

An Examination into the Retail Skills of Itinerant Retailers before 1900

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Abstract

This paper examines the retail skills of people who operated prior to 1900 without a fixed retail premises. The majority of research into retailing has focused on the retail outlet, and the traders who operate outside of it are under researched. It has been generally assumed that these traders, who operated on the margins of society have little skill, given their general low levels of education. Investigation of contemporary evidence however has shown that they employed a range of highly developed skills and had a good knowledge of the psychology of their consumer. The range of skills, advertising, selling, and buying are explored and evaluated. The paper ends by examining whether these techniques lead to success. In some cases it can be shown that itinerants who employed good retail skill could be highly successful.

Introduction

This paper examines the retail skills of itinerant sellers trading in England before 1900. Itinerant sellers were seen as the 'poor relations' compared with the more socially acceptable shopkeepers. Alexander (1970) puts forward the proposition that hawking was unskilled and required the input of time and labour for very little returns. Some of these traders were verging on destitution (Benson 1983), but this does not mean that they were devoid of retail skills. It is their poverty that makes the development of retail skills essential in order to survive. Mayhew (Neuburg 1985) who interviewed costermongers revealed that they thought they needed considerable retail skills to achieve high earnings. Wilson-Brooks' (1986) research into Romanies also emphasised the need for good retail skills especially when selling to a hostile 'gorgio' customer. Little research has been carried out into the area of itinerant retailers, and particularly the skills that they possessed.

Terminology

The word itinerant has been used throughout this paper to encompass a range of retailers who operate outside the shop environment. This covers costermongers selling food products in the streets of major cities, hawkers and pedlars with trays or barrows of wares selling in both urban and country areas, the travelling Scotsmen who journeyed from the northern manufacturing areas through the country selling door to door and the travelling merchants who acquired goods from a variety of sources, sometimes overseas, who set up temporary premises in inns around the country. There are a variety of terms that could be used, particularly among local dialects, and hence to provide consistency itinerants has been used except where a specific term is contained within a quote, or source document.

Methodology

In order to explore the skills a number of contemporary commentaries have been used. The problem with all contemporary sources is that it is difficult to assess their validity; they have a tendency to acquire validity with time and frequent reference. The most useful has been the work of Henry Mayhew, an investigative journalist who provided a series of approximately eighty letters for the Morning Chronicle between 1849-1850 and this became the basis of the book, London Labour and London Poor first published in 1851-52 (Neuburg 1985). He has been described as a statistician, social investigator and literary portraitist (Quennell 1967). Although he interviewed the poor it is not clear to what extent he embellished their tales, or was told what he wanted to hear. One of his observers is quoted as saying of him.

He was in his glory at that time. He was largely paid, and, greatest joy of all, had an array of assistant writers, stenographers, and hansom cabmen constantly at his call, London labourers... were brought to the Chronicle office, where they told their tales to Mayhew, who dictated them, with added colour of his own, to the shorthand writer... Augustus (*his brother*) helped him in his vivid descriptions and an authority on political economy controlled his gay statistics. (Neuburg 1985 p.xx).

This statement sheds some doubt on the validity of some of his prose but does substantiate that he did interview the subjects, although how easy it was to get at the truth in an alien office far removed from the streets, might be open to debate. He also interviewed some people in their homes as these were described

in some detail. In parallel with Mayhew's work the Morning Chronicle also commissioned Charles MacKay and Angus Bethune to provide articles in the form of letters from the Northern Industrial towns. These have been collected together with other writings from the Chronicle into seven volumes edited by Ginswick (1983). These articles tended to concentrate on the industrial worker, as opposed to the street worker and there is little mention of itinerant retailing apart from sections on the immigrant Irish that appear frequently, many of whom were involved with this trade. The final contemporary work that offers any insight is provided by Thomson and Smith (1973) in their book, *Street Life of London*, which was first published in 1877/78. This provides a series of vignettes of some of the more colourful London characters. The book makes no attempt to analyse the information merely to describe the characters, many of which were itinerant retailers. The text is supplemented by numerous photographs and sketches, but there is no evidence to suggest how the material was gathered and whether it was an accurate account. It does however seem broadly comparable with Mayhew's work, and adds credibility to both.

