

Selling to the Goyim

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It is my firm belief that the blood of generations of salesmen flows through my veins and that, at least on my father's side, peddlers, pitchmen, hucksters, drummers, horsetraders, and merchant princes have been in the family since the days of Solomon. I've got uncles in men's wear and lingerie, cousins in hardware and paints, and last year my Aunt Sarah, at the age of sixty-five, opened a yarn and needle-craft shop on the proceeds of her husband's life insurance. My great grandfather taught Sam Goldwyn everything he knew about pushing gloves, but my father was the Harry in "Harry's Famous West Side Liquors," and to my mind, he was the best of them all.

I ought to know, because I worked elbow-to-elbow with him from the time I was old enough to hoist a case of beer up to the counter to the day I went off to college. Long before the discount drugstores made loss leaders a permanent fixture in the trade, my father was featuring at cost a name-brand Scotch one week, a bourbon the next. He compiled a mailing list of over 20,000 names and regularly hired neighborhood kids to slip flyers underneath the windshield wipers of every car within a mile radius. He sponsored softball and bowling teams, importing ringers whenever a championship was at stake, and donated kegs of beer to the Fourth Ward's Annual Labor Day Picnic. The week before Christmas, he gave away over a dozen cases of whiskey – bottle by bottle – to his best customers, and on December 24 he was open for business until midnight. On Christmas day he was

open from nine to five.

But the true key to the success of Harry's Famous West Side Liquors was not my father's undercutting of the competition or the sweepstakes he ran once or twice a year. It was, as he so often reminded me, "Psychology! Good human relations skills!" He found, for instance, the standard brown paper bag to be a depressing sight, and he reserved for his clientele a customized rainbow-striped carrier with the scarlet legend "Harry's Finest!" emblazoned across its surface. "Buying fine liquors is not something to be ashamed of," he would say. "It's something to enjoy!" and rarely did anyone over the legal age feel unwelcome, harassed, or insecure in my father's store.

Yet like many successful salesmen, even those who earn the deep respect of their customers, he felt a mild contempt for them all. Those who entered his store probably considered him an advocate for conviviality and high spirits, and as they left, clutching their multi-colored bags full of clinking glass and sloshing liquids, they were surely convinced that he, too, celebrated their over-indulgence as strength. But although he loved to sell, my father was neither fond of them nor their habits.

He began to like his customers even less when the racial composition of the neighborhood, which had begun to change shortly after he opened the store, turned completely black. In the face of rising insurance costs and an increasingly impoverished clientele, he had to lower both the quality of his merchandise and the extent of his markups. But his volume grew in still greater proportions, and his increased profits confirmed the truth of his methods and the power of his salesmanship. When the riots erupted in the summer of '68, his

store – which was on the fringe of the area – was not touched, and at the end of the second day, he proclaimed, “You see, that’s what comes of psychology and good human relations skills!”

But on the morning of the third day, after most of the other fires had subsided, Harry’s Famous West Side Liquors was ransacked, torched, and gutted, and to this day its site remains a vacant lot. Although he always blamed “an outside element, hoodlums!” I suspect that he was convinced that he had been betrayed by his customers, and without ever returning to see what could be salvaged from the debris, he retired from business. A little over a year later he died, having, I suppose, no further reason for living since there was nothing more for him to sell.

I’m sure if I had shown the least inclination toward retail trade, my father would have rebuilt the store for me, although most likely in some suburban mall rather than on the West Side. I recall, as a child, overhearing him discuss my prospects with the relatives as if an empire of retail liquor outlets – with a spawn of rainbow-striped billboards publicizing the family name along the highways of the world – were to be erected on my shoulders. But in college I was far more interested in channels of distribution, psychographics, and usage pulls than in stock-sale ratios and inventory control, and when I made my preferences clear to him, he was deeply disappointed. “That’s fine,” he said. “You better yourself. You become better than me,” but there was neither conviction nor pride in his voice.

Yet when I took my first job as a Spiegel Catalogue copywriter, churning out ten-line blurbs for electric blenders and the like, I had far more in common with Harry Warner than either he or I supposed,

and many years later, as Marketing Director for Caldwell Publishing, Inc., I could still hear my father's voice in my ears, "Know your market. And if you got something to sell, sell it! Shout so's all of them can hear you loud and clear!"

