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Ambassadors of Commerce: Images and Self-Images of the Sales Representative in Britain, 1900-1960

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The commercial traveller or sales representative has been rather a neglected figure in British business history. Their activities are usually subsumed within broader analyses of marketing in which their actual work is either ignored or assumed to be consistent with a general picture of business methods. Their work involved visiting retailers to take orders for products and sometimes to collect payments due for past orders. The actual experiences and attitudes of salesmen have received little attention and the aim of this paper is to look at the images and attitudes of salesmen from 1900 to the 1950s.

Research on US salesmen is more extensive and highlights economic and social changes linked to developments in marketing. Most recently both Spears and Friedman has identified the ‘birth of the salesman’ around 1900. It was a predominantly male occupation with a popular reputation for trickery or dubious morals. This reflected the methods of high-pressure selling and showmanship used in many trades. Similarly in a study of selling in the United States between 1880 and 1920, Susan Strasser emphasised the transformation of the ‘drummer’ into the ‘modern commercial traveller’. She used this dichotomy as a measure of the shift to a new and more systematic approach to selling and of a change in the culture and attitudes of salesmen. The ‘drummer’ worked for wholesalers and his image was one of pioneering into potential sales territories on lengthy road trips intended to promote (or ‘drum up’) sales from retailers. The drummers’ culture was a masculine world associated with mobility, gambling, womanising and hard-drinking. By the early 1900s, Strasser argues, salesmen’s magazines were depicting drummers as a dying breed whose passing ought not to be mourned. Instead they referred to the commercial traveller or travelling salesman. These terms were associated with a modern approach to selling characterised by self-discipline and the application of systematic sales techniques shaped by advertising and closely directed and monitored by manufacturers’ sales departments. Salaries, bonuses and training were designed to maximise the commercial travellers’ effectiveness in representing their company’s products including shaping their personality away from the stereotype of the ‘drummer’. To what extent were these changing images of the salesman found in Britain?

The ‘drummer’ era has been explored in Hosgood study of British commercial travellers between 1870 and the 1910s. As in the United States this was a masculine world. The work required lengthy trips away from home during which salesmen socialised in the commercial rooms of hotels that specialised in catering for them. In their reminiscences salesmen often claimed that the pace of business was more
leisurely before 1920 and featured lengthy business lunches. In the evening travellers
gathered in designated commercial rooms to dine and drink in a setting governed by
its own etiquette. It fits into the ‘drummer’ image. One traveller recalled that ‘In my
eyearly days I have seen half of the commercial room too drunk to walk straight up to
bed’. But there was a more positive aspect too. Travellers’ mobility made instant
access to contacts and socialising valuable. In some respects the commercial room
offered a relatively structured society with its own hierarchy and etiquette based on
age and business standing. This supported the development of a network of
associations and benevolent societies designed to aid commercial travellers. These
groupings included temperance and religious strands that endeavoured to counter the
emphasis on alcohol. Transience also permitted travellers to engage in less structured
and less respectable forms of behaviour. Huggins described Victorian commercial
travellers as one of the groups of men who were least constrained by domestic or
family life and, thus, able to engage in less respectable leisure pursuits. He identified
travellers with a bohemian lifestyle centred around public houses and music halls and
noted their reputation as sexual predators. The pre-1900 culture then had elements of
the ‘drummer’, but was more hierarchical and socially structured than Strasser’s
picture of the itinerant salesman suggests. This more positive imagery can be
encapsulated in the concept of the ‘ambassador of commerce’, a term used by
travellers’ representatives in both Britain and the United States. Both ‘drummer’ and
‘ambassador’ capture aspects of ‘life on the road’.

How far was the image of the British salesman changing or ‘modernising’ after 1900.
The contemporary literature offers mixed images that reflected the heterogeneous
character of the occupation. There was continuity with the ‘drummer’ image. In the
1930s George Orwell placed them within a ‘sinking middle-class’ and as a transient
group staying in poor quality hotels and lodging houses. To some extent this reflected
Orwell’s focus on the less affluent travellers and the diversity of specific jobs within
commercial travelling which blended seamlessly into door-to-door selling and
hawking. The drapery trades, for instance, employed casual or seasonal travellers for
a few months of the spring and summer season. There was a flood of newcomers
immediately after World War and high levels of unemployment also led many men to
try travelling. Commercial travellers’ organisations were always anxious about the
resulting image of commercial travelling as a marginal or criminal occupation. In
response they portrayed their members as ‘legitimate’ travellers, complaining when
court reporting identified an accused as a commercial traveller and frequently called
for licensing as a means to limit entry.

