

FB-DWT Distributor Connor McDonald found this great history of the company on AmericanHeritage.com. It's a bit lengthy and dated (1986) but it's a great read.

THE FULLER BRUSH MAN

Connoisseurs have long regarded him as the master of cold-turkey peddling. He's been at it for eighty years.

by Gerald Carson

Once upon a time, not too long ago, a doorbell would ring almost anywhere in America, a housewife would run to answer it, and there would stand a well-groomed, smiling gentleman. "I'm your Fuller Brush Man," he would say, stepping back deferentially. "And I have a gift for you." It was the famous Handy Brush. "I'll just step in a moment," he would go on, scooping up his sample case and kicking off his rubbers (which were, by intention, bought a size too large so they would slip off easily). By some extrasensory perception, the Fuller representative would seem to know where the living room was, and within seconds his case would be open, the free brush splendidly in view, the demonstration, or "dem," already under way.

The brushes looked like anyone else's brushes, a twist of wire and a tuft of bristles. But there were important differences, as the salesman explained. He might ask for a sincere opinion: "What do you think of these bristles, madam?" The housewife probably knew little about bristles or brush technology, but her earnest visitor could show conclusively that Fuller brushes were fashioned in novel shapes and sizes, each designed to perform specific tasks. And, he would explain, he wasn't selling things, but service, better ways to keep a house neat and avoid drudgery.

The talk never flagged, because a pause in door-to-door selling meant no sale. The Fuller Brush Man left two out of three of the homes in which he was allowed to make his full pitch with an order worth from three to seven dollars. He asked for no money and left no brushes. The following Saturday, when the husband's paycheck was still largely intact, the Fuller representative reappeared to deliver the merchandise and pick up the cash.

Sometimes the customer had changed her mind. The brush peddler might look troubled but was never argumentative. "Which one did you decide you could get along without?" he would ask, scanning the order list. The woman had intended to cancel everything. But the way the salesman phrased it usually led her to let the order stand or agree to some substitution.

The Fuller art of opening doors was regarded by connoisseurs of cold-turkey peddling in somewhat the same way that balletomanes esteem a performance of the Bolshoi—as pure poetry. In the hands of a deft Fuller dealer, brushes became not homely commodities but specialized tools obtainable nowhere else. They were brought to the door by a man worthy of trust who would be back again in three to six months with new items to demonstrate once more the truth of the Fuller Brush Company's slogan, "45 Brushes—69 Uses—Head to Foot—Cellar to Attic."

If the customer didn't always remember the name of the Fuller representative, it didn't really matter. To her he was "Mr. Fuller." And in fact, sometimes he was Mr. Fuller. Once a country lad off a hardscrabble farm in Nova Scotia, Alfred Carl Fuller applied mass-production manufacturing and dazzling sales techniques to a humble but necessary article and—without patent protection—built a business whose sales worldwide rose to more than \$100 million a year. The company he started is eighty years old this year.

Fuller was born in the apple belt of the Annapolis valley, Nova Scotia, on January 13, 1885. He got his formal education in a one-room schoolhouse, his vocational training on a family farm, and his religious instruction from a devout Methodist mother who had a Scriptural verse ready for life's every moral crisis.

The Fuller house was always full. "There were twelve of us," Alfred Fuller recalled, "rather too many for the farm." He was number eleven, a gangling youth with no clear prospects, expected to fend for himself when he became eighteen years old. Several brothers and sisters had already shown one way to escape from the ox-team culture of the Annapolis valley into the modern world of the States. They took the "down" train from Berwick to Yarmouth, the night boat to Boston, and the Boston Elevated cars to Somerville. There Alfred's siblings had settled and there, in January 1903, his sister Annie and her husband, Frank Adler, provided board and room for eighteen-year-old Alfred. His capital at the time was seventy-five dollars, and he had no job and no discernible skills.

In Somerville the Fullers had shown a modest degree of upward mobility. One brother, Robert, operated a small express business. One was on the police force. Another made and peddled household brushes in a small way before he contracted tuberculosis and died. Still another was a trolley conductor. Alfred, also, got a job as a trolley conductor but soon lost it. He tried being a gardener and groom but was fired again. Robert gave him a job driving an express wagon. That didn't work out either.

