our Leader featured an assortment of glassware. Toys were available in fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five dollar assortments, “for merchants who do not wish or have not time to make their own selections.” “Cheap-counter” assortments of five and ten cent items in twenty-five and fifty dollar lots were featured regularly, and there were assortments of apparel, umbrellas, stationery, notions, and laces, among other products. There was even a ribbon remnant assortment to go along with the laces.

The far-from-modest copy writers used their most persuasive language on the assortments. Thus, for the laces: “A lady cannot resist a bargain in laces. Offer her a piece of lace at about half what other people sell it for and she’s going to have it even if she sells all her husband's old clothes for the funds necessary. And what is more, before she goes to bed that night every one of her next door neighbors within six blocks knows of her wonderful luck. Consequently, we know of no more profit-
able advertisement for a wide-awake merchant than a Cheap Lace Counter."

Further incentives to the purchase of assortments were introduced as time went on in the form of display cabinets and racks which were given to retailers who purchased a minimum order. In 1890, a spectacular assortment was offered at twenty-two fifty, for which the buyer also received a free showcase and an optometer for fitting glasses. It was promised that with the latter's "aid every merchant can fit the proper size glass as well as an optician." Other special deals included a "wagon load" of paint brushes, a ten-dollar whip assortment with "Cooley's patent circular whip rack free," a basket of caps, and a five-cent soap assortment in a basket. The latter offer carried the admonition: "Don't keep toilet soap—sell it. . . . Don't put your soap back on your shelves where it will get old and dirty. Pile it up in the middle of your store in baskets and trays. Mark plain selling price where everybody sees it. You will increase your sales ten-fold."

By 1900 the Sommers firm was ready to offer a new promotional service: "John Wanamaker pays his advertising man $20,000 per year. You cannot pay that much, but your business needs advertising as much as Wanamaker's. . . . We have engaged a competent, experienced man, who for several years has conducted the advertising department of one of the largest and most successful retail department stores in the United States. His duties will be to furnish our customers . . . ideas for advertisements. . . . He will correspond with any customer about new methods of pushing business, special sales, and will furnish hints and suggestions for introducing city department store methods into smaller cities. No charge made whatever for any work done by this department and only absolutely cost price will be charged for cuts and electrotypes furnished."

In addition to giving merchandising assistance, Our Leader served as a point of contact with the outside business world. Several issues contained reassurances with respect to general business conditions. In the fall issue of 1885 under the heading "The Season's Prospects—Prosperity" Sommers correctly forecast the end of the 1883-85 depression with the statement: "The iron industry, the real index to the whole commercial situation, is again reviving; and from Pittsburgh and other manufacturing centres the welcome news reaches us that the long slumbering fires have again been started, and already high chimneys are belching forth their waving signals that prosperity is at hand. . . . Everything indicates that we are on the threshold of a

A go-cart with corduroy upholstery and satin parasol was listed at $14.50

A bed lounge of solid oak was priced at $6.98

Autumn 1954
new era of trade and prosperity.” It was a prosperity which was to last nearly eight years.

The April, 1897, issue carried an expression of hope that the depression which had begun in 1893 was near an end: “We think 1897 will be a good year. We have an abiding faith in the future of the great Northwest and we believe that the long expected era of better times is at hand.” And then in September of the same year, “Hear Ye! Hear Ye! All good merchants take heed that Good Times and Prosperity have returned to the Land.” The enthusiasm was somewhat premature. The tide had turned, but real prosperity was nearly eighteen months off. When it did come in October, 1899, Our Leader was exuberant: “Prosperity is once more here, and here to stay for many years, the wise men of finance predict. The careful, cautious policy of the years of depression may now give way to more venturesome enterprise, and every merchant should study in what new directions his own business may be pushed.”

During this period, the population of the Northwest was increasing rapidly. This development and the resulting opportunities for trade were also brought to the attention of retail tradesmen: “Thousands of immigrants are already on their way to new homes in the Northwest... One day in the latter part of March, five thousand immigrants passed through St. Paul on their way to new homes in Minnesota, The Dakotas, Montana, and neighboring states. ... Most of them will have to buy new stocks and outfits before they get settled.”