So I shouted, and everyone heard. "Reduce Fatty Build-up! No Exercise! No Diet!" That ad ran for five years before it stopped pulling. "A Refund Every Year from the IRS! Get Your \$\$ Back from Uncle Sam!" Bill still inserts that one in the Sunday financial section of every major metropolitan newspaper from February 1 to April 1. "There Are 5,000 New Millionaires Every Year! You Can Be One of Them!" *Fortune* and *Business Week* produced solid returns. "Single Girls Are Easier than You Think. If You've Got the 'Touch!'" *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Popular Mechanics*, and the like. My boss, Bill Caldwell, dubbed me "the franchise" because of headlines like those. "They ought to be enshrined in the Advertising Hall of Fame," he used to say, "along with 'Diamonds Are Forever' and 'They Laughed When I Sat Down to Play the Piano.'"

But not only could I write heads that demanded attention – inciting a reader's lusts or greed, his unacknowledged cravings or fear of shame – I also crafted narratives with the skill of a Dickens or Jackie Collins. ("One day a famous face appeared at the door of Dr. Havermayer's Beverly Hills Clinic," begins my immortal ad for *The Havermayer Celebrity Diet*.) I was adept at arousing curiosity ("Learn the seven ways to lose fat while fast asleep!"), allaying fears ("No money down! No obligation to buy!"), sweetening the offer ("If you act NOW, FREE with each order...") and impelling action ("And, in addition, if you print your name and address on the lines

below TODAY...).

Of course, the books that Caldwell Publishing produced, tailor-made for mail order, simplified my task. *Get Rich from Penny Stocks* was a sure-fire bestseller, as were *The Embarrassment Syndrome* and *An Appalachian Grannie's Recipes for Perfect Health*. All written to formula, all repeated regularly, with slight modifications in content and structure. Every year a crash diet, one or two strategies for instant wealth, a guide on bedding the single girl or entrapping the eligible male, and at least one manual on, to use Bill's phrase, how-not-to-be-a-slob.

The list would be rounded out by exploiting various fads (*The Care and Feeding of Your Pet Rock*) or by replicating some trade bestseller (*Visitors from Beyond the Stars*). Although we maintained an editorial department that read and solicited manuscripts, most of our books were simply titles before they were anything else, and Bill retained a stable of freelancers – nutritionists, psychotherapists, nontenured academics, library drudges – capable of inflating any one-line idea into enough pages to warrant a \$19.95 price tag. In a pinch, Bill could flesh out a volume himself, and I happen to be the pseudonymous author of *The Way to Power: Selling Yourself in Interpersonal Relationships*.

Like the thick brown bottles, supposedly full of miraculous elixir, once hawked by medicine-show barkers, our books were made of the cheapest materials to ensure maximum profits. Signatures more inclined to separate from their spines than to stay put; casebound covers likely to split apart after a second reading (if any of our readers were benighted enough to read a Caldwell title twice); paper sure to

yellow, crack, and disintegrate within the decade. But the shoddiness of our products had little impact on sales, for Caldwell Publishing was not in the business of selling durable art or entertainment. Instead, we peddled fantasies of undeserved riches and robust health, dreams of popularity and prestige, freedom from anxiety and want. Like my father who did not deal exclusively in liquid refreshment but also in reduced inhibitions and, in some cases, oblivion, I, too, offered the means to an end, the slaking of a thirst, the cure to some undiagnosed disease.

I often wondered if any of those who responded so eagerly to my ads ever took the time to read through *Surviving Your Midlife Crisis* or *Charting Sexual Signs*, or whether any of them actually practiced the five basic techniques for achieving spiritual tranquility or financial well-being. Most of them, I suspect, were simply seeking reassurance that given the proper methods and sufficient discipline, such things were still attainable in a world increasingly alien and unsafe. In any case, our money-back guarantee was rarely acted upon, confirming our claim to “twenty million satisfied customers,” and despite an occasional misleading headline or overstated case, I never considered myself guilty of deceptive practices. Like my father used to say, “The goyim want to drink, and I make a fair profit. So who’s complaining?”

