

STRANGE DOINGS AT THE SOAPWORKS

May 3, 2004

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In 1967 I was a newly-minted Brand Manager at Procter & Gamble, charged with marketing responsibility for Oxydol, a fading but venerable and still consequential laundry detergent. It was an important job on a respected brand in a tough and competitive company, and I felt that I was well positioned to move up the corporate ladder.

In those simpler times, a brand's marketing dollars were largely divided between two separate but closely related efforts: advertising (TV commercials, print ads and the like) and sales promotion (short term sales incentives to encourage the consumer to try the product). It was announced, one day, that all brand managers were to convene in the Advertising Manager's office for a very important sales promotion meeting. And there we were told of an alarming development: the Federal Trade Commission was contemplating a moratorium on the sales promotion device we most depended upon - price pack (a few cents off the normal price, to encourage trial purchase). The FTC maintained that there was so much price pack for so many brands on the shelves of the nation's supermarkets that consumers could no longer recognize a base price. Price pack had already been declared off limits for coffee, and detergents were probably next. This would have been a major problem, since our brands relied 50 heavily on price pack. We had to find some creative new forms of sales promotion, we were told... and instant advancement was more or less promised for the Brand Manager who came up with the best idea.

As I walked back to my office, the phone was ringing. The call proved to be an omen, in both timing and topic. Of all the unlikely things, it was from an impresario in Nashville, Tennessee: a man named P.J. "Call Me Jack" Waldrip. How he got my name, I never knew. He was in the circus business, and was calling to explore the idea of P&G sponsoring his circus - good wholesome family entertainment - which would travel the

United States playing all major markets, with admission by box tops from P&G brands. The idea was so improbable that I did not pay a great deal of attention to his proposal: "Don't call us, Mr. Waldrip" I told him: "We'll call you." I hung up the phone and put it out of my mind.

However, my Assistant Brand Manager did think about it. He had been listening in on the call - ABM's routinely listened in on all business calls in those days - and later he came into my office carrying a pad filled with penciled calculations. "I've been thinking about that circus guy," he said. "Now, I don't know what a circus costs... but assume for a minute that you can put on a good one for X dollars. And assume that we could sell Y cases of Oxydol in support of the promotion, and that Z box tops were redeemed. It's not entirely impossible that this thing could be a money making proposition. I think we ought to look into it - especially in light of today's challenge to come up with a creative new promotion device. I guarantee no other brand will try a

circus," he said. And it began to make a little sense to me. "Let's call Waldrip back and ask a few questions," he suggested, and so we did...

P.J. "Call Me Jack" was delighted to hear from us. He assured us that he could mount a circus that P&G would be proud of for the kind of money we had in mind. "I don't know how much soap you could sell behind it that's your business," he said. "But from my point of view it would work. Why don't I come up to Cincinnati so we can talk a little more?" It began to sound intriguing, and we invited him to come the following week.

Mr. Waldrip proved to be a very impressive specimen. He was well over six feet tall, about two hundred and fifty pounds: a big man in a blue tailored pinch-waisted silk-looking suit. He had a full head of wavy white hair, heavy gold rings on many fingers, gold caps on many teeth, an enormous smile on his genial face, and a voice so loud (doubtless from years as a ring master) that he could almost be heard from Nashville without benefit of a telephone. He was a showman to the core, and he was a salesman. He looked over our cursory calculations, declared them to be right on target, and then explained to us how the circus business worked, and what would be involved in a collaboration. And then came the capper...

"Tell you what, men," he declared. "There's a circus playing here in Cincinnati right now; a nice little tent show from Clyde Beatty & Cole Brothers out on the Lunken drag strip. Let's go out there this afternoon. I'll show you around, and you'll start to get the sawdust in your veins." It was too good an invitation to turn down.

It was fascinating to see a circus in the company of a professional. The afternoon show was in full swing, and the tent was filled with young mothers and their offspring. P.J. "Call Me Jack" (we were already on a first name basis) explained all the acts to us. We learned which really were death defying, and which were not. We learned about wild animals and high wire artists. We learned how a traveling circus is organized, how it is housed and fed, and how it moves from city to city.

