

THE WISDOM OF DAVE WEINER



Dave Weiner (right), with InSinkErator's former Senior VP of Sales & Marketing Bob Cox, who literally put Dave in business with the SE account in 1961.

Half a century of marketing plumbing products can teach us a lot.

>> By Jim Olszynski

Many of you who read this need no introduction to Dave Weiner. You know him because he's been around the industry for more than a half-century providing advertising and marketing services for InSinkErator and various other plumbing manufacturers.

Perhaps you know him from his role heading up the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Information Bureau (PHCIB) for some 20 years prior to its demise as the industry's promotional arm in 2001.

Maybe you remember him as the jovial MC at countless industry roundtables and social functions, or as one of the narrators (along with this reporter) of "Arteries of Civilization," a program about plumbing history on the History Channel's "Modern Marvels" series.

You may recall Dave Weiner as co-author with wholesaler John McDonald III of "The Wholesaler Showroom Handbook" that was published by ASA in 1995. Or maybe you've even read one or more of the four non-business books he has authored trying to figure out how an organ as remarkable as the human brain leads to so much mystifying behavior.

Then again, maybe Dave stands out in your memory because you were startled by one of the salacious remarks that he periodically cuts loose with in polite company in order to unravel the uptight. If you've gotten close to him, you

may have attended one of his late-night sessions at a boozey Chicago piano bar where the itinerant musician kept himself and crowds amused for many years. (And where his business made a breakthrough after Dave helped up a retailer's marketing executive who had fallen from a bar stool, who then asked him, "Do you do packaging design?")

None of this has much to do with why I decided to interview Dave Weiner for this article. Nor does the fact that I've known him almost from the day I started my industry career 32 years ago.

No, the main reason I'm doing this is because Dave Weiner is so well known as a raconteur and personality, it tends to obscure the fact that he is one of the most brilliant marketing professionals ever to figure out what makes our industry and its various segments tick.

Dave's been at it for more than 50 years. He began as a young public relations agent recruited to handle the account of an obscure young kitchen disposer manufacturer named InSinkErator. He became a protégé of that company's legendary sales and marketing vice president Bob Cox, and the two of them teamed up to produce a series of promotions that over time led the company to the top rung of its market. (Weiner's company currently handles InSinkErator's commercial business, though not the residential side.)

Along the way, Dave and his Chicago-based marketing services company, Marketing Support Inc. (MSI), have acquired numerous other plumbing and

WEINER

HVAC accounts, including Lake Chemical (La-Co), which they've represented for almost 40 years. Today MSI also handles advertising and/or public relations for White-Rodgers (35 years), Elkay, Fluidmaster, Pentair, Steamist and Lachimar as well as in-store programs for American Standard bath fixtures. "We've lost some, too," Dave humbly reminded me.

Plumbing industry accounts now represent a small portion of MSI's business, which in 2015 was recognized by Ad Week magazine as one of the nation's top 100 ad agencies. MSI generates about \$95 million in annual revenues from a client base that includes retailing giants Home Depot and Wal-Mart, and a relatively new but fast-growing packaging design segment. Along the way Weiner's professional reputation has spread beyond our industry. A few weeks before we met for this interview, Dave had addressed the In-Store Marketing Institute, a professional marketing group, on the subject of aging brands that are no longer meaningful to today's Gen Yers. Although the glamour side of his business resides elsewhere, the plumbing industry remains a labor of love with him.

"I think you get one industry in your life where you feel comfortable," he told me. "I go to an ASA cocktail party and it feels like home. MSI represents clients who make things like garage door openers and hair conditioners, and we do well by them, but on the professional sides of their businesses I don't know who the main dealers and distributors are like I do with plumbing."

Late last year we reported InSinkErator hosted a surprise party celebrating Weiner's 50 years of association with the company. I decided this occasion warrants a more detailed story. Going in I'd envisioned coming away with a question-and-answer article. But the Q & A format doesn't work well because a conversation with Dave Weiner meanders through stream-of-consciousness pathways where subjects get addressed thoroughly but in a nonlinear way. So from here on I'll get out of the way and let Dave tell the rest of the story in his own words on selected topics:

EARLY DAYS WITH INSINKERATOR

When I first started, the entire kitchen disposer industry sold something like only 500,000 units. Many cities had ordinances prohibiting disposers, and to pioneer the market we were actively trying to reverse that.

Bob Cox had a philosophy of "always keep the pot boiling." Even during a recession he wanted to keep finding ways to market the product and keep it in front of people. We were not a big company back then, so we took advantage of every low-cost opportunity we could find.

Back in those days you could get movie stars to pose for a picture with your product simply by giving them a free disposer, so we ended up with promotions featuring big stars of the day like Bob Hope, Phyllis Diller and Doris Day. It cost us around \$100 to give away a disposer on the old TV program, "Queen for a Day," and we had paid commercials on the "Today" show back when Barbara Walters was hosting it.

One key turnaround was when a big builder in Southern California was offered mortgage incentives and started putting in disposers. This industry for many years started marketing new products on the West Coast, then if it caught on it moved down through the Gulf Coast, then up the East Coast and finally to the Midwest.