The Columbia Graphophone had a recorder

As the area became more thickly settled and the company prospered, new lines were added. Many of these were intended to enhance the “tone of living,” as it were, and to bring to the average home a few products of a lighter nature. Again, the copy writers threw discretion to the winds. The ceramic figures in a new line were described as “gems of art in unique shapes and brilliant colors. ... You can sell thousands of them at from five cents to twenty-five cents each. As advertising mediums for free distribution they are unequalled.”

For the parlor of 1885 there were “handsome rustic baskets and vases, gilded and painted, filled with natural everlasting straw flowers, grasses and mosses, finely arranged. Ornaments for the richest parlor in America.” Several sizes were available, including a “superb floral parlor ornament hand-
somely arranged" wholesaling at six dollars a dozen and "a really magnificent parlor ornament" at seven dollars and fifty cents per dozen.

Sommers also catered to the musical needs of the area. In 1891 four models of violins were offered, including "our conservatory violin" at six dollars. There also were imported Swiss music boxes selling for as much as sixty-five dollars each. When the gramophone appeared on the market, several models were listed in the catalogue.

There were, of course, many oddities. For the summer traveler of 1892, Our Leader featured "Scenery Spectacles"—"An amber tinted lens makes them an excellent protection from the glare of the sun, and the peculiar construction enables the wearer to see distant objects more clearly than with the naked eye. No bicycle rider should be without these glasses; every fisherman should have them; every sportsman needs them; every tourist will buy them." And then there was the "laughing camera." This looked like a pair of opera glasses, but it distorted people in a manner similar to the curved mirrors found in amusement parks. A full line of Indian trading supplies was listed, including beads, pipes, jewelry, shawls, extract of musk, and other items.

The latest in apparel and accessories was given increasing attention as the years passed. A wide variety of men's "laundered" and "unlaundered" shirts was included. The March, 1891, issue described a man's coat collar spring: "Keeps the coat in shape and prevents lapels from curling up. . . . Two million in use. . . . Saves the wear on buttonholes." For the ladies there were several styles of "fancy celluloid hair daggers."

Always, however, the company faced competitive problems. The expanding structure of marketing agencies during the early decades of the company's growth resulted in strong pressures. These pressures had an impact on both wholesale and retail tradesmen. One aspect of this competition is indicated by the following statement, which appeared in the April, 1897, issue under the heading "Fighting the Devil." There is noted "one of the most serious questions which now confronts the retail country merchant, viz: The growing competition of the supply and retail catalogue houses." Following this is advice to "Fight the supply houses in their own way by selling your goods so cheaply that the people will leave their money with you instead of sending it away. . . . Have leaders which make people talk about you. . . . Try the department store plan of having bargain days and bargain counters. . . . Sell your goods with a small margin of profit rather than have the money leave your country." This was one of many statements in the catalogues which exhorted retailers to adopt "department store practices."

THE HANDLING of credit has long been a major problem in wholesaling. The gradually changing credit policy of the Sommers company clearly reflected the importance of giving liberal credit terms for competitive reasons and at the same time emphasized the necessity of preventing credit losses. From the beginning, the company quoted prices at "2% discount for cash within 10 days, or net 30 days," with "an extra
"China limb dolls" came in three sizes

1 per cent, when cash accompanies orders."
A five-dollar advance was required for
C.O.D. orders, and later a ten per cent
advance was required on C.O.D. orders
over a hundred dollars.

As time went on, the net period was
lengthened, first to forty days and finally
to sixty days. During the depression of
1897, the firm's credit policies and require­
ments were explicitly spelled out: "Send
money by Registered Mail, Express Money
Order, or Draft on St. Paul, Chicago or
New York. Do not send your own personal
check. . . . Take a common sense view of
our request for references. . . . Our goods
represent cash capital to us and we must be
as careful in granting a merchandise credit
as you would be in loaning an equal amount
of cash. . . . Merchants who desire to open
a credit account with us will please refer
us to some other wholesale house where
they have bought goods on credit. We can­
not accept references to retailers or to local
banks. If you are just starting in business,
and wish to buy on time, send us a brief
statement of the amount of cash capital
you have in business, merchandise, good ac­
counts, notes, real estate, and state amount
owing for merchandise, real estate, and
other obligations. . . . Our terms may seem
strict to dealers accustomed to long dating
ahead and long terms of credit, but our
goods are sold on a cash basis and our
low prices must be the inducements to send
us orders."