It was fascinating, too, to see how, one-by-one, the circus acts we were watching in the ring all recognized P.J. Call Me Jack in the grandstand and came rushing over between performances to say hello. There is only a limited number of circus acts in all the land, it turned out, and they have all worked together at one time or another. It is a tight family. As we were leaving the tent a scantily clad trapeze lady - very shapely - pushed through the crowd of young mothers who were heading to their cars with their children in tow. "Jack, Jack!" she called. The young mothers and their children stopped in a ring around us to see what was happening: perhaps an animal was going to be fed. "I'll be damned if it ain't Mademoiselle Fifi," Waldrip boomed out in a voice that could be heard downtown. "Best f----g slack wire artist in the business." And as he introduced us he asked in his booming voice, "Gib, was you ever in the rack with a slack wire lady?" The onlooking mothers gave little yelps of dismay and snatched their children away. Crimson with embarrassment and mortified beyond description, I said that I never had. "Terrific," said P.J. Call Me Jack. "Simply terrific!"

But, P .J. Call Me Jack had succeeded in getting the sawdust in our veins, as he put it. In the following weeks, we studied and restudied the bizarre notion of putting P&G into the circus business. The Sales people were entranced with the idea: here was

something they could really get behind, they vowed. Finally, I went to see my boss with the concept... and together we went to the Advertising Manager. He was stunned by the idea (he thought we were pulling his leg, I think). He looked at our numbers again and again. He had his comptroller study them. He grilled us on every detail. But his challenge to find a new promotion was on the table. And finally he agreed to a one month test in the state of Indiana, playing Indianapolis, Fort Worth, Elkhart, Evansville and South Bend. Good Midwest markets, and prime Oxydol territory. If it worked in the heartland, we would take it national.

Elated, we called P.J. Call Me Jack to tell him we were ready to look at a contract. He was elated, too, and quickly sent us a draft contract for approval. We forwarded it to our Legal Division, who were in open disbelief at the whole thing. "We haven't had a lot of experience with circus contracts," they said. But they rallied to the challenge, and in the course of time P.J. Call Me Jack came to Cincinnati for the signing.

I remember feeling a little sorry for him as he walked alone into a conference room bristling with P&G attorneys. "Mr. Waldrip, are you not represented by counsel?" they asked him.

"Nope," he answered with his big Tennessee smile. "I trust you fellers."

"We really recommend that you have an attorney review this document," they insisted. "Have you read the contract, Mr. Waldrip?"

"Yep, I looked her over the other night. Looks good to me. Where do I put the ol' John Hancock?" he asked. And as he signed with a flourish, I was reminded of Faust signing his fateful agreement with Mephistopheles, with kettle drums sounding ominously in the background. I hated to see a nice, unsophisticated little guy being gobbled up of by a roomful of corporate lawyers. But I could have spared my concerns. Someone was being taken advantage of at that signing, sure enough... but it was not the person I thought it was.

And that is how P&G got into the circus business. The balance of this paper is about how P&G got out of it.

The weeks that followed were a pure delight: as much fun as I ever had at P&G. While my fellow Brand Managers toiled away at stupefyingly dull and prosaic business problems, I was putting together a circus somewhere along the way, it evolved into a combined circus and ice show. Even better, good clean, wholesome entertainment for Midwestern families. Every day or two, P.J. Call Me Jack would be on the phone with another golden opportunity for my approval.

You may recall the comic strip Pogo. One of its key characters was the circus bear P T Barnwell. When he spoke, his words were never drawn in comic strip balloons, but in circus posters... emblazoned with show biz designs, and held in place by tacks in each corner. That's just the way P.J. Call Me Jack spoke, and I loved it.

I remember well one of his first calls, from Seattle: "Gib," he said, "Set back, put your feet on your desk, close your eyes and think BIG." I did. "Imagine a wild elephant stampeding around the ring. And on the elephant's back is a portable ice rink. And on the ice rink is a beautiful lady, figure skating!!"

"I see it! I see it all! Sign them up!" I cried. And so he did.

A few weeks later there came a particularly memorable call from Mobile, Alabama. "Gib," he said, "if you are a man of decision... if you are ready to act... if you are prepared to seize opportunity at the fleeting moment she is offered to you, I may be able to sign a contract with the world's only ten foot tall ice skating bear!" I was transported with delight: I have always loved bears. "Do it, Jack!!! Grab the bear!!! Don't let him slip away from you!!!"