Besides the contemporary commentaries there have been a number of studies which impinge on the itinerant trades, although none considers them as a whole. Betty Naggar (1992) has extensively explored the Jewish pedlar in her book, *Jewish Pedlars and Hawkers 1740- 1940*, using mainly Old Bailey Session Papers as a source plus information held within the Jewish community. Francesca Wilson (1962) also touched on the Jewish community in her book, *They came as Strangers*, but broaden it to cover all immigrants, some of whom became itinerant retailers as there were few alternative trades open to them. De Vries (1989) in his book, *From Pedlars to Textile Barons*, also charts the Jewish itinerant retailer but only briefly, he was more concerned with their backward integration through their network of contacts into major manufacturers. The other classes of immigrants settlers that have been researched are the Romany population (Mayall 1981; Okely 1977; Wilson-Brooks 1986). In these instances, itinerant retailing is a by-product of the way of life and the research offers little to the body of knowledge on retailing skills.

In terms of the indigenous population there have been three major authors in the field. Margaret Spufford (1984) studied the seventeenth century chapman in her book *The Recloning of Rural England*. This was an exhaustive piece of research in an attempt to put some flesh on the bones of these itinerant merchant retailers. These itinerants were at the highly respected end of the trade and as her research into their wills shows, were extremely wealthy, but there is little on the retail skills that helped to achieve this. At the other end of the social scale John Benson (1983) has researched what he termed *The Penny Capitalists*, whose who subsidised their income often in times of unemployment by engaging in small retailing activities, usually of an itinerant nature. Geographically he was concerned with the manufacturing areas and particularly mining communities. Also active in these types of communities was yet another type of itinerant, the tallyman or Scotsman, who have been researched by Gerry Rubin (1986) in *From Packmen, Tallymen and Perambulating Scotchmen*, using mainly court cases.

These main sources have been supplement with more general retail texts to give insights into the various retail skills that were employed. The information that was available has been collated and evaluated into three distinct retail skills, advertising, selling and buying.

Advertising

Before 1900, the range of advertising options available to itinerants was limited partly due to technology and partly the literacy skills of their poorer consumer. This does not however diminish its importance and they strove to make the most of the options available. The implications of the low levels of literacy was that advertising had to appeal to the ear, and this view is expounded by one itinerant:

The street seller cries his goods aloud at the head of a barrow; the enterprising tradesman distributes bills at the door of his shop. The one appeals to the ear, the other to the eye (Mayhew 1985 p12).

Most cries which were shouted in the streets were concerned with the product, price and condition, for example, "chestnuts all 'ot, a penny a score" (Mayhew 1985 p.13). These cries were welcomed by the consumer and Mayhew (1985 p.77) details the case of the news vendor who was always was "always glad to hear the baked potato cry", so that he could add a potato to his dinner. The streets of London and other

major cities were full of cries as the itinerant salesmen competed with each other. It was essential therefore that your cry could be heard above others. In cases where a young assistant was employed, the onus was on him or her to announce their arrival in the street. Mayhew's (1985 p166) investigations suggested that the rationale for using a young voice was that it was higher pitched and more likely to echo along the street than the rougher hoarser voice of the main seller. If the sound of the voice was not enough to attract attention then young children were employed to beat a drum (Mayhew 1985 p12), being the most noticeable was essential to secure trade.

In America this was carried a step further with even greater degrees of showmanship including Wild West shows that would amaze and dazzled their audience into submission and purchase (Friedman 1996), and in Italy the sellers of medicines also offered entertainment, to create laughter and an escape from woes, (Gentilcore 1995 p308), in order to attract customers.

Itinerants were quite sophisticated in the ways in which they appealed to their customers, cries could also be varied to suit the potential consumer. One of Mayhew's interviewees revealed the case of a widow about who it was said:

(I) have heard her cry 'mack'rel, eight a shilling, mack'rel!' and at other times, 'Eight a bob fine mack'rel, mack'rel, eight a bob, eight a bob!'. On my inquiring as to the cause of this difference in her cries, the fish seller laughed and said, 'I cries eight a bob when I sees people as I thinks is likely to like the slang; to others I cries eight a shilling, which no doubt is the right way of talking (Mayhew 1985 p160/161).

These examples demonstrate that itinerants understood their customer and how best to use sound to attract them.

Besides sound itinerants also used visual advertising, it was not unusual to attach samples of wares to nearby walls, or a pole that could be transported through the streets (Mayhew 1985). For those who travelled around the country selling their wares it was essential to make customers aware of their presence. In rural areas the itinerants served a more diverse set of people, some of whom had high levels of literacy skills, and this enable other forms of advertising to be used. Jane Austen of *Pride and Prejudice* fame was reported to have purchased some fabric and stockings off a passing trader in 1789 (Adburgham 1964). This was not an isolated incident as in a letter to her sister Cassandra written in October 1798 she writes, "the laceman was here only a few days ago. How fortunate for both of us that he came so soon", how she knew of his arrival is not clear, but he was welcomed.