But he liked brushes. Applying to the little brushmaking shop where his late brother, Dwight, had been salesman, Alfred was handed a case containing twenty-five assorted samples. His employer wished him luck. Heading for a middle-class section of Roxbury, young Fuller, still very much a "country bumpkin," as he said, learned the exhilarating fact that he could sell brushes even though he spoke with an accent, saying oot and aboot instead of out and about. The crucial moment, young Fuller learned, was the demonstration. The sale was made when he showed the housewife what the brush could do for her.

"I washed babies with a back brush, swept stairs, cleaned radiators and milk bottles, dusted floors—anything that would prove the worth of what I had to sell," Fuller said. In return, grateful customers gave him ideas for new and better brushes, which, he noted, could "be made in fifteen minutes out of a few cents' worth of materials" and sold for fifty cents. Mulling it all over he calculated that he could sell from samples for future delivery, manufacturing only what he had already sold. No capital was needed. At twenty-one Alfred Carl Fuller decided on a career in brushes.

On New Year's Day, 1906, Fuller knocked together a workbench in his sister Annie's basement, mounted a small hand-operated wire-twisting machine and spools to hold various gauges of wire, opened his bundles of horsehair, fiber, and hog bristles, and went to work. With a fresh supply of homemade samples packed into a fiber suitcase, Fuller headed for Roxbury. "Mrs. Angeli," he said on his first call, "I now have that special brush you asked for—the sweeper with protected ends that can't damage woodwork. I made it in my shop just for you." Fuller had found his *métier*. Despite his Canadian inflections, despite his lack of a "line" or perhaps because of it, Fuller made a clear profit of \$42.15 his first week out.

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A few years later, Fuller moved to Hartford, Connecticut, a city with both spiritual and material attractions for him. Fuller's first wire-twisting machine had been built at Hartford; the great Fuller family Bible that reposed on the center table in the Fuller parlor back home at Grand Pré had been printed in Hartford, which made it for the virtuous youth a heavenly city built upon a hill; and he had noticed on an earlier visit that the insurance capital had long avenues of big, old Victorian residences, filled with dust-catching grillwork, wood paneling, dados, moldings, stair banisters, steam radiators, and spacious but unsanitary kitchens—all in urgent need of the elemental tools of cleanliness. Prosperous but dusty Hartford was a brush man's dream.

Fuller thumbed the Scriptures and concluded that something greater than himself had led him to Hartford: “Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken,” his Bible told him, “neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah. . . .”

Though Alfred Fuller was never called Hephzibah, he did become affectionately known as “Dad” throughout his company as it leaped forward, expanding year after year under Fuller’s exhilarating guidance, incorporating in 1913, always employing the latest automatic machinery, the newest sales ideas. Fuller was indeed a father figure to the thousands of salesmen whom he inspired with confidence in what an ordinary man could accomplish—working on straight commission. There was nothing new about brushes. Anybody could make them. And there was nothing new about peddlers ringing doorbells. But how to get inside the house: that was Alfred Fuller’s contribution to the art of legal entry. Fuller’s idea was that one man, ringing a certain number of doorbells each day, would, by a precise mathematical average, sell a certain number of brushes and other Fuller items to a certain number of housewives, provided he learned how to put on a demonstration properly and diligently worked the two to six thousand families composing his exclusive territory. In theory each family was able to absorb about \$120 worth of brushes, waxes, polishes, and cleaners a year.

In 1908, with the handsome sum of two thousand dollars in the bank, Alfred Fuller had proposed marriage to Evelyn Ells, an eligible Nova Scotian girl he had spotted earlier behind the glove counter at Jordan Marsh Co., the Boston department store. They were married on April 10. There was no time for a honeymoon. Evelyn proved to be a substantial addition to the business as stabilizer, adviser, and star salesperson. But she had no friends in Hartford, and a husband who loved her mostly in absentia. Two sons were born to the marriage, Howard in 1913 and Avarad in 1916. To the father, whose own existence merged completely into the life of the company, the outlines of an industrial dynasty were apparent. But under the pressure of developing the business, Alfred forgot the admonition that his mother had pointed out in the Book of Proverbs—to “rejoice in the wife of thy youth.” The Fullers were divorced in 1930.

