



SELLING HOUSES BY MAIL

How Advertising Built A Unique and Romantic Industry from \$200 to \$1,500,000

This is the business romance of a \$1,500,000 industry which nine years ago did not exist.

It was built out of an idea, \$200 capital and the power of advertising. The idea was *selling a house by mail*. Not a temporary or "portable" shack, but a regular house such as you live in—a house that is a home, which represents the pride and happiness of a family for a lifetime.

This company sells the most bulky mail order article in existence, the largest, most important, most critically studied purchase ever made by the average family.

And it does this without salesmen, without retailers, without personal touch of any kind, depending absolutely upon confidence, upon faith in printed advertisements, to persuade a man and wife to go to the bank, and draw out the savings of a lifetime and send them off to an unknown firm in a distant city.

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This industry had its beginning in the winter of 1906-07 on top of a square piano in a little house in Bay City, Michigan. Its first equipment was a bread board and a ruler. With these an imaginative young man—a dreamer, if you will—drew the plan of a boathouse.

He had an idea that it would be cheaper for people who wanted to build, to buy not merely the lumber and materials, but lumber ready cut according to plans, and other materials in proper quantities, all marked and indexed like steel and stone for a sky-scraper, ready to be shipped anywhere and put together by a local contractor.

The young man—his name was W. T. Sovereign—first drew the plan for a boat house. He took it to a mill, and to dealers, and found out how much it would cost to cut the lumber, buy the hardware and make shipment.

His brother, Otto, also a very young man, was in the advertising business. This brother helped him prepare an advertisement, which in the spring of 1907 they inserted as a half page in "Motor Boat" magazine, at a cost of a few dollars.

It talked about boat houses, but at the bottom was this line, placed there on a long chance, "We also sell summer cottages."

The response to this advertisement soon proved that people really would send money by

mail for such a thing. It further proved something of even greater importance. Nine out of ten inquiries were for summer cottages, rather than for a boat house.

Mr. Sovereign at once saw a field far more vast than even he had imagined. He drew designs for a dwelling house and some garages, and issued a catalogue.

That year he sold eight houses of various kinds. In the fall of 1908 he spent \$50 advertising in some local farm papers, and more business came.

At the end of the second year his brother Otto gave up a good job and went to work with him at \$5 a week. A stroke of genius supplied by the new partner was the name "Aladdin Houses"—you say what you want, rub the magic lamp of advertising, and your house springs into being.

On April 5, 1909, the firm became national advertisers, with a half-inch each in Collier's, the Associated Sunday Magazines and The Saturday Evening Post. The "campaign" cost \$93; they sent the money by post office order.

Again the advertising paid, and the following spring larger and more frequent advertisements were carried in several publications—the largest amount being in The Saturday Evening Post.

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The advertising had to be skilful, because it had to break down the idea that this was just another portable house. It was not a portable house. It was a complete house—ready to build, and permanent once it was built. Frame, siding, clapboards, flooring, inside and outside finish, nails, plaster, bricks, hardware, paint, varnish—everything was supplied but the foundation.

The advertising also had to instil in the reader confidence in the firm. People were not going to send the savings of a lifetime cash-in-advance unless they were convinced that they would get their money's worth and a square deal. Every act was carefully planned to inspire confidence. Shipments were made promptly. Money was refunded without question if a customer was dissatisfied. All possible advice and information were given to the purchaser while the house was being erected. The customer was always right. Plans for grading, suggestions for landscape gardening suited to various climates, were given free. Perhaps the most striking feature has been the "dollar-a-knot" guar-

antee—which means that the customer gets a dollar back for every knot which mars any piece of lumber he receives.

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Today that company's houses stand in every part of the world, from Saskatchewan to the Tahiti Islands, in hot and cold climates. There are whole communities built of Aladdin houses. As many as 200 homes have been sold in three months to the same purchasers—large industrial concerns which house their own employes. In the offices 120 girls are employed to handle the correspondence, which has amounted to more than 300,000 pieces of mail in one month.

The company is adding other lines to its catalogue. You can now buy from the same source not only the house, but the plumbing, the heating, the furniture, the interior decoration. The business is growing tremendously. The lumber mills (some of which it owns) are working at top speed, producing forty houses a day, at prices ranging from \$138 to \$8,000 each.

But it has not been easy. It has required courage, faith and a willingness to invest money and wait for results.

More than half of the sales are to people whose inquiries are a year or more old. People do not buy houses in a hurry.

Competition has developed—and has been met with more advertising.

For one advertisement recently—a single insertion—the firm paid \$12,000.

And apropos of the advertising, Mr. Otto Sovereign says this:

"We have never used a single advertisement, of any size from a half-inch up to a two-page spread, that has not been profitable for us."

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Perhaps a part of the answer to the whole story is found in a quotation from Kipling that hangs over the desk of one of the brothers—the first two lines of which are these:

"I didn't begin with askings; I took the job and I stuck

"And I took the chances they wouldn't; an' now they're calling it luck."

THE CURTIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

INDEPENDENCE SQUARE, PHILADELPHIA

The Ladies' Home Journal

The Saturday Evening Post

The Country Gentleman