Yet unlike the liquor business, there is a corrosive mystique to the book trade that can lead the most calloused of hucksters to seek communion with things of a higher nature or lasting worth. I once seriously suggested to Bill that he establish a line of children’s books, with specially commissioned drawings and four-color covers. “Kipling and Twain, *Treasure Island*, *King Solomon’s Mines*, that kind of thing. There’s probably a vast market out there. Parents who are into quality

reading, not the kind of pabulum that passes for children's literature nowadays. The Caldwell Classics for Kids! Has a ring to it, doesn't it?" Bill crossed his arms and looked at me as if he thought I no longer considered making a buck a worthy goal and had therefore seriously compromised my ability to write effective copy. "Give me a man who reads!" he replied in the cold, unhappy tone of a commander who now doubted the loyalty of a trusted lieutenant. "What's the matter, Hal? Aren't we respectable enough for you any more?" "Just an idea," I muttered, and quickly retreated from his office, never to mention the Caldwell Classics for Kids again.

But, apparently, respectability was not as far from Bill's thoughts as he would have liked me to believe, for the following year he acquired the rights to the entire list of the Free Republic Press.

"It's a great opportunity," he said, speaking rapidly as if afraid to take a breath until he had fully justified himself. "We'll gain an instant reputation for something other than books with the lifespan of a housefly. I've always been fond of political philosophy and history, and these titles will draw immediate attention to Caldwell Publishing. In influential circles, too." He paused for a moment, and then as if to reassure me that his motives were not entirely altruistic, he added, "But more important, we'll get into the bookstores and be noticed by the reviewers. A publisher can't survive on mail-order alone." He looked at me expectantly, eager for me to share his enthusiasm.

"We've done pretty well so far," I said, recalling his hostile response to the Caldwell Classics for Kids and unwilling to give him the satisfaction of immediate approval.

"Look, I'm not suggesting we dump mail-order, so you don't have

to feel threatened. But we need more than ten new titles a year, all of them clones of something we've already done. We need to expand, gain higher visibility. I must be the only publisher in the western hemisphere who hasn't received at least one takeover bid from the Germans or the Dutch!"

"Free Republic Press? Isn't that a reactionary..."

"Their publications are conservative, but so what? Did I ever mention that my father served as a state senator for two terms and went to the '52 Convention as a Taft Republican? Granted, some of the titles are garbage, and we'll let those sink to the bottom with the sludge. But a few are by respectable people with impressive strings of intellectual hardware behind their names. And some have sold really well. This one for instance."

He handed me a thick paperback, the edge of the pages scarred and ruttled as if the blade used to cut them had been dulled with age. The cover was a faded yellow, with no graphics to enliven it, only the words *The Big Lie* printed in a spindly typeface I had never before seen.

"Their packaging is worse than ours."

"We'll design all new covers, scrap the inventory, and reprint from negatives. But apparently their customers were no more concerned with production values than ours. That one went through four printings. It's a revisionist history of World War II, or something like that. The author's a tenured professor."

I opened the *The Big Lie* to the title page where a picture of the author appeared. In his black suit and with his close-cropped black hair, Dr. Wolfe looked anything but professorial, even though his eyes glared through his wire-frame glasses with an intellectual ferocity. "It

says here he's a professor of Fluid Mechanics."

"No matter. Play up his degrees, anyway. 'Distinguished professor,' 'scientific accuracy,' 'scholarly objectivity,' you know the drill. It's imperative to give the entire line the appearance of reputable authority from the start. 'Caldwell Monographs on Social and Political Issues.' How's that for a series title?"

"You never were any good at titles, Bill."

"Well, I'll have a logo designed, anyway."

"Should I treat this as a series in the first ad?"

"No. I want to market this one separately first. It outsold all of their other titles two-to-one without, so far as I can tell, any great push. With your golden touch, we ought to make a killing."

"One killing coming right up," I said, finally succumbing to the contagion of Bill's excitement. "I'll have copy for a full-page by the end of the week and a few suggestions for media buys. Let me know if you're contemplating any direct mail."

"Will do," said Bill, and I slipped the volume into my briefcase so that I could begin preliminary work on the campaign as soon as I returned to my apartment that night.