At that time, my brother was living in Moscow, working for Pan American Airways. I wrote him about the ten foot tall ice skating bear, thinking he would be impressed with his younger brother's entrepreneurial accomplishment. Not at all: he assured me that in Russia they had teams of ice skating bears playing hockey. A likely story - and a typical put-down from an older brother, I thought.

I called our advertising agency in New York to celebrate the great ursine breakthrough, and instructed them to make the bear a centerpiece in all the advertising and promotional materials they were preparing. The agency, as an aside, was distinctly leery of the entire circus project. They saw money that might otherwise have been spent on commissionable advertising being spent on bears and elephants with portable ice rinks, which paid them not a cent of commission. But they were good sports, by now they had some sawdust in their veins, too, and Oxydol was a big account back then.

But if the Agency was cautious about the circus, the Sales force was ecstatic. They had never had so much fun selling any promotion to the grocery trade. And the trade ate it up. Our Sales people were making calls on supermarket chains accompanied by performing chimpanzees and cheetahs, and they were taking orders for lots and lots of Oxydol. The buyers had never seen the like! Many big accounts made plans to erect tents in their parking lots and stack hundreds of cases of Oxydol there, to be ready when the housewives and mothers of Indiana came stampeding in for their box tops. It seemed clear that we had a winner with our circus: a tiger by the tail, if you will.

The pace of things picked up noticeably as opening night approached. We planned to use the dress rehearsal in the Indianapolis coliseum as a gala opening for the grocery trade in Indiana. They were all invited to come as our guests, bringing their entire extended families: brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, parents, grandparents, the works. We rented buses to take key P&G people from Cincinnati to the show. It was getting exciting!

We had a "front man" for the circus: all circuses have front men, it seems, who go ahead into markets where the circus will soon perform to generate advance publicity and sales. Our front man wore dramatic mustachios, a scarlet tailcoat, a top hat, and drove a fur covered convertible with a long tail flapping behind it in the breeze: he called it the Yakmobile. I borrowed the Yakmobile to pick my children up at school, and we drove it

around the city. It was a smashing success! We had a memorable encounter with a policeman on Fountain Square.

And then, about ten days before the grand opening, the first hints of problems began to appear. I remember the long distance operator saying, "I have a collect call from Mr. P.J. Call Me Jack Waldrip in Sarasota, Florida. Will you accept the charges?"

"Jack," I asked, "What's going on in Sarasota? Why aren't you in Indianapolis?"

"Well, Gib, we've got a little problem down here with our big cats. You remember our big cats?"

"Of course I do. Eight fully maned African lions and eight prime Siberian tigers," I replied.

"Gib, make that eight dead fully maned African lions and eight dead Siberian tigers. They all got fed some bad hamburger yesterday and they went to meet that Great Tiger In The Sky."

I was floored by this catastrophe. There was no way we could have a proper circus without lions and tigers. "My God, Jack, what are we going to do?"

"The only thing we can do is hire some cats away from Ringling for the run of our Indiana test. They've got more than they need. But they won't come cheap, and we're sure gonna go over budget." Going over budget was the last of my concerns. The Sales reports from Indiana were miles ahead of objectives and we were sure to be ahead of budget.

"You better do it, Jack. And get them up to Indianapolis fast." And so he did.

It then crossed my mind that there might never have been eight fully maned African lions and eight prime Siberian tigers. A devious thought, and I was embarrassed by it for I had no reason to suspect P .J. Call Me Jack of underhanded dealings, but it was best to be sure. The stakes were high.

A brand new hire had been assigned to me that very day: a fresh, green Harvard Business School graduate named Jeremy Kinross-Wright. I called him into my office, gave him a round trip ticket to Sarasota, and told him to get down there and check things out. He was startled: Harvard had not prepared him to investigate dead cats, he said. But down he went and sure enough - next day he was on the phone reporting that there were dead cats all over the place, and lots of them. Showing true HBS entrepreneurial instinct, he had already made arrangements to recoup a bit of our loss by selling the skins. And there were some surplus cats available over at Ringling. I breathed a sigh of relief that we had dodged this bullet. But there were more coming...

Just two days later, and only a week before opening night, there came another blow: "Mr. P.J. Call Me Jack Waldrip calling collect from Mobile, Alabama. Will you accept the call?"

"Jack, what are you doing in Mobile? We open in Indianapolis in less than a week. Why aren't you in Indianapolis?"

