

COMMERCIAL RESEARCH AS A CAREER

Extracts from a Chapter by Charles Coolidge Parlin
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A commercial research man, to succeed in a magazine publishing house, must be a student, a traveler and a salesman. He must have a real desire to know and a willingness to work long hours earnestly and patiently that he may obtain the facts. He must be willing to meet the truth face to face wherever he may find it. More than that, he must earnestly seek the truth and not be satisfied until he finds it. He must be courageous enough to think for himself and to attain convictions based on the eternal verity of things, quite independently of the exigencies of the moment.

He must be a traveler by instinct as well as by occupation. He must be willing to endure the hardship of incessant travel. Probably more commercial research projects have been wrecked by lack of travel than in any other way. In a recent address to a group of manufacturers, I stated:

"A research man who spends much time at his desk comes to think that markets are made up of statistics. As a matter of fact, markets are made up of folks. Statistics are cold, uninspiring, usually discouraging. Folks are live, they have hope and ambition.

"In a time of depression, statistics show that the world is headed for the bow-bows, and a projection of the curve leads quickly to the nether regions. Yet out in the field conditions are not half so bad as statistics indicate. Folks are still alive. They work, they eat, they play, they

grumble a bit, they sigh for better days - but they are not dead - they do not intend to die right away. Ambition continues to assert itself; courage struggles to come back; the promise of better times is somewhere in the hearts of men. Markets are there for the man who studies folks and their wants and, through study of folks, learn how to advertise his products to win the favor of live people.

"But when the research man has covered the country in a market study, may he not then for an indefinite period shuffle cards and plot curves? Not if he is to do for his employers what he should do. As soon as he can put his conclusions into effective shape, once more he should get away from statistics and into the world of live people. For the past twenty years I have personally traveled an average of not far from 1,000 miles per week - a total of approximately 1,000,000 miles in twenty years. Accumulating statistics? Oh, yes, plenty of them, if statistics are what you wish, but tempered, I hope, by sufficient sense of humor to recognize that statistics should be the servants and not the masters of man."

In the third place, a research man must be a salesman. Theoretically, his task is to produce ammunition which other more courageous souls are to use. Two things are wrong with this theory: First, no salesman will understand the research man's material so well as the research man himself. Secondly, the research man is in an organization of salesmen. Just as in the law office to rank well one needs to be an attorney, and in a hospital one needs to be a surgeon, so in a sales organization to command respect, one needs to be a salesman.

The research man produces a piece of work. "Is it any good?" queries the salesman. "Take me out to one of your accounts and let me try it," says the research man. After the research man has demonstrated that he can use the material effectively, no salesman will acknowledge himself

unable to use it. The research man must be able, when he has produced a piece of work, to sell it to his own organization; and, to do this, he will at times need to demonstrate that he can use it effectively with a client.

At times it will become necessary to present research material to groups - to a board of directors, to a sales convention, or perhaps to a public assembly. If the research man cannot do this well, he is out of luck. Hence, in addition to being a student, a traveler and a salesman, it is desirable that a commercial research man be an effective public speaker.

The problem in finding a research man is in the combination of rather diverse talents. To find a student or a salesman is not difficult. To find a salesman who prefers student grind to the thrill of selling is not easy. Have you ability in selling and in public speaking, and yet would you forego the thrill of the sale for the thrill of patiently seeking the truth? Have you a bump for accuracy, an unflinching honesty of purpose, and the courage to declare an unwelcome truth when you have found it? If so, you have the requisites for a research man.

Twenty years ago I coined the phrase "commercial research" and started the commercial research occupation in an empty office with half-time of one stenographer. Early in the summer of 1931 The Curtis Publishing Company had on the pay roll of Commercial Research not far from 100 workers in the office and about 90 men and women in the field. A peak load, to be sure, but indicative of the fact that commercial research in hard times as well as in good times performs an essential function in the magazine publishing business.

In seeking employment in commercial research, one other fact needs to be borne in mind - namely, that the research man or woman, to be successful, needs whole-hearted support from the organization for which he or she works. Perhaps I can best express the reason for this in words which I

recently used in addressing a group of manufacturers:

"Commercial research is pioneering, and like all pioneering work, is lonesome. Just as a Spanish pioneer pushed through a jungle of trees in search of a fountain of eternal youth, so must the commercial research man push through a jungle of conflicting opinions in search of the elusive truth. In the wilderness of ideas he must think for himself. At such a time it is helpful to believe that others have faith in him."