Those who operated by hiring a room in an inn, which was common, in order to sell goods generally advertised in advance of their arrival, using newspapers and flyers. Mrs Muihead for example visiting Macclesfield in 1812 in the hope of increasing the sales of millinery and dresses (Mitchell 1976) used this method. In 1795 Mr Ell advertised that he would be at the Wolf's Head, in Chester, in order to sell his china recently bought from London (Mitchell 1976). The advertising was designed to suggest that the goods were the latest, as in the previous example of Mr Ell's china, and could be obtained at bargain prices. Having advertised their arrival and attracted the customers the next stage was to sell the goods.

Selling Techniques

As everyone involved the retail industry knows, closing a sale is difficult and a number of techniques were employed to improve the chances of a positive outcome. The first range of techniques discussed relate to price. Itinerants understood the concept of pricing and sold some goods at of below cost in order to attract customers with the hope of then selling high margin goods (Mui and Mui 1989). Perhaps the most interesting selling technique was that of the pie seller whose livelihood depended on the toss of a coin.

If the pieman wins the toss, he receives 1d (*0.01p*) without giving a pie; if he loses, he hands it over for nothing. The pieman himself never 'tosses' but always calls heads or tails to his customer (Mayhew 1985 p96).

The rules of this game gives the customer an even chance of winning, but leave them with the impression that they can manipulate the outcome and hence might get the best of the deal. Given a sufficiently large number of potential customers then the pie seller would not be any worse off using this technique, however

one seller claimed “I’ve taken as much as 2s 6d (*25p*) at tossing, which I shouldn’t have if I hadn’t done so” (Mayhew 1985 p96). Tossing for a pie was considered a favourite pastime among boys and gentlemen, the later using the pie often to throw at their friends. This implies that the technique was successful in generating sales and that it was the contest between pie seller and customer that was more important than the product itself. This desire to win was also used by itinerants who held auctions and lotteries (Mui and Mui 1989), and these techniques are still used sometimes today.

Itinerants generally sold goods at lower prices than their shop-keeping competitors. Evidence of this is provided by numerous petitions tasking for their activities to be curtailed, for example the one from Carmarthen shopkeepers who complained at the prices at which the itinerants sold their products (Mui and Mui 1989). Pricing was a fine balance for itinerant retailers between pricing the goods below those of their rival shopkeepers in order to attract trade but without conveying the impression that the goods were of inferior quality. Various methods were used to account for the low prices whilst ensuring customers that the quality was comparable with other sources. Tales of shipwrecks and fires were commonly used to explain the low prices (Brown and Ward 1990 p9). These tales could be elaborated to entertain the crowds, and increase sales. An alternative suggestion was that the goods had been smuggled or stolen and hence the low price was explained (Benson 1992).

The pedlar had a greater need to secure a sale, since cash flow was everything to the hawker living hand to mouth. An itinerant seller of mats was reported in the *Morning Chronicles* (Ginswick 1983), as saying that there ‘is no regular price for mats. I take what I can get, and if we’re hard up I take very little’; illustrating that the price was flexible, determined by the need of the seller and an assessment of the buyer.

One way then of making goods more accessible was by offering credit and tallymen were specific users of this system. Mayhew (Mayhew 1985 p132) suggests that “what was worth 8s. (*40p*) was 18s. (*90p*) on tally”. The credit system allowed the buyer to obtain the goods initially for a low price, the customer did need to appreciate the true cost of the goods. Fontaine (1996) however suggests that there were a more Machiavellian motive for the tally system, in that it gave the itinerant a reason to continue to call at the house giving further opportunities to sell goods with a small addition to the tally account.

Besides pricing strategies, itinerants who were often desperate to make a sale used persuasive techniques or in the case of tallymen their ‘oily tongue’ (Rubin 1986 p209). Flattery was one of the most obvious techniques, as illustrated in this example by a seller of gowns:

In selling my gown pieces I say that they are such as to suit the complexion and such like and I always use my judgement in saying so. Why shouldn’t I? It’s the same to me what colour I sell.... and I always speak to any smart servant as if I thought she was a mistress, or as if I wasn’t sure whether she was a mistress or the lady’s maid. (Mayhew 1985 p135).

