

Our Changing Economy

Business of Religion May Get 'Hard Sell'

By Philip Stoddard Brown

IN last spring's issue of Business Horizons there was an article entitled "A Marketing Analysis of Religion" by James W. Culliton, with the subtitle "Can businesslike methods improve the 'sales' of religion?" Culliton is Dean of the College of Commerce of the University of Notre Dame. Business Horizons is a publication of the School of Business of Indiana University.

The theme of this article is "Religion is being very poorly sold. The 'market penetration' of all brands is low . . . Despite the fact that it has been on the market much longer, its percentage of market potential is substantially below that for television sets . . ."

Culliton speaks of the "rather confused brand situation" in religion, but does not dwell on this. Instead, he focuses on the need for a broad marketing analysis or "audit" of religion.

Marketing is a subject that doesn't interest me much, so after the initial surprise this article afforded, I gave it no further thought. Recently, however, I began reading the usual Saturday listing of sermons offered by the local distributors of what Dean Culliton calls "the dominant brands of religion." The subjects have a provocative ring and occasionally sound a catchy off-beat. Then I became aware of many exciting promotions in the Washington area.

Light From Louisville

Last week, for example, the Laymen's Conference on Christian Living, held in Alexandria, billed a speaker who predicted the first, second and third Kentucky Derby winners, another speaker who was unhappy with a million dollars and another who can prove that God made the atom. For good measure, a member of the President's Cabinet was also put on the bill.

As author of "Our Changing Economy," I realized I owed readers a report on merchandising developments in the field of religion, so I turned back to the spring issue of Business Horizons.

Dean Culliton has a lot to say about the four P's (product, price, place and promotion) and how, by offering the right "marketing mix," good management can sell religion as it has never been sold before. If it's priced right and if a businessman doesn't have to choose between business success and eternal happiness, "but can literally have all this and heaven too," the product is one of the most fantastically attractive ever conceived." But the product needs a lot of redesigning, he says.

"Religious product designers and promoters," Culliton says, get themselves into an "egocentric predicament" (an expression he borrows from Malcolm McNair, Professor of Marketing at the Harvard Business School). They continue to design their product as they think it ought to be—"as if they were God himself, rather than servants of man." The product designers of religion are just as stubborn, he says, as Henry Ford was when in the face of consumer resistance he went right on offering Model T's in any color as long as it was black.

Motivational Studies

After "religion's products" are redesigned satisfactorily, the right promotional techniques must be used. Here too Culliton is severe in his criticism: "Promotion has been terrible" . . . It's inefficient to center the promotional effort of religion on "those who are already customers" . . . Missionary work should be redirected "with an understanding of the potential customers' wants and motivations."

Preaching, he says, was the most-effective type of promotion in the days when most people were illiterate. Today, "preachers are not only voices crying in the wilderness (without a PA system) but their messages are frequently anachronous."

Culliton advocates more primary, and less secondary, selling—but not, paradoxically, the go-to-church campaigns donated by the advertising industry. Cooperative industrial promotion is usually weak, he says. "The vigorous industries are those made up of competitors who brag that they can take care of themselves. They try to sell more of their brand . . . rather than by putting money in the pot for someone else to spend."

It disturbs me to report that the advertising industry will be moving in on religion in a really big way, if Dean Culliton's advice is heeded. It disturbs me that the "religious product" is going to be redesigned, repackaged, re-priced and resold in a different marketing mix to satisfy the changing tastes of the Free Consumer. (These new cereals with all their gimmicks are not for me; I'm a shredded-wheat man.)

Cal Would Be Upset

Even Calvin Coolidge, I think, would be disturbed. Coolidge believed "the business of America is business." At the same time, he was an individualist and believed that a man had the right to belong to the political party of his forebears, and the right to choose the church to which his parents first took him as a child.

Now, with television in the nursery and all the new techniques of "hard sell" and "soft sell" about to be mobilized by the "industry of religion," how will our children be sure they are exercising free will when they choose one of the nationally advertised brands of religion? Maybe, with all the "product redesigning," added to the "brand confusion" that already exists, it won't matter . . . After all, one soap is just about as good as another these days.



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