

45 From Door to Door or From Generation to Generation

An article titled “Door to Door Deception” in the October 2007 AARP Bulletin caught my eye and brought back a memory I had almost totally forgotten. It described how a young solicitor, named Heather, knocked on the door of a woman near Des Moines Iowa, saying she was a soccer player at Iowa State University raising money to buy books for children in need. The woman gave her a contribution, and was given a receipt from Quality Subscriptions Inc. of Buford, Ga. for magazines she never ordered.

And now, my experience. It was the summer of 1946. I had completed my first year at CCNY and had worked part time at Reich and Schrif, a stationery store near the school. For the summer, I wanted something completely different, and scoured the Sunday New York Times Help Wanted ads. And then I found it: An ad for college students looking for summer employment with the potential to make hundreds of dollars a week.

First thing Monday morning I went to the address listed in the ad. It was on West 42nd Street in Manhattan. When I arrived, there were several other young men seated in the outer office. We were given applications to fill out, but I had no idea what kind of work was being offered, nor what the kind of business it was. None of the other applicants seemed to know, either. But if you could make hundreds of dollars a week, I was certainly going to stick around to find out.

As I was waiting, someone whom I knew from junior high school walked by. “Hey Roy! Roy Sperling! You work here?” “Yes.” “What do you do?” “I’m in sales.” “A good job?” “Absolutely.” I finished filling out the application, and was told that I would be seen in a little while.

After a while, I was interviewed, and then asked if I would like to start work that morning. I still didn’t know what I was supposed to do. Or how much I was going to make. In 1946, 75 cents an hour was a pretty good wage. I was told that I would make a lot more than that, but since it was a sales job, my salary would depend on how much I sold. But what will I be selling? Go with Bill, I was told, and you will find out.

Bill was a tall, good-looking fellow, several years older than me. He was dressed in a suit and tie and carried a brief case. I was wearing a suit and tie as well, but I didn’t have a brief case. He walked quickly out of the building, with me following, and we headed to the subway. He explained that he would fill me in on what I had to do as we rode the subway to Battery Park and then took the ferry to Staten Island.

We found seats on the train, and he took out a portfolio which contained photographs and the names of at least a hundred magazines. He explained that what we will be doing is selling these magazines, but that the customer will not realize that he is buying a magazine until after we close the deal. I had no idea what he was talking about. He then explained to me that magazine publishers make their money from advertising, not from subscriptions. What they charge for ads depends on the size of their readership. They

contract with companies that use different ways of “selling” magazine subscriptions. He explained their sales pitch when we boarded the ferry.

The magazine salesman poses as a college student who is trying to win a scholarship. He will get the scholarship if he earns a certain number of points. He earns points by having people sponsor him. People sponsor him for one or more points. He sizes up the people and tries to get them to commit to as many points as possible. When he has the commitment, he explains that in appreciation for their sponsorship, they will receive a year’s subscription to a magazine, at no charge. He then produces the list of magazines available for the points to which they have committed, generally from one to five. They select one. Then he explains that though the magazine is free, they have to cover the postage, which turns out to be from one to five dollars. By this time, he has totally ingratiated himself with the individuals. They are happy to help this nice young man go to college, and they are getting a free magazine subscription. Of course they will come up with the few dollars to pay for the mailing. Our college student-magazine salesman fills out a form indicating the points the sponsor is pledging, a receipt for the postage, and an order for the magazine. And that’s how it is done. The magazine salesman gets half.

This particular summer, the sales force was working Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island, and I happened to have been assigned to one of their best people covering what turned out to be a poor section of Staten Island. Bill had a street map of the borough, and we went to the first house on the street he had marked out. I asked him why he didn’t go to a more affluent area. He assured me that you can make as much money in poor neighborhoods as in rich ones. You go where you are sent.

At the first house we visited, an elderly Italian woman answered the door. Bill greeted her with a hearty Buon Giorno, and started his pitch. I was amazed at how convincing he sounded. Not only was he, the son of a poor Italian family, trying to get a scholarship to enable him to go to college, he wanted to go on to Medical School so he could make poor sick children well, so that they can get an education and succeed in this great land of ours. Could she sponsor him for three points? And out of his bag of tricks he pulled an Italian proverb which translates into “One hand washes the other.” After she selected her “free” magazine, she just didn’t have the three dollars for postage. Our visit ended with him settling for two dollars. It was pathetic.

There was no one home in the next several houses. It was not surprising since it was around 11 am on a Monday morning. Then we got lucky. A young black woman with a baby opened the door. Bill made kitchekoo with the baby, then went into his spiel. This time he only asked her to sponsor him for one point. OK, but when Bill explained about the postage, she was crestfallen. She had no money. Come on said Bill. You must have some change in your purse or in a piggy bank. He held the baby as she looked all over the house. She came up with 95 cents. He generously accepted it in place of a dollar, and she was so happy that she could help him. And I was sick.

At this point, I turned to Bill and told him that I don’t think I am cut out for this kind of work. He looked surprised and told me that I am passing up good money. We were just

getting started. We could make \$40 to \$50 today. I said goodbye, thanks for the demonstration, and headed back to the ferry. The next day, I called Reich and Schrift and asked them if they could use me during the summer at 75 cents an hour. They were glad to have me back, and I was glad to be back.

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