Advertising agencies often discourage their copywriters from using the products they are meant to sell for fear that they might be demoralized by the experience. But like the monarch who ingested arsenic with each meal to develop a resistance to poison, I had begun, early in my career with Caldwell, to read selected passages from each of our new titles, gradually increasing the dosages until I could stomach them all from cover-to-cover. In the process, I often discovered that even the most confused and inarticulate of writers, in wrestling

with the language and unformed thoughts, occasionally glimpsed an elegant truth. It was such glimpses that often gave me the themes for my ads, and like an explorer entering an uncharted land, I opened *The Big Lie* with the expectation of encountering passions, aspirations, and desires I had never before manipulated.

Before I could begin, however, a large bookmark, with the entire list of the Free Republic Press imprinted on it, dropped into my lap. I ignored most of the descriptive blurbs underneath each, for there could be little doubt about the content and bias of *The Threat of the Underclass* or *What IQ Tells Us* or *Taxation and Tyranny* or *Marxism and the New Deal*. Various “Texts in Americanism” were also offered, including Washington’s Farewell Address and the Articles of Confederation, all “attractively engraved on simulated parchment suitable for framing.” I smiled at the cliché, but the feeling of mild amusement that settled over me as I scanned the list quickly dissipated when I read the description for *The Big Lie*. “A university scholar,” it informed me, “courageously exposes the greatest hoax of them all. The myth of the holocaust.”

I immediately turned to the Table of Contents where I found “The Crime of Nuremberg,” “Roosevelt and the Jewish Connection,” “The Final Solution: Resettlement,” “Typhus, Not Gas,” “The Zionist Deception” all listed as chapters. There was no need to probe any further. I closed the book and phoned Bill Caldwell at his home.

“Sounds like an interesting point of view,” he replied when I informed him of the book’s contents.

“You want me to go through with this?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“I thought you were going to let the garbage sink to the bottom.”

“Come on, Hal. Don’t get squeamish on me after all these years. This is their bestseller! Say, superstar, you’re not thinking of renegotiating your contract, are you?”

“Sure. Send over a mess of pottage and I’ll get started on it right away.”

Except for the slight crackling of static, there was silence at the other end of the line as Bill absorbed the allusion. I didn’t expect him to place it, but apparently he was up on the Old Testament. “I didn’t know you were Jewish, Hal,” he finally replied. “Or should I say ‘Esau’? Warner? That’s not a Jewish name.”

“It can be.”

“Warner Brothers?”

“Jews. Hollywood was crawling with them.”

“Listen, Hal, if you don’t want to do it, that’s ok. I’ll understand. I’ll find someone else for the project. Some freelancer.”

I suddenly felt very foolish for having placed the call. Did I really expect Bill to scrap *The Big Lie* simply because I considered its contents to be offensive? “I won’t be in tomorrow,” I said, “but I’ll have the ad for you Friday.”

“I mean it, Hal. If you don’t think you can work with this book, if you don’t think you want to sell it... Well, no problem.”

“I can sell it. See you Friday,” and I slammed the receiver down. Perhaps Bill sincerely wanted to spare my feelings when he suggested I drop the project, but the tone of his voice had been as frigid as when he had rejected my proposal for the line of children’s books, as if he had again begun to doubt my abilities, as if the success of this

advertising campaign were simply too important to be entrusted to someone who might prove to be unreliable. Angered by these suspicions, I returned to my easy chair and opened *The Big Lie* to the first chapter, “The Crime of Nuremberg: Justice on Trial.”

I’m no scholar, and I never cared much for history. I’m not competent to judge the worth of Professor Wolfe’s claims that there were no extermination camps, that only a few hundred thousand – not six million – perished, that it was all a Zionist hoax. But as he accused one eye witness after another of being a liar, discovered one Jew – or Zionist or Soviet agent – after another to be the source of an incriminating document, developed one logical, persuasive thesis after another for the presumed diabolic and incomprehensible, I became more and more convinced that the diabolic and incomprehensible had been the reality and not Professor Wolfe’s reasoned explanations. As I continued reading into the late hours, my fingers frequently marked the pages with perspiration, and my skin bristled as if some threat to my existence had silently invaded the apartment. In the past, I had never been much disturbed by the photos and newsreel footage I had seen of the emaciated corpses and mountains of hair, the crematoria and the gas chambers. But when I finished *The Big Lie*, I knew I would be unable to sleep, and I immediately began to write my copy, although it was well past midnight.