In 1932 Alfred Fuller married again, more happily. His bride was another Nova Scotian, Mary Primrose Pelton, daughter of a judge in Yarmouth. The second Mrs. Fuller widened her husband’s horizons, bringing new relaxations and pleasures, charitable interests in the fields of music and education, and a congenial companionship that lasted for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile the Fuller way of doing business developed as a beautifully clean, cash operation, extending no credit, requiring no infusions of outside capital. The Fuller Brush Man paid for his sample kit, advanced the money for his first order, even paid for the free Handy Brush he gave away. When he delivered the order, he collected the amount of the bill and sent the proceeds to Hartford, less his commission (50 percent in the early days, later scaled down as the company provided more training and supervision, branch warehousing, and other backup services). Recruiting good men was the hardest part, carried on in a rather haphazard fashion until 1909 when Fuller inserted an “Agents Wanted” classified advertisement in Everybody’s Magazine, a popular national periodical. The cost of the ad was ten dollars, and the mail poured in. Within a month, Fuller recalled, “We had two hundred and sixty dealers and a nationwide business. . . .”

Successful Fuller canvassers came from practically everywhere. One of the greatest in company annals was Albert E. Teetsel, a former factory foreman from Poughkeepsie, New York. Bursting with energy and team spirit, he had dark, curly hair and was built like a wrestler, with a broad, goldtoothed smile and a booming laugh. As district manager for metropolitan New York, he organized a Fine and Dandy Club, which earned him the title “Fine and Dandy Al.” The club motto, long before the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale produced his popular variant of it, was “Positive always.”(Incidentally, Peale, too, once lugged a Fuller sample case.)

Another big success was a man who drove a laundry wagon in Lowell, Massachusetts. Cheerful, aggressive, he took a chance on delivering brushes instead of shirts and sheets. In three years he was a

district manager with a paycheck running into five figures. And there was a brakeman, and a meat cutter. One man signed on because he needed lots of fresh air. Others were former clerks, ministers, teachers, bricklayers, insurance agents, musicians.

The most commonly heard complaints were the long hours, the six miles a day each man was expected to walk, and the strange dogs they met along the way.

The Fuller technique with dogs deserves mention. It once drew a respectful inquiry for details from the United States Post Office Department in Washington. A Fuller Brush Man was taught never to run from a dog—that only encourages it. And he never kicked one, either, for if the pet's mistress was peeking from behind the curtains, the peddler was as good as dead anyway. The trick was to be firm, and brisk, and to try to look like a friend of the family while keeping the sample case between your legs and the beast's teeth. It also helped to be philosophical about it: every salesman expected to get bitten about once every four years.

Possibly no company in the direct selling industry ever received more free advertising than the Fuller Brush Company. The adventures of its intrepid representatives somehow caught the public fancy. Celebrities were tracked down and sold their quota of brushes, and the fact did not go unheralded. Among them was the original John D. Rockefeller at his estate in Pocantico Hills in New York's Westchester County. The old billionaire was good for forty-two dollars' worth of Fuller's goods, while not far away, at Hyde Park in Dutchess County, a brush salesman once persuaded the Secret Service and the household staff of the President of the United States to admit him and sold Franklin D. Roosevelt a thirteen-dollar set of matched brushes. When Alfred Fuller was summoned to the Truman White House to discuss production of brushes for cleaning guns during the Korean War, a cartoonist drew a picture of the Fuller Brush Man with one foot in the door of the White House. Actually, Fuller said afterward, the housekeeper at the White House had been a good customer for years. The Lyndon Johnsons, both before and after they occupied 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, laid in supplies of Fuller merchandise regularly. A secretary paid for them—in cash, of course.

Much valuable publicity was generated by the entertainment industry. In 1948 the comedian Red Skelton starred in a motion picture released by Columbia Pictures called *The Fuller Brush Man*. Skelton rehearsed for the part by taking out a sample kit of brushes and making some calls. He sold to three out of the ten housewives he called on. The film opened in Hartford, Connecticut, home of the Fuller Brush Company, and was dedicated to "those unsung heroes with the flashing smiles and flat feet."