In the interwar period JB Priestley depicted travellers as combining the qualities of
Ulysses, Don Quixote, Tom Jones and Mr Pickwick. Priestley justified this curious
blend on the grounds that their work involved drama, mobility and insecurity. But the
mix equally offered images of pettiness, poverty, sexual licence, fanaticism and
lunacy. These literary images are matched by later academic references to salesmen.
For instance, in a study of Britain’s middle-class, Ross McKibben assigns them to a
‘socially marginal world’, along with shop-assistants and petty clerks, in which low
incomes restricted their aspirations to middle-class lifestyles. The overall sense of
mobility, insecurity and a lack of respectability implied a continuation of the
‘drummer’ image.
To some degree there was continuity in that both the ‘drummer’ image and the more positive images of travellers continued to co-exist. The culture of travellers’ associations persisted through local and national associations with their blend of dinners, musical evenings and sports. The continuity of ‘drummer’ and ‘ambassador of commerce’ images reflected the essential diversity of selling and, as Friedman and Spears have shown for the US, the divide between those whose trade centred on making a single sale and those who aimed to build repeat orders. Thus a 1926 article on ‘shady travellers’ described them as offering cheap goods for cash in the hope of a quick sale with no further business or contact. Yet, though the ‘drummer’ remained, the balance shifted towards establishing relationships with customers. The long-term trend was symbolised too by the increasing use of the term ‘sales representative’ rather than commercial traveller between the 1920s and the 1950s. The changes occurred at different levels. This approach to business was not new and it often relied on a supporting cast of temporary agents or canvassers to support the company salesman although salesmanship became more formalised and the earlier culture changed.

Comments in the trade press certainly reflected a belief that travellers’ behaviour and culture was changing by the 1920s. There was some nostalgia. Older commercial travellers were recalled in the 1920s as ‘gentlemen of the road’ who had dressed in elegant clothes and silk hats. Again in the 1940s there was a lament for the top hat and flower in the buttonhole. There was reportedly a decline in the formal gatherings for evening meals in the commercial room of hotels and, thus, in the camaraderie of life on the road. In 1917 ‘an old country traveller’ recalled earlier Sundays in hotels ‘where we dined at 4 o’clock and Mr President and Mr Vice were autocrats at dinner, always finishing with a glass of port’ plus a toast to the Queen. By the 1920s reportedly salesmen were more likely to have a quick snack at midday and then to eat in a restaurant or main hotel dining room rather than in the commercial room of their hotel. A 1940s comment suggested that ‘Commercial gentlemen don’t discuss now. They only eat’. The older reliance on railway travelling changed and journeys as salesmen gradually switched to the motor car. One older man complained that the commercial room was now a ‘debating ground for motor mad youths whose sole topic of conversation is miles per gallon and miles per hour’. It was a different working experience compared to the reliance on railway timetables and hotels. Although the associational life and culture of the ‘road’ continued, travellers’ work became more individualistic. Greater use of cars made it easier to transport samples and to canvass a sales territory more intensively. It seems likely too that improved transport enabled salesmen to return home more often, thereby strengthening their contact with domestic life rather than the earlier culture of the commercial room. In this respect their work routines became less distinctive.

The transition produced contrasting images of the salesman’s life and contrasting responses to modernisation of the work. An article in The Draper’s Record in 1925 lamented that ‘travelling isn’t what it used to be’. The writer claimed that commercial travellers were now ‘devoid of personality’ and that advertising had taken over their economic function. The systematic approach to selling developed through the use of scripted approaches to customers that became more common for branded goods from the 1920s. In the 1940s the spread of advertising was credited with turning travellers into ‘tarts or tricksters’, implying a refashioning of the ‘drummer’ image. Such suspicion of modernisation was evident in Frederick Coysh’s interwar assertion that
‘A man representing a big advertising house like Levers and Nestles becomes largely a collectors of orders and not a commercial traveller’. Coysh was secretary of the leading association of commercial travellers and tended to emphasise the importance of the travellers’ craft or skills. His image of the pre-1900 generations was not that of the drummer, but rather the ‘ambassadors of commerce’. Some manufacturers dealt directly with major retailers, thereby reducing the significance and status of the traveller. Generally commercial travellers saw themselves as under threat from the expansion of trusts, chain stores and the Co-operative movement. All were seen as threats to the salesman’s economic role since they centralised buying and were part of the development of mass marketing and advertising. A group of confectionery travellers criticised multiple-stories as ‘excessively mean and un-British.

