

RECOLLECTIONS OF A FULLER BRUSH MAN

by

Lawrence Siddall

It was a late June morning on a sunny New England day. I was standing on the front porch of a white, two-story clapboard house in need of a coat of paint. I rang the doorbell. A middle aged woman in a floral print house dress opened the door.

“Good morning,” I said, speaking through the screen door. “I’m your new Fuller Brush Man. Can I interest you in some of our products?”

“I don’t think so today, young man, but I’ll take a sample of your hand cream.”

She opened the screen door and I stepped inside. While I was getting out the sample from my case I said, “By the way, we have a new non-caustic oven cleaner that’s really great. Could I show you?”

“Well, I guess so.”

“Swell. Let’s go to the kitchen.” I could see it beyond the hallway and living room. As she followed me I said, “This is neat stuff. I think you’ll like it.”

When I pulled open her oven door, the woman feebly protested. “Oh dear, I don’t want you to see what my oven looks like.”

“Not to worry,” I said, “Watch this.”

What I was about to demonstrate was Fulsol, a household degreasing agent. I poured a small amount on the inside of the oven door and moved it around with two fingers. “See that? Doesn’t harm the skin at all.” Then I took out my metal scratcher and cleaned a small area. “Slick as a whistle, I’d say. What do you think?”

“I must say I am impressed. What did you say that bottle cost?”

During that summer I sold more bottles of Fulsol as an oven cleaner than any other salesman in my district. It was one of my most popular products. If I could get as far as the kitchen I could almost be guaranteed a sale.

It was 1960. I was thirty years old, married with three small children, and about to begin graduate school. I had recently moved to Amherst, Massachusetts, where I still live, but my territory was in Greenfield, a small city to the north near the Vermont border. Being a Fuller salesman turned out to one of the best summer jobs I ever had.

In those days fewer women were working outside the home and were more receptive to door-to-door salesmen than today. I put in a good eight-hour day, sometimes longer if things were going well. I often made my best sales at supper time when the husband of the household was at home, since the wife sometimes sought his approve for her purchases. He might buy something too.

I remember one sweltering evening. A tired man sat at his kitchen table, not sure if he would accept my offer to demonstrate a cooling foot spray. His wife said, “Take off your shoe, honey, and let the man show you.” It was a quick sale.

In addition to foot spray and oven cleaner, I sold my share of brushes, mops, household cleaners, aerosols and cosmetics. One woman was especially happy to see me and asked if I still had “harmone” cream, referring to a lotion with hormones. I said I did and she promptly ordered a jar. I soon realized that there was real potential of repeat sales in cosmetics, but it turned out that I saw my customers only once that summer. I did my own deliveries on Saturdays, unlike most of my more

experienced colleagues who hired someone to do it for them. Sometimes it was a challenge to squeeze all my delivery items into my VW Beetle. As I recall, my net income averaged about \$100 a week, not bad for a beginner I was told.

Alfred C. Fuller, a native of Nova Scotia, founded the Fuller Brush Company in 1906 in Hartford, Connecticut. His small business was immediately successful. By the end of the first year he had 24 men working for him, with sales totaling \$8,500.

By 1909 Fuller was employing 260 representatives, all of whom worked solely on a commission basis. He liked to say that, because he demanded that his salesmen be courteous, knowledgeable and honest, his company was making door-to-door selling respectable. He also found that his best ideas for improving his products came from his customers.

The company's sales force had grown to over 1,000 by 1923, with 100 branch offices, while sales increased to more than \$15 million. The Fuller Brush Company was fast becoming a household name. In fact, it was *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1922 that coined the phrase, "The Fuller Brush Man."

In the years that followed, the Fuller Brush Man became a familiar figure in American culture. Fred Allen, the popular radio comedian in the 1930s and 40s, is reported to have said on one of his shows that Edison gave us electricity, Marconi gave us the wireless, and Fuller gave us the brush. There were also two films, one in 1948 called "The Fuller Brush Man" with Red Skelton and Janet Blair; the other was in 1950, "The Fuller Brush Girl" with Lucille Ball and Eddie Albert.

Famous people, such as Joe DiMaggio and Billy Graham, were known to have been Fuller salesmen.

In my daily rounds I rarely had an unpleasant encounter. However, one occurred at the end of a day when an intoxicated woman angrily slammed the door in my face. But things have an unexpected way of working out. As I walked to my car I forgot to jot down the street number on one of the small cards I used to keep track of which houses I had called on. So the next morning I didn't realize I was ringing this woman's doorbell again. The door opened and sure enough there she was, but this time she had a big smile.

"Good morning," I said. "I'm your new Fuller rush Man."

"Well, come in," she said. "'What have you got for me today?" I left twenty minutes later with a seventy-five-dollar order, one of my largest single sales. And I didn't even have to visit her kitchen where her oven door had been patiently waiting.

By 1959, with a sales force of 7,000, the Fuller catalog reached more than five million customers. But that year the Fuller family and company employees suffered a terrible shock when Fuller's eldest son Howard, who was now CEO, and his wife, Dora, were killed in an automobile accident in Nevada. For the first time he had invited her to accompany him on a business trip. Driving his Mercedes sports car, his speed was estimated by police at 120 mph when a tire blew and the car flipped over.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Howard's younger brother, Avard, became president, and in 1960 the company built a new plant in East Hartford.

Family control of the Fuller Brush Company eventually ended in 1968 when the company was sold to what became the Sara Lee Corporation. In 1972 Sara Lee moved the Fuller headquarters from Hartford when it built a more up-to-date manufacturing facility in Great Bend, Kansas, which became the company's only manufacturing, distribution and operating center.

By this time the buying habits of the American consumer were beginning to shift away from door-to-door selling and moved more to network marketing, such as hosting sales parties for friends and acquaintances. Eventually, marketing expanded with the advent of the Internet and opening outlet stores.

Currently owned by CPAC, Inc, the Fuller Brush Company marked its 100th Anniversary in 2006. The company held a celebration that honored the company's founder, Alfred Fuller (who died in 1973), and the company's long history of providing quality products, now totaling over 2,500 different items.

Alfred Fuller always said about his products, "Make it work, craft it to last, and guarantee it no matter what." My customers often told me about Fuller items they had used for a long time. One day an elderly man came to the door and welcomed me inside. He called to his wife.

"Martha, our new Fuller Brush Man is here."

She joined us in the hallway. A bit unsteady on her feet and speaking softly she said, "Before we look at your catalogue, we want to show you something."

I followed them into their bedroom. Going to the dresser she said, “See this beautiful Fuller comb and brush set? It was a wedding gift and I have used them every day of our marriage.”

“That’s been a long time,” her husband added. “And they’ll last long after we’re gone.”

I never received any formal training, though my supervisor tagged along for a couple hours one morning to see how I was doing. His final comment was, “The only problem you have, Siddall, is you don’t walk fast enough between houses.”

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