I finished the first draft shortly before dawn. I’m accustomed to working or reading into the early morning hours, but I always try to be in bed and asleep before the sparrows begin their insistent morning chirping outside my window. This time I waited too long, and after an hour or so of listening to their frenetic songs, I arose and began my

second draft. In the late afternoon I took a long walk, and after I returned to my desk, I continued to work until, by early evening, I was satisfied with the ad. Exhausted, I went to bed shortly thereafter, but despite my fatigue, my sleep was frequently interrupted by what were probably troubled dreams. I can remember none of them now, except the one that took place in my high school washroom where we used to sneak smokes between classes. The washroom in this dream, however, was located on the lot where Harry's Famous West Side Liquors had once been, and as I walked toward the sinks, a dark, viscous liquid seeped upward between the tiles, soiling my shoes and awakening me.

The following day was Friday, and I slipped the copy into Bill's inbox as I had promised. It was a masterly job, and placed properly it would have generated in one month enough orders to equal sales from the previous four printings. Sure to attract immediate attention, as well as to cajole, provoke, and even incite, the ad was intended to arouse the interest of both the conservative thinker and radical ideologue. It portrayed the book as a quest for truth and cleverly endowed it with an aura of intellectual faddishness. Bill probably considered placing it in a string of right-wing journals, but I was sure it would do well in more liberal media, too, and I wrote a covering memo to that effect.

The memo also informed him that I would be taking a few days off, and when I returned a week later, I found the camera-ready art for the ad on my desk. As Director of Marketing I proofed most of the promotional materials for Caldwell Publishing, but I suspect that this art was forwarded to me by mistake.

Although the layout I recommended, with Professor Wolfe glaring fiercely at the reader from the middle of the page, had been followed, the words were not mine. “The Scandal of the Holocaust” read the inept headline, and the thrust of the body text was so crude and vulgar that not even the promise to deliver the book in a brown paper wrapper would have induced any reasonable prospect to buy. It was amateurish and cheap, an affront to my personal integrity and a certain disaster for the series, and from its familiar verbose style, I recognized the author to be Bill Caldwell.

I demanded an explanation.

“What’s the matter, Hal,” he said. “You know I’ve got the final say on all promotions.”

“You’ve never cut a sentence of mine, let alone an entire ad.”

“I kept the layout.”

“Every word was right for the job, and you know it!”

“I thought it would be best this way.”

“I put a lot into that ad. Two days of hard work, a solid effort.”

“Ok, I’ll pay you overtime. Or are you still hankering after that mess of pottage?”

I’m sure Bill was only teasing me with this last remark, but I didn’t then find it to be funny. Rather, it confirmed my suspicions about the true reasons for his rejection of my ad, and I resigned on the spot. He refused to take me seriously. “Anything you say, Hal. But there’s this how-not-to-be-a-slob manual that’s just come in. A sure winner. Perfect for your golden touch. Take care of the campaign first, and then we’ll talk about your resigning.”

“Sorry, Bill. I can’t work here any longer.”

“Come on, Hal. I’ll have a copy of the manuscript on your desk this afternoon. I’m thinking of budgeting a nationwide direct-mail promotion. We haven’t done anything that ambitious together for a long time.”

But I left his office without another word. He phoned me at home that evening, and occasionally thereafter, and each time I explained that I still considered him a friend, but under the circumstances I could hardly continue working for him. Eventually he stopped calling.

I remained between jobs for some time, enjoying my idleness and its freedom from phone calls to be answered and deadlines to be met. But after several months, I sensed a disorientation in my life, an uncertainty and uneasiness that my father must have felt in his short retirement, having no more customers to attend to and his place of business a vacant lot. So I polished my resume and sent it, along with a cleverly composed cover letter, to a select list of prospects. It pulled very nicely, too. Far better, proportionally, than even my famous ad for *The Havermeyer Celebrity Diet*, which ran for five years in the national media. □