The technique was claimed to be successful and was probably used and adapted by many itinerant sellers. Whilst flattery might help create interest and a sale, the technique could also be used to increase the value of the sale as illustrated by an umbrella seller.

Look here, ma’am, said I, this umbrella is much bigger you see, and will carry double so when you’re coming from church of a wet Sunday evening, a friend can have a share of it, and very grateful he’ll be, as he’s sure to have his best hat on. There’s been many a question put under an umbrella that way that’s made a young lady blush, and take good care of her umbrella when she was married, and had a house of her own. I look sharp after the young and pretty ladies, Miss, and shall as long as I’m a bachelor (Mayhew 1985 p135).

Obtaining a husband was seen as desirable by some in those times (1850) and the deal for often struck for the larger more expensive item.

In order to employ these techniques successfully the seller would need a good knowledge of the psychology of the consumer. This was also highlighted by (Thomson and Smith 1973) in their analysis of photographers on Clapham Common. They postulated that it was not the photographers with the best technique who made a good living but those who had ‘tact and diplomacy’ and were prepared to change their approach to suit the individual. A sound knowledge of the customer psychology is again indicated. Rather than lowering the price, the itinerant could maintain the price and persuade the customer that the

goods were of superior quality and hence better value. Shops at this time did not have a particular good reputation for quality, food adulteration was widespread among fixed and non fixed retailers (Oddy and Miller 1985) and hence this was a viable option. Mayhew (1985 p131) quotes the case of a seller who claimed to have been a manager of Belfast linen company in order to emphasise his knowledge of quality products. The teller of this tale however suggested that the claimant had never been to Belfast and bought the produce at a swag shop, covering the faults with stains, claiming that the goods had been damaged by fire and the stains would wash away leaving perfect quality goods. Others claimed that their goods came from exotic sources such as India and China (Mayhew 1985 p133) when perhaps they had been acquired more locally. Again these techniques are based on the playing on the psychological understanding of the consumer, and their desire for a 'bargain'.

The final technique that could be used to increase sales in a competitive environment was that of location. They located near bridges, steam packet wharfs and in later times railway terminuses (Mayhew 1985 p53), anywhere they would ensure high footfalls. The commentary of Thomson and Smith (1973) illustrates that the choice of location could not only be in terms of area, but the specific location within an area, as with the example of the shell fish sellers,

There's al'ays two sides of a street if it's any good, one's the right side for custom. Don't know 'ow it comes, whether it's the sunny side or what, but its so, and it's so much that it makes all the differ in trade.

This example shows the level of thought that some itinerants gave to making a decision and their ability to evaluate a prime location.

Buying Techniques

Buying the right product was important, the writings of Mayhew (1985) indicate that the itinerants varied their stock to suit the season or the amount of competition on the streets, for example, oranges in March and April, then flowers the rest of the year.

At the heart of making a profit is the ability to buy products at a low price that could be sold as much higher prices and hence increase the profit. Whilst warehouses, wholesale markets and swag shops were the sources of new goods, many of the items bought were second hand, and these were obtained from various sources. Naggar (1992) who interviewed taxi drivers revealed that in exchange for old clothes, jam jars and windmills were given to children. Goldfish or second quality pottery (Mayhew 1985) were given to servants in exchange for their mistresses clothes. Again the psychological element was important, the vendors were attracted to 'desirable' items which had little value but allowed the itinerants to acquire goods at minimal cost.

One servant who certainly appreciated the value of his master's clothes was the Valet de Chambre who tried to sell;

his masters clothes while he was walking with them on his back through the Mall, followed by six Monmouth tradesmen trying to outbid one another Ginsburg 1980) p121.

Presumably if a satisfactory price could not be agreed then the master was allowed to keep his clothes. Itinerants were astute at judging the worth of the items that they purchased. The sellers of second hand clothes were able access more than the age of the garment:

He could not only tell how long the coat had been worn by the feel of it, but in certain cases also tell the lifestyle of the wearer: a worn back denotes a gentleman; a worn left elbow and right arm, an author; worn under the left arm shows a left handed wearer and so on (Naggar 1992 p67).