Another evolving competitive device was
the guarantee policy permitting merchan­
dise returns. This policy was first announced
in the spring of 1886, and a few months
later the guarantee was extended to nearly
all lines, excepting those which had to be
specially packed. It permitted the retailer
to return at Sommers' expense goods he did
not wish to keep. The company claimed to
be the only house giving this service. The
company also had an established policy of
securing special order goods "outside," but
made it clear that these goods could not be
returned.

By 1886, the company was selling to many
types of retail outlets, including general
stores, and grocery, drug, dry goods, hard­
ware, and notions stores. Orders also were
received from department stores. The com­
pany listed bank references in Minnesota,
Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Montana, Oregon,
and Washington.

Circulars were sent to West Coast cus­
tomers showing the favorable freight rate
structure from St. Paul compared with rates
from Chicago. When the rate structure was
changed before World War I, resulting in
rates that were more nearly in accordance
with distances, the Sommers firm notified
its customers that it would equalize freight
costs for those closer to competing whole­
sale centers, particularly Minneapolis.

THERE ARE other phases of Sommers'
operations which might be discussed, but
these highlights will indicate the wealth of
material contained in the catalogues. They
constitute a panorama of the activities of
a successful wholesale firm during a very
interesting period of our history. The mar­
keting practices and policies outlined in
them are of interest to the economic historian
and the student of marketing history. The
detailed product descriptions and illustra­
tions are very useful to anyone studying the
types of products purchased by consumers
during this period or attempting to recreate family living patterns. The material for the years before World War I is particularly interesting in this connection.

The price information is of considerable interest also. Product-line pricing, price differentials, and historical changes in price can be studied and compared with other periods. The economist who is analyzing changes in competitive practices and patterns likewise will find much that is useful. Here are a long series of empirical data which show how one firm actually conducted its business over a span of nearly sixty years.

Those engaged in historical studies of promotion techniques will find many things worth noting. Packaging may be taken as an illustration. The types of packages used for toilet goods and cosmetics (a very important competitive factor today and, apparently, then as well) reflect the fashion mores of the day. An 1883 issue of Our Leader describes a “Fish Bottle Perfume,” and a hand cologne in “a large bottle representing a lady’s hand with rings, &c; neatest thing in the market.” Among the soap lines were “Baby Mine,” a toilet soap packed in a miniature wicker cradle; “Solace, I doz. in complete writing desk”; and “Pastime,” packed in a “fine checker-board box, with checkers complete.” The brand names used during the last decades of the nineteenth century make a fascinating study in themselves, particularly when compared with the names used today.

The Sommers catalogues were presented to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1943 by former heads of the company which issued them. They constitute the longest and most complete set of wholesale catalogues in the society’s library, which also has series issued by the drug firm of Noyes Brothers and Cutler of St. Paul, the hardware firm of Janney, Semple, Hill and Company of Minneapolis, and other local concerns. A set of manufacturers' catalogues and lists covering the period from 1870 to 1888 also is of outstanding value. All these materials reflect changes in the American way of life and picture vividly its physical aspects in the decades about the turn of the century.

Memorials and Bequests

The Minnesota Historical Society has established a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts not only serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, but they help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

Whenever a contribution is made to the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

Minnesotans are urged to remember the society when making their wills. Bequests, as well as contributions to the Memorial Fund, will be used in forwarding the society’s program of collecting, preserving, and disseminating material on Minnesota and its history.

ENCLOSED is my contribution of $_______ to the Minnesota Historical Society’s Memorial Fund.

PRESENTED in the name of______________________________

Please send card to ________________________________

Address: _______________________________________

Signed: __________________________________________

Address: _______________________________________

The following form is suggested for a clause in the will of anyone who plans to leave a bequest to the society:

I BEQUEATH to the Minnesota Historical Society, incorporated under the laws of Minnesota, the sum of $_______.

IF YOU prefer that a memorial or bequest be used for a specific purpose, check below:

Purchase of books ☐, manuscripts ☐, pictures ☐, museum objects ☐; publication work ☐.