INSINKERATOR'S RISE TO PROMINENCE

Back then we were fifth or sixth in market share behind players like Waste King, GE, Westinghouse, National and Bus Boy. Once we got the market

The little old ladies from Dubuque are running for your business.

(Yes, folks, it's another election.)
Our little old ladies are McDonald as well. And they want you... so bad that they are making a major campaign to get your business.
Let's take a look at the record. Our little old ladies have never jumped their hearts out since 1858. They've done everything asked of them. They never get depressed.

They've never missed a vote yet. They never miss one. Our little old ladies... the job, the multi-votes, the endorsements, all of them are ready to serve. So your heart just knows they're true.

AN MCDONALD MFG. CO.
P.O. Box 108, Dubuque, Iowa
Or write our address request.

Award-winning ad for the A.Y. McDonald Mfg. Co. that ran in trade magazines in 1968.

going, then we tried to widen InSinkErator's share of the market.

Dorothy Sharpe (retired executive director of the Illinois PHCC) called on us to support the PHCC Women's Auxiliary in 1963 when she was Auxiliary president. Bob (Cox) agreed and ISE started sponsoring an annual convention luncheon, and soon after in conjunction with the Auxiliary, a number of industry scholarship and public service awards programs. He never put any pressure on them, but the plumbers' wives began telling their husbands to support InSinkErator, and they listened.

What we were doing was a form of viral marketing, although we didn't use the term back then, but it certainly worked. Plumbing contractors began forcing the distribution of InSinkErator. Wholesalers who wouldn't carry the line now carried it. We did some TV advertising for a year for consumer pull through, but it didn't do as well as the trade push leverage created by the PHCC Ladies' Auxiliary. (Editor's note: An InSinkErator-sponsored luncheon and awards program remains a mainstay of the annual PHCC-NA convention.)

Also, each competitor made mistakes. GE and Westinghouse started selling appliance dealers, which we knew was a mistake. We felt plumbing contractors were the key, because of the codes and installation involved, among other factors. National and Bus Boy also went that route. Then Waste King's founder died and the people who succeeded him didn't have the same knack. InSinkErator also had direct salesmen calling on contractors and builders.



Weiner with former ASA President John McDonald III.

They had a blue collar bent and were skilled in developing relationships. This was another key.

InSinkEerator was not in a hurry to grow too fast. They wanted to remain within their capital base. Bob Cox had a remarkable instinct for the market. Month after month he would forecast sales and never be off by more than a fraction of a percent, so the company's expenses were always in line. Then when it was acquired by Emerson, InSinkEerator got pushed to a new level of sophisticated forecasting, but they still asked Bob for his numbers on the side.

PLUMBING INDUSTRY'S COMPLEXITY

This is one of the most complex industries. When we handled our first furniture accounts in the 1980s, we met with a group of top furniture retailers and in four hours they explained the entire industry to me. In the plumbing industry, it takes three to four years to grasp the overall synergy of the business.

That's because it has so many different segments, especially the contractors. There are residential specialists who deal with a number of market segments and have had to adapt to the emergence of the retail market, creating highly effective best practices groups. Then there are new construction or production contractors who are in a business of their own. There are mechanical contractors who specialize in high-rises and health clubs and such; commercial contractors who specialize in gas stations, dry cleaners, industrial plants and various other specialties. Then you have the country plumbers in the "C" and "D" counties, who are different from the suburban contractors, and the big city contractors are in an entirely different world. Even though we handled PHCIB all those years, it's still hard for me to keep up with all the changes on the contractor side, which continues to evolve. Then there is the specification side of the business which is entirely different, extremely complex, and yet related.

With wholesalers, even with all the consolidation, you still find different characteristics in different parts of the country. In many areas of the East

Marketing today is all about identifying your cohorts as tightly as you can.

Coast it is rare to find an outside wholesaler salesman, while in many areas on the West Coast they're still strongly servicing accounts. Today you have some wholesalers specializing in smaller niches, including ethnic customers and apartment maintenance. Then you've got the national chains like Ferguson, HD Supply and Hajoja all doing things differently, including some private label, plus all the buying groups. It gets complicated.

Reps have had cataclysmic changes in that sector of the industry. Fifty years ago their main objective was to write orders and send them in to their principals. Now all that's done by EDI, while the reps are expected to do missionary work and provide support services.

Plus, the plumbing industry has unions active not only in supplying labor but also in the promotional and business end through various councils and industry funds. Where these funds exist, television, radio and other media may be used to proclaim the wisdom of using a union professional, which provides solid exposure for the entire industry. We've been involved with HVAC, electrical and a lot of other industries, and all two-step channels have complexity to some extent, but not like this.

DISTRIBUTOR MARKETING

Distributors used to do a lot more marketing for their vendors than they do now. Early on, we handled A.Y. McDonald Supply, headquartered in Dubuque, IA, and worked on getting contractor market share for their 40-plus branches. For A.Y. McDonald's water systems manufacturing division, we developed a classic ad series for them in 1968 centered around "The Little Old Ladies from Dubuque." That was a lot of fun and won a number of awards. Handling their wholesale division, however, was a great learning experience on the wholesaler's point of view.