"Well, Gib, we've got a little problem down here with the ten foot tall ice skating bear."

Fear clutched my heart. "My God, Jack, don't tell me he's dead, too!"

"No, he's sure not dead. But it turns out he can't skate!"

"Can't skate? What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, Gib, when I put that bear's paw to the contract he could roller skate like anything and we thought it would be easy to train him over to the blades. So last night we rented up a rink here in Mobile, strapped on the blades, stood him up and shoved him out on the ice. His feet shot out from under him, he jabbed himself in the ass with one of the blades, he mauled his trainer, the trainer is in the hospital, and we got no bear."

I was speechless with dismay. When I finally got my breath, my first words were, "What are we going to do? We've got television commercials and newspaper ads and billboards all over Indiana promising a ten foot tall ice skating bear!"

But Jack, ever resourceful, had an idea. A note of low cunning crept into his voice as he asked, "Gib, just exactly how do them ads read, because I can easy find a bear that can skate ten feet."

I was pretty sure our lawyers would not go for that kind of weaseling. "No, Jack," I said, "That's not good enough. There has to be a better solution."

"Well, Gib, how about this? I got a seven foot bear that's a whiz on the blades. He skates like Sonja Henie. Now, here's what we'll do. We'll hire us up a midget lady, put her on skates and send her out on the ice. Some of them midgets has got great shapes even if they are kind of short, but under the lights you won't be able to tell she's only four foot tall. And then we'll put the seven foot bear out under the spotlight right next to her, and that bear will look like he's every bit of ten foot tall." And, believe it or not, that's just what we did. It was the only way out of a tight corner. I did not clear it with the Legal Division. And it worked pretty well!

But in the meantime, as we slogged from one of these trifling difficulties to the next, dark clouds were gathering in another direction, and a storm of infinitely greater magnitude was about to break upon us.

Howard Morgens, P&G's CEO at the time, was a hard man with icy blue eyes who, in his lofty position, knew nothing of a promotion Oxydol was about to test in Indiana. He came to his office, just days before Opening Night, and was told by his secretary there was a strange man waiting in the lobby who absolutely insisted on seeing him. The man's name was Grand High Potentate Cecil J Bradley, and he wore a funny hat. Mr. Morgens said that he did not know Potentate Bradley, and had no interest in seeing him. But at the end of a long day the man had still not gone away, and he was finally shown into Mr. Morgens' office. "Mr. Morgens," he said, "I am Cecil J Bradley, Grand High Potentate of the Mystic Order of the Shrine in the State of Indiana. And I am here to talk to you about Procter & Gamble's new venture into the circus business."

Mr. Morgens smiled a frosty smile. "Potentate Bradley," he said, "I can assure you that Procter & Gamble is not in the circus business."

"Then how do you account for this?" asked Potentate Bradley, as he laid out on Mr. Morgens' desk a half dozen posters for the circus, replete with pictures of the ten foot tall ice skating bear carrying the Oxydol package. For once in his life, Mr. Morgens was

at a loss for words. But Potentate Bradley had seized the high ground and he forged ahead...

"Mr. Morgens, as you are doubtless aware, the Shrine has long sponsored a very fine not-for-profit touring circus, which is our principal annual fund raiser. The funds from our circus go to our hospitals for the critically burned. And incidentally, Mr. Morgens, even as we speak one of your senior vice presidents is fighting for his life in one of our hospitals, for life threatening burns he suffered in a plane crash at the Cincinnati airport (this was all too true).

And now, Mr. Morgens, we find that P&G is bringing its own for-profit circus to Indiana: and not only that, but you are playing every single market we are scheduled to play just weeks before we are scheduled to perform there. Can you imagine the consequences for our fund-raiser, and for all those burned people?"

"Potentate Bradley, thank you for bringing this matter to my attention," said Mr. Morgens. "I will look into this." He pushed buttons on his desk, corporate wheels were set in motion, and in very little time I was identified as the instigator of this contretemps, and I stood before the great man - the first and last time I was ever in his office. He listened impatiently to my explanation of our glorious plans for the circus. He told me, briefly, of his unfortunate meeting with the Mystic Order of the Shrine. And then he gave me his orders:

"Mr. Carey, make it go away." Those were, his exact words.

As I returned to my office, I pondered precisely what his order meant.