There is evidence that itinerants tried to avoid paying for goods, or at least minimised their cost. Many cases which came to attention of the courts involved the handling of stolen goods rather than their theft. Jewish peddlers were prevalent in the second hand clothes market, and Naggar's (1992) conclusion was that they did not actively steal the clothes, but they asked few questions about the origins of the goods. They claimed that they had been purchased in a 'Marché overt' the 'general consensus was that no names, addresses or questions were asked about any goods on offer' (Naggar1992). Wilson (1962) also agrees with the view that the Jews were probably receivers of stolen goods, but concludes that they, 'were probably less addicted to crime than their neighbours' being religious and sober men. This view is also

supported by the evidence of the Commission of the Board of Trade on Alien Immigration 1894 it who stated that ‘generally that the evidence shows the amount of crime traceable to this class of immigrants is probably less rather than greater than the normal proportion among the whole population of London’, (Naggar 1992). Davis (1966) adds that, ‘probably many genuine pedlars found contraband a profitable sideline’. This comment could also be levelled against shopkeepers and publicans in those times. Buying groups also existed although these were less formal than the ones in existence today. Thomson and Smith (1973) suggest that it was not unusual for itinerants to club together in small groups to enable them to buy larger and proportionally cheaper lots at auction, that they could then divide among themselves and increase their potential profit.

If itinerants were going to sell at lower prices, but were unable to negotiate a better deal from their suppliers than shopkeepers then this puts pressure on their margins. One solution was to make the stock go further is to sell short measures and reduce wastage. Benson (1983 p107) concurs with new that short measures were common, suggesting it was mainly through the use of faulty weights and measures. The itinerant obviously had to be carefully as measures were frequently checked and if found faulty legal action could follow and confiscation of all stock. Other options were to prick the juice out of oranges (Mayhew 1985 p11) and then sell the juice and orange as two separate products.

In order to reduce the wastage old products, fish for instance, could be sold by candle light or at a distance where the itinerant was unknown, (Mayhew 1985 p11). This deception was unlikely to lead to repeat sales but could produce a quick profit. Even displaying fish on a marble slab could give it a cleaner appearance (Mayhew 1985 p52).

Thompson and Smith (1973) suggest that it was not in the pedlars interest to be involved in trickery and quoted one pedlar as saying;

I find a good honest racket pays the best in the end, people buy and come again. I have had my regular customers for years, and now I make a tidy living both summer and winter.

It is impossible to evaluate the amount of dishonesty among itinerant retailers, but it was probably a small minority. Repeat customer was the basis of success of successful retailing as is the case today.

Evidence of success

The retail skills that have been outlined illustrate the variety that were available. Unfortunately there is no evidence to evaluate how successful these techniques were and to what extent they were employed in general.

There is some evidence that would support the view that some itinerants were very successful, by using the value of their packs, and the value of their estate on death (Spufford 1984). Thomson and Smith (1973) give the example of “ ‘Old Mo’ a pedlars of household goods’ who used to carry £9000 about with him tied up in a sack”. Another sack was used by Richard Dixon of Worthe in Surrey, to hide the capital and the proceeds of his trade (in excess of £840) in order that he could live on parish relief, which he later had to pay back when his crime was discovered (Brown 1996). The Muis (Mui and Mui 1989) highlight the case of two principles from the Society of Travelling Scotchmen of Shrewsbury who ‘claimed to have a capital of £20,000 and upwards in the said trade, and £16,000 of goods sold on credit’. From her research of the Old Bailey Session Papers, Naggar (1992) highlights the case of Mosses Pincas, itinerant trader, who had in his box, as the time of his arrest;

44 watches valued at £50
4 bunches of pearls valued at £20
1 silver snuffbox valued at 12s. (60p)
Silver cup valued at 18s. (90p)
20oz of silver lace valued at £3
Plus some cash.

Throughout her book, she gives examples of many Jewish sellers who had high value items in their

possession. Spufford (1984) also details the value of the stock in the wills of chapmen, showing that many of these were quite wealthy.

Some of the itinerants continued in the trade, some fell by the wayside, whereas others progressed and moved on. The evidence from the autobiography of Thomas Lomas (Brown 1996) charts the progress from itinerant to wholesaler, and an employer other itinerant to sell your wares. De Vries (de Vries 1989) and Fontaine (1996) both give examples of itinerants who backwardly integrated into the wholesale sector and in the case of the former manufacturing as well. Others moved into the retail sector, opening small retail outlets, whilst other eventually owned retail empires. One of the most famous being Michael Marks, an immigrant who started as a pedlar in Northern England and went on to found Marks and Spencer (Rees 1969), one of the most successful retailers on the High Street.

In conclusion there were itinerant retailers who had highly developed retail skills, comparable with retailers of today, which they successfully employed. Of the less successful trader, little is known.

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