The reason wholesalers don't do much specific vendor marketing anymore has to do with the distribution policy of the vendors. Selective distribution is the key for distributors to market and it's rare today. Why should a wholesaler bother to invest a lot of time and money promoting a product without additional incentives, when their customers, finally convinced, can buy it from a competitor, perhaps at a lower price? Distributor marketing today is centered on their own business models. There are still some opportunities for vendors to utilize distributors to gain an edge marketing technical products, particularly to mechanical and commercial contractors, and some customers still buy the salesman. The problem is there are so many segments to follow and understand.

Marketing today is all about identifying your cohorts as tightly as you can. For instance, if you're selling cookware you may be aiming at "hospitality moms" who enjoy entertaining, but depending on your design and pricing, it may be only the high-end of the segment. With marketing budgets tight today, careful segmenting both in the trade and among end-users is essential to get the best ROI on every dollar spent.

WEINER

STAR POWER!

Over the years, Dave Weiner has gotten numerous celebrities to endorse clients' products or take part in promotional events. Shown here (clockwise from top left) are Dave and colleagues with stars

such as Bob Hope, Phyllis Diller, Barbara Walters, former Today Show anchor Lew Wood, Sen. Ted Kennedy (inappropriately, at far right of photo), and a mouse that needs no introduction.



WEINER

Some of the biggest marketing opportunities in the distributor business today center around showrooms. Showrooms have become major industry outlets, primarily because kitchen and bath dealers generally don't do so well with baths even though there has been tremendous growth in mid-market consumer demand for bath remodels during the past 20 years. It's a business primed for plumbing distributors, but it's a separate business, and again, very complex. If you're a rep and calling on showrooms, you need to have a separate person calling on them. The salespeople who do it well know the designers, architects, custom builders and everyone else who are purchasing influences within the trading area.

TRADE ADVERTISING

I'm a strong believer in trade advertising and public relations. This is the best way a plumbing manufacturer can get new products out and show support for the industry. We used to find out that if an advertiser wasn't in the wholesaler magazines, wholesalers would wonder if the vendor was really committed to the channel. You have to keep showing that commitment, particularly to the independents who want to have some pride in your brand and see that you are working to grow it.

With contractors, every survey we've ever done among contractors shows they want to know about something new — not that they always like something new, but they want to know if there's a danger ahead! Many think of new products that way, vs. retail where new products are a lifeblood. Adver-



Weiner, at far left sneaking a smoke, shown here on the set of a TV commercial featuring 1970s TV star Cliff Arquette (white shirt with tie askew), renowned for his folksy "Charlie Weaver" character.

Viral marketing got plumbing contractors to force the distribution of InSinkErator.

tisers have to talk about something new to get their attention. Just tell it like it is and don't be phony.

Many times we have convinced clients they have to be in the trade magazines, even when it meant giving up some of our commission. We make very little off of trade advertising — a sizable segment of our income comes from our bigger retailer-oriented accounts. But if wholesaler salesmen are disappearing and if I'm a manufacturer selling through reps with 15 to 20 lines, they can do only so much. You need trade advertising to get the message out to plumbing contractors, particularly about new or improved products or a change in your market positioning.

When times are tough, it's the best time to advertise because you get less clutter in the magazines. Trade magazines will survive because it's the only way to reach this industry's unique cohorts.

CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY

One of the things missing today in the industry are the characters — people like InSinkErator's Bob Cox, Elkay's retired sales and marketing VP Fred Rexford, Just Sink's Dean Lewis, Kohler's Dave Harrison, and many others. They represented the company, and the company used to promote them as spokesmen. When a wholesaler or contractor had a problem, they could call these guys and they would answer the phone. Bob Cox was built up as a father image at InSinkErator, which he was — you can't build up something that's false. It will ultimately collapse.

I first saw this disappearing around 10 years ago, when we were doing some work for a buying group and it turned out at a meeting of about 25 wholesaler members, that nobody knew the VP of sales at a major faucet company, even though they were all handling the line. That's when it dawned on me that many companies were becoming reluctant to build up personalities, probably because they might move on. Now from the trade's point of view, you don't always know who to call with a problem that your rep can't handle. This has been a pretty big change, I think.

FINAL COMMENTS

Is it really necessary to tell people that I'm 76?

Oh, alright, I guess that's okay. Just make sure to mention that I finally hit 100 mph on my tennis serve last year, and I still enjoy jogging, weight lifting, canoeing, skiing, and horseback riding. And when called upon, I can do a mean soft shoe.

Energy doesn't have to diminish with age, as long as you love what you're doing, which I do. I get tremendous satisfaction when our clients find new distribution niches and when they have great sales years with or without our help. And I still love to pitch new business, although in all these years, I have yet to make a cold call. I have left instructions to put that on my tombstone: "He Never Made a Cold Call."