Mutt and Jeff, Mickey Mouse, and Donald Duck have all been depicted as Fuller salesmen. Fuller Brushes figured also in the domestic adventures of that most famous of comic-strip married couples, Blondie and Dagwood; and the Big Bad Wolf in Walt Disney's *Three Little Pigs* concealed his sinister purposes under the guise of being a Fuller canvasser. Fuller gags and anecdotes served the Fuller Brush Company's purposes, much as affectionate jokes about the Tin Lizzie reflected the friendly rapport between the public and the Model T Ford.

The lady of the house often had her order ready, and of course the brush man was invited in.

The Fuller Company understood early the importance of motivation. Much emphasis was placed on semiformal dances, which brought wives into the Fuller circle. There were service pins and awards, salutes to old-timers, recognition of anniversaries, marriages, and births, and once a year the headquarters employees honored "Dad" Fuller with a gala chicken and spaghetti dinner.

"We do not seem to have gone in much for genius," Dad Fuller once remarked. Everybody at the Fuller Brush Company was just average human material, according to its head, including himself. But Fuller managed to impart a sense of evangelistic "calling" to commercial objectives with stunning success.

There were inevitably a good many Fuller tales of the farmer's daughter-traveling salesman variety. There may have been some truth to them, but probably not very much. The brush man had little time for dalliance. Fuller told one story out of his own experience. He was putting on a "dem" for a red-haired woman. As he delivered his pitch, he became aware of the fact that she was more interested in him than in his samples.

"Do not lead me into temptation," she said coyly.

"I replied, 'Madam, I am not leading you into temptation, but delivering you from evil.'

She laughed and bought three brushes."

Dropouts always exceeded by a wide margin the cadre of real pros in the brush game. Some couldn't maintain the psychological "high" necessary in cold-canvass work; others lacked the necessary self-discipline to face rebuffs, but company-sponsored self-help publications helped maintain morale. Reading *The Brush-Off*, Fuller's house magazine, a dealer could learn how ordinary fellows had advanced in the world, thanks to Fuller's fine products and policies—like the enthusiast who pointed out the vast opportunity that lay ahead for Fullerizing Texas, a huge, virgin territory, practically floating on oil; the teacher of romance languages with a master's degree from Columbia University, who got tired of living in penury and now, through his association with the Fuller Brush Company, no longer had to think twice before buying a good cigar.

After the brush company went national, legal problems developed with cities and towns that had passed ordinances directed against door-to-door selling. The purpose of these ordinances was to placate local merchants and to protect unwary citizens against charlatans who sold "flash" linoleum, lightning rods, or fake Irish lace. In a well-known case, the town of Green River, Wyoming, (pop. 3,187) passed a stiff regulation that in effect outlawed all door-to-door selling by requiring that the peddler be invited to enter the customer's house. Strictly speaking, the Fuller representative was not an employee of the Fuller Brush Company, and the Fuller lawyers were always happy to point out to those who tried to invoke police and licensing powers against brush salesmen that the company was a national manufacturing concern engaged in interstate commerce. The man who rang the doorbell was not the unknown emissary of some "foreign" corporation but a local, independent businessman serving an exclusive territory, assuming the risks and problems of his own business, bringing to the customer specialized housewares that she could not buy from any sedentary retailer. The designation of its representatives as "dealers" also relieved the company of such obligations as Social Security taxes and unemployment and workmen's compensation.

In the Green River case, the local police arrested a Fuller Brush Man, and he was fined. The company brought suit under the "due process" clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and won a verdict in the lower court but lost at the appellate level. John W. Davis, the distinguished corporation lawyer and onetime Democratic presidential nominee, took the case to the Supreme Court. But the Court declined to review, so the ordinance stood sustained. How, then, was a Fuller Brush Man going to get invited to enter a house? With typical Fuller resourcefulness, the peddler was instructed simply to slip a sales brochure under the door promising that he would be back soon with a gift. This worked so well that it was made standard practice throughout the country. And in 1956, when the Fuller line was expanded to include aerosols, detergents, vitamins, cosmetics, and chemicals, more items than any man could possibly demonstrate, the brochure became a catalog, called somewhat extravagantly *Fuller Brush Magazine*, containing editorial reading matter surrounded by Fuller advertisements. The lady of the house often had her order picked out before the brush man arrived, and of course he was invited in.