Upon first hearing it seemed clear enough: a death sentence for the circus. But upon reflection, surely "it" could not really refer to my circus, which was a living, breathing organism involving a hundred souls and animals, about to be launched upon a breathlessly waiting Indiana. You couldn't make that "go away." The more I thought about it, the more it became apparent to me that what Mr. Morgens must have meant was "Make the Shrine go away," or perhaps simply "make this problem go away." I certainly had no intention of going back asking for clarification. And so we gathered an emergency team to consider just how to resolve the difficulty in an honorable way.

Our final plan was to take the Shrine's gross box office receipts for the previous year in each market where we were in conflict, assume a five percent growth in attendance for the present year, and commit to make up to them, in cash, any shortfall in the present year. This was going to put us even further over budget after the lion and tiger crisis, but the Sales force was still selling piles of Oxydol and, having little choice, we gambled that it would all work out. Hat in hand, I went to, Indianapolis to make this offer to Potentate Bradley, who agreed cheerfully. And having agreed, he took off for vacation in Florida without remembering to tell any of his fellow Shriners in Indiana that everything was now okay, and "the fix was on." And so our circus sailed innocently into its first market, Indianapolis, with the Lord knows how many angry Shriners waiting to sabotage it.

Never, ever, take on the Shrine. They are everywhere. And they are in positions of influence that you would never have paused to consider. The typesetter at the Indianapolis newspaper was a Shriner, and our ads appeared with the wrong dates and

times in them. The man who ran the commercials at the television station was a Shriner and our commercials ran upside down and backwards, or not at all. The men at the loading dock at the Coliseum were Shriners and harassed us with exquisitely painful delaying techniques. The electricians at the Indianapolis Coliseum were all Shriners, and nothing electrical worked. It was like fighting bees. Somehow, we struggled through these difficulties, persuading every Shriner we could find that we were good guys who had reached an amicable settlement with the Potentate. And so we staggered on to our dress rehearsal - which we had billed as Opening Night for the grocery trade.

The Coliseum was packed to the rafters. Everyone in the supermarket trade, every small town grocer, every Mom and Pop in Indiana had accepted our invitation and brought their extended families to the gala opening. Several bus loads of P&Gers made the trip from Cincinnati. It was really exciting: genuinely heady stuff. Because it truly was a good circus and a great ice show. The animal acts were terrific. The seven foot tall ice skating bear and the midget lady came off without a hitch. The last-minute lions and tigers were superb. The lady figure skated on the elephant's back as he rampaged (sort of) around the ring. The crowd loved every minute of it.

And then came one of our headline acts that really was death-defying - or at least, dangerous. It was a high wire balancing act involving two beautiful ladies hanging by their teeth from a ring that was tied to the hair of a third beautiful lady balancing on the high wire. And just at the critical moment when they were all starting to spin and twirl, every single light in the Coliseum went out. It was totally, utterly black as the inside of your hat!

It was tense. Children cried, mothers wept, lions roared and elephants trumpeted in the darkness. In perhaps thirty seconds emergency lights went on, but it seemed a lot longer than that. Of course, what had happened was the master electrician at the Coliseum - remember, he was a Shriner - had pulled the fuse blocks for the entire arena and taken them home with him. There was no way to restore full lighting. The show limped to its conclusion as our grocery guests suspecting that something had gone very wrong, headed for the door.

Two days later, we had recovered from the disaster of Opening Night, we had again cleared the air with the Mystic Order of the Indiana Shrine, and at long last we threw the doors open for paying business. And it was all downhill from there. Because, then came the nastiest surprise of all: one for which we were utterly unprepared.

Nobody came.

Well, very few people came. In a Coliseum that could accommodate tens of thousands, our wonderful circus and ice show was playing bravely to perhaps seven or eight hundred souls at each performance. We could not understand what was wrong. Of course, we thought it was part of the Shriner plot - but they all vowed their innocence. We doubled our advertising (further still over budget). We hired boys to put leaflets under windshield wipers. We retained PR consultants. P.J. Call Me Jack sent his clowns and midgets into the shopping centers. It helped a little, and the average crowd nudged towards two thousand.

Our unhappiness was nothing compared to that of the supermarket managers all across Indianapolis. They had hundreds of cases of Oxydol stacked under circus tents in their parking lots, just waiting for the hordes of housewives frantic for their box tops. The managers reported no mobs in sight: they were worried, too. And, being February, it started to snow... and the detergent started getting damp. Not good.