Resentment of the greater power of central offices and of modern methods were also apparent in travellers’ portrayals of sales managers as interfering, unduly critical and lacking in experience or understanding of the real work of selling. Often such views associated new methods with Americanisation and the argument that such techniques were not appropriate for the British market. Here manufacturers and their sales managers began to direct salesmen. This direction was less welcome since it challenged the much-prized autonomy of the individual salesman. At a conference in 1926 representatives of commercial travellers portrayed sales managers as lacking practical experience and for being the products of salesmanship schools. Other travellers critically compared their sales managers’ emphasis on teamwork in selling with their office-based existence. Their authority over salesmen was resented. In practice sales managers were cautious. In 1931 Rowntree’s sales manager described American sales methods as too rigid to be applicable to ‘British salesmen or the British temperament’. He favoured practical experience during a period of probation as the best means to train salesmen and to determine who was likely to be successful.

Even advice manuals for salesmen portrayed themselves as providing sound, common-sense advice that was not overly theoretical. So modernisation was perceived as threatening and was contested. The trade press and in sales manuals that counselled salesmen on how to dress and the best approaches to customers in order to win orders. Here the advice tended to emphasise moderating behaviour and styles of dress and language in order to not to offend customers. Whether in the 1920s or the 1950s trade journals and speakers at travellers’ dinners and conferences offered similar advice. Heroic individualism was to restrained in favour of empathising with customers, understanding their business concerns and personal interests so as to establish good personal relationships. This approach was recommended as the best way to ensure that the salesmen would not be turned away and would gain orders at least in the long run. The advice manuals trod a delicate line between offering standard or systematic guidance and praising the importance of individual initiative. One aspect of this approach was the frequent rejection of high-pressure selling which was often labelled as an American practice that was not appropriate in the British market. In 1939 a trade journal identified high-pressure salesmanship as a characteristic of the United States that was being imported into Britain. It argued for that a personal style ought to be preserved as being more in line with British culture. Emphasis was placed on the salesman’s character and individualism as the key to engaging customers and handling each sale in a personal fashion. There was a steady shift in attitude though. By 1961 Nestle’s sales manager rejected the idea of a salesman as an order-taker and instead desired the ‘management man’ who can sell
‘quality, ideas and faith’. Similarly Paul Cadbury urged sales representatives to ‘give something of ourselves in our relations with other people’.

Other imagery was used to interpret and adjust to the changing nature of the work. The sense of being under pressure, a perception common to many middle-class occupations, was reflected in descriptions of salesmen as a ‘buffer’ between manufacturer and retailer or the ‘buffer’ between different parts of their firm, such as manufacturing and the sales department. In common with small retailers salesmen described themselves as being ground between the upper and lower millstones of society. Such defensiveness sometimes reflected depressed trading conditions. Travellers feared a loss of jobs or being diminished to ‘collecting orders’ rather than actively selling. A 1940s comment described the commercial traveller as a ‘harrassed and anxious servant.

But there were also more positive interpretations. Some commentators argued that increased competition required modern salesmen to be more resourceful and enterprising that their predecessors who had benefited from more prosperous times. An editorial in 1929 described the modern commercial traveller as ‘probably more enterprising, perhaps more industrious, and certainly more sober than his prototype of let us say 50 years ago’. The self-image was evident in an item in Confectionery News in 1938 that proclaimed travellers as still gentlemen even if they no longer wore frockcoats and top-hats. Personal qualities of resourcefulness and courage were seen as essential to cope with the demands of life on the road. Moreover the salesman’s own image, reputation and behaviour were all important in dealing with customers. A confectionery trade journal asserted that ‘cleverness may obtain an order, but character is required for repeats.’ Above all, there were efforts to integrate modernisation of marketing with positive views of the salesman’s role. Advice manuals, sales managers and salesmen all referred to selling as key link between the manufacturer or wholesaler and the retailer without which production and consumption would break down. Salesmen described themselves as the ‘backbone of trade’ and as the ‘intelligence department’ of their firm. On a grander level, they consistently referred to themselves as ‘ambassadors of commerce’, a term used in both Britain and the United States from the late nineteenth century. It combined notions of a pioneering role with the high-status associations of diplomacy. Equally striking were references in 1939 to salesmen as ‘emissaries of peace’ whose example or behaviour was a guide to good relationships between nations. These attitudes were reinforced by annual sales conferences at which salesmen were consulted and met with senior managers. Sales managers and advertisers built the salesman into their new ‘systems’, offering their own expertise as supporting the salesman rather than seeking to destroy their role. Personality mattered and the manuals were full of guidance on how best to approach customers, to win their confidence and to clinch sales. Trade journals encouraged salesmen to be optimistic and not to spread gloomy news or attitudes that might depress trading. There was no shortage of advice on the importance of empathising with customers, avoiding irritating mannerisms and being knowledgeable, but also realistic. This focus on personality was a way of reconciling the values of autonomy and enterprise that were so important in travellers’ self-image with the more directed, scripted or controlled systems of selling. Its focus on long-term relationships and repeat sales was also very different from the short-termism or trickery of the ‘drummer’ or hawker.
Aspects of travelling have always been dull and routinised. Much of work could be routine and repetitive-covering same territories and trying to build relationships with customers in order to win repeat orders. A comment in 1925 noted the monotony of travelling. One salesman summarised the work as ‘Day after day, life’s same old lane-Train-samples-snack at one-Smoke-orders-train again-And one more day is done’. The work could be stressful and disappointing: a series of meetings where the sales pitch might fail, buyers could be rude or retailers might try to avoid making payments. There were also the demands of coping with travel, hotels, poor food and meeting rival salesmen. A drapery journal described railway waiting rooms as ‘dirty dungeons’. Such negative experiences provided the basis for many of the jokes, stories and images of the commercial traveller. A 1933 comment, for instance, defined commercial travelling as ‘offering lines you don’t sell to chaps who won’t buy, and sending blank sheets to the firm to indicate orders you haven’t taken, for a commission you won’t receive’. Such humour perhaps created a sense of shared experience, helped to reduce feelings of personal failure or to magnify the sense of achievement when business was good.