It seemed at times that the Fuller Brush Company would be destroyed by success as it tried to surmount the great imperatives of modern mass merchandising—production, real estate, and factory space, sales policies and cost accounting. Leaping sales figures tell the story: 1910, \$30,000; 1916, \$86,649; 1917, \$250,000-plus; 1918, \$700,000; 1919, \$1,000,000; and on to \$15,000,000 in 1923; and by 1946, \$41,000,000 in brushes and mops alone.

World War II brought a temporary hiatus in the profits pattern, when raw materials as well as men were in short supply, and during the war Alfred C. Fuller retired, though he remained the revered chairman emeritus until his death on December 4, 1973. His retreat to honorary status was enthusiastically endorsed and assisted by his restless, aggressive elder son, Howard, who piloted airplanes and speedboats, and drove powerful, fast cars. A born salesman and executive, Howard often locked horns with his father over the need for a broad reappraisal of Fuller Brush Company policies and procedures. "We were close," the father wrote in a curiously revealing passage, "but in an antagonistic way."

In 1943 Howard became president, "picked up the leadership and ran with it," as his father noted, bringing his brother, Avar, in to head the engineering department, strengthening the central management, and introducing innovative sales methods such as emphasizing short demonstrations and smaller sales but more of them.

The new methods worked. Under Howard Fuller's leadership, gross sales reached \$109,000,000 in 1960. But by that time the leader was gone. On a 1959 business trip, accompanied by his wife, Dora, Howard was hitting 120 miles per hour in Nevada when his Mercedes-Benz 300SL blew a tire. Both Fullers were killed.

Avar E. Fuller succeeded to the presidency to find a new threat in a changing world - "Avon calling." Avon Products, Inc., a perfume and cosmetics company dating back to 1886, moved ahead spectacularly in the 1960s, keeping step with profound sociological changes. Avon advertised heavily and used independent contractors, most of them women who worked part-time. The strategy fitted the need for two incomes to support the family, and the massive entry of women into the country's economic life. Between 1953 and 1967, Avon sales soared by more than 900 percent, while Fuller gained a stodgy 47 percent. Briefly, just after World War II, Fuller had experimented with women dealers, called "Fullerettes." The plan didn't work. The salesmen were resentful, and Fuller returned to its traditional reliance upon professional salesmen, full time, men only.

"In the thirties, Fuller's was the better strategy," Forbes magazine noted, "but the times changed." Fuller kept up its standards. But high employment and high wages lured good men into other fields. "We goofed," Avar Fuller said in retrospect. "The handwriting was on the wall and we should have read it." Avon had an army of one hundred thousand in the field, far more than Fuller. Belatedly, in 1965, Fuller Brush welcomed back the part-time saleswoman, but the shift required the reshaping of recruiting, an overhaul of the commission system and support activities, and higher costs. Much momentum—and money—was lost.

Nonetheless, Fuller Brush endured. Today, thousands of salespeople still fan out over their appointed territories. Seventy-five percent of them are women now, most of whom work part time to supplement the family income, and all of them—male and female—are known by the straightforward title of Fuller Brush representative. The company is today (1986) owned by the Sara Lee Corporation, which bought it in 1968; no member of the founding Fuller family is any longer involved in the operation.

An unexpected ring of the doorbell is unlikely these days: a housewife would be reluctant to welcome in a stranger. Now a representative's visit is usually preceded by a telephone call, setting up the time at which he or she will come around with the catalog and gift. The product line has expanded far beyond Alfred Fuller's twist of wire and tuft of bristles, but it is still for the most part only available through Fuller representatives. There is Fuller cutlery, Fuller door locks, Fuller kitchen utensils (they prefer to call them "time and work savers"), as well as the cleaning products and toiletries they've been selling for years. Some of the original line is no longer in much demand. There aren't many calls for brushes to scour out the chimneys of kerosene lamps any more. And hardly anyone is looking for a brush to clean a derby.

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