



A Short Career

Mr. Warren Buffet - for obvious reasons - gets his name in the news fairly frequently, and I read a piece the other day which described how he got his start in business. It mentioned that even as a very young child he was interested in commercial activities, doing such things as selling magazine subscriptions door-to-door in his neighbourhood.

When I read that I couldn't help but smile to myself, "Well, look at that. He and I got started in quite a similar way!" Let's put aside for the moment the question of how (and why!) our paths diverged, and re-visit that experience ...

Like every kid in the neighbourhood, my brother and I were voracious comics readers. We would read them cover to cover, trade them around with our friends, trade them back, and read them again and again. This wasn't great literature of course, but from my mother's point of view, having a gang of boys quiet for an hour or so with their noses buried in *anything* was not to be discouraged, so she gave us a bit of pocket money now and then so that we could buy a few more to add to our collection.

Comics in those days had advertising sections at the back, and at one point something I read there caught my attention - one of those "Boys, you can earn good pocket money!" kind of ads. Perhaps with the help of my mother, I don't remember, I replied to the ad and received their package of information. The proposal was simple; I was to go door to door in my own neighbourhood, and take orders for packets of adhesive return address labels printed with the customer's name and address. The customers would pay me the retail price (maybe this was around \$2?), and I would collect a batch of orders and send them to the company along with payment at the wholesale price (\$1.50?). I would keep the .50 as profit, and in due course each customer would receive their packet of labels in the post, shipped directly to them by the printing company. What could go wrong?

Well, actually nothing did go wrong. I got up the courage to head out and start knocking on doors, and returned home some time later with ... an order! I don't remember how many houses I visited, but it was probably only a half-dozen or so; I certainly didn't spend hours and hours going up and down every street in the neighbourhood.

But what happened next demonstrated the difference between myself and Mr. Buffet. He (as far as I can ascertain) kept at it, built up plenty of sales, and then used the money he earned to start up something else. I, on the other hand, lost my taste for it that very first day, and didn't make any further attempts to sell labels. I think that it was simply my basic shyness, along with a true dislike of ringing the doorbells and 'bothering' people. (And even now I myself get very short with people who call here trying to sell me something. I am *never* polite to them, something that unsettles my staff members here when they hear me behave that way.) And the episode didn't end there, but developed into a problem. I guess the printing company had a minimum order system - the young salesmen had to send in at least (was it six?) orders in order to get the wholesale rate. So I procrastinated; the order form and the \$2 from the customer sat there on a chair in our dining room for day ... after day ... after day. I was too shy to return the money to the customer; I was too unwilling to head out and try and get more orders; I was unable to send it to the company because the amount was too small.

All these years later, I have to admit that I don't know how the situation was resolved. Perhaps my mother got tired of seeing it there, and walked down the street to return the money. At least I *hope* that's what happened. But I do have to admit that it is quite possible that it all just got swept aside, and that the customer never did receive their labels.

I wonder how long the statute of limitations is for fraud offences?

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