In Draper’s Record in 1926 salesmen were urged to focus on the ‘bright side of travelling’ which was defined in terms of being out of the house and meeting people. One sales manual placed the travelling salesman in a direct lineage from Britain’s sea-faring heritage, likening them to Francis Drake. At times there was an image of the salesman as battling against the odds, especially during recessions. Travellers emphasised the importance of persistency and determination. The heroic image can be seen as a response to uncertainties and insecurities associated with selling. It also asserted individuality and provided a counter to routine and to the changing character of the work. In this respect commercial travellers’ images of masculinity were based on mobility, personal skills and a capacity to triumph against in difficult and competitive conditions. They valued their work for its sense of freedom and autonomy.

The most common images of travellers remained unchanged: photographs of groups of men. Thus images of sales conferences or travellers’ associational dinners or meetings in the 1920s and 1950s show neatly or formally-dressed men. Except during wartime, there were few women travellers and they faced opposition to joining professional associations, being frequently perceived as a potential threat to earnings or to the culture and etiquette of life ‘on the road’. Salesmen often stressed their freedom for managerial or domestic scrutiny. This self-image was very often reinforced by drawing comparisons with office work, which was pictured as sedentary, closely regulated or supervised and lacking in dynamism or entrepreneurial abilities. It was also reinforced, especially in jokes and after-dinner speeches, by references to travellers’ doubtful reputation. Among the images used in stories told by travellers were: ‘Pressure of business as the young traveller said when he placed his arm round the waist of the pretty shop assistant’ One speaker at a travellers’ dinner described the ‘successful traveller’ as ‘often a man who has a way with the girls’. In part, salesmen engaged in routine work, but were happy to cultivate an image of womanising or being a little disreputable. It was also an image promoted in contemporary comedy from the music hall through to 1940s and 1950s radio comedies and films. Max Miller, for instance, used the character of a commercial traveller as one means for bringing sexual innuendo into his act. There are similarities
with sailors’ stories and reputations as a way of defining the occupation and its associated sense of masculinity.

Overall there were numerous images of commercial travelling which reflected the variety or diversity among salesmen. Indeed one individual might share elements of different images. The older image of the ‘drummer’ persisted among travellers themselves and in popular and literary perceptions between 1900 and 1960. It was a product of the autonomy and mobility of the salesman. But these elements were changing with the increasing influence of advertising, sales managers and manufacturers rather than wholesalers. The ‘drummer’ had always co-existed with the more professional, sober and enterprising images of the travellers’ associations including some supporters of temperance. Their self-image was that of the ‘ambassador of commerce’ or ‘confidential man’ with a key and enterprising role in commerce. These perceptions were maintained by an vibrant work culture of local and national associations. For these men, the ‘drummer’ and autonomy were important self-images in a difficult and uncertain job and they used positive images and humour as counters to the routine and regulated aspects of their work. More broadly, there was a transition to the sales representative whose personality and empathy with customers were a key part of modernising marketing. This was a contested and gradual change and can also be seen as an aspect of salesmen’s definition of masculinity. Although ‘drummer’ gave way to sales representative—a change symbolised by the short life of a post-1945 Drummers’ club—commercial travelling’s image remained more kaleidoscopic than fixed.