We finished our Indianapolis run miles behind our budget goal and limped on to South Bend, hoping that the Indianapolis situation was simply localized fallout from the Shriner difficulties. Business in South Bend was a little better, but not nearly good enough. We tried everything we could think of to bring in the crowds (or "asses on the boards" as they are known in circus speak) but nothing seemed to work.

By the time the circus reached its fourth and last scheduled stop, in Evansville, it was clear that we had a disaster on our hands. The decision to cancel, rather than go national, was a painfully easy one. Sadly, I drove over to Evansville one afternoon to give P.J. Call Me Jack the bad news. I arrived to find the circus playing bravely to a tiny band of about four hundred lonely spectators huddled in the stands. But P. J. Call Me Jack seemed cheerful as ever, and greeted me warmly. "Come over from Cincinnati to talk business? That's fine! We got a cast party right after the show. You come to the party back at the hotel and then we'll set down and talk," he said. And I agreed.

It was quite a party. To my surprise, I seemed to be the center of attraction - especially with the ladies in the cast - some of whom were quite attractive in a circusey sort of way. This was a new experience for me. And then I was approached by a lady in her late middle age - the duenna of an internationally known family of acrobats. "Mr. Carey," she asked, "You've come to cancel the circus, haven't you?"

I saw no reason to dissemble, and told her that was the reason for my visit. "This will be very disappointing for the Company," she said, "but it's no great surprise. We saw it coming. But I think you should know that most of us feel Procter & Gamble has played fair and been generous to us all through this run, and we've all been paid on time - which doesn't always happen in this business. That's why several of us feel you should know that Mr. Waldrip has made an offer of \$100 to any woman at this party who can get you into her hotel room... and he has photographers ready to be called in."

I was stunned. Truly shocked. At first, I could barely understand what she had said. When the words finally sank in, I walked out of the hotel, got in my car and drove back to Cincinnati. And that was the end of the great Circus Venture. Except for the mopping up.

In the following weeks, with no more paychecks coming in from Cincinnati, we were inundated with bills for miscellaneous circus expenses hidden in the nooks and crannies of our contract; costs which the P&G attorneys had never, ever foreseen. I remember one day when the Division Financial Officer - a very buttoned up kind of guy - appeared in my office door shaking like an aspen. "I hold in my hand," he stammered, "a bill from your pal Waldrip for \$1,000 for the removal of elephant manure from the Indianapolis arena... which you know he has probably resold to some Indiana corn farmer. Now, I wish to say 'that never in my financial career have I ...'"

"Please, Bill," I replied, "Just go away and pay it. Let's get all this mess behind us." And it was at this point that word reached us that Waldrip's checks were bouncing all over Indiana; including checks to cities for rental of their municipal arenas in Procter & Gamble's name. P&G guards its credit like a dragon... and the Company went ballistic.

After a while the tumult and the shouting subsided. We wound up so far behind budget that we had to discontinue national advertising for the balance of the fiscal year to pay our bills (the advertising agency's worst fears had come true). And, worst of all, we had to take back thousands of cases of soggy, unsold Oxydol - something the Company never, ever does.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of this unlikely story is that I kept my job after such a world class fiasco... but the Management, who had agreed to the test in the first place, stood behind me like champs. P&G is truly a class act about these things! I did gain a measure of fame (some might call it notoriety) from the affair, which was not all bad: after all, it is better to be known for something in a large company than for nothing at all. The Company did move me out of brand management, and into another line of work where I had no access to circus-sized budgets for a number of years.

And that is the end of the Circus Tale... except for a curious postscript.

A month or two later, I received a telephone call from a man who identified himself as the head of marketing for Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey. He said that he would like to come to Cincinnati to talk to me about a tie-in with P&G. "Sir," I said, "If there is any one thing in this life of which I am absolutely certain, it is that P&G is out of the circus business for good!"

"That's really too bad," he said. "That was a terrific show you put on in Indiana. Variety thought so, too." (Indeed, Variety had been much interested in the whole circus venture, scenting corporate underwriting for entertainment events... and they had reviewed the circus very favorably). "Of course, he continued, "You did violate one of the cardinal rules of show business... but we figured that what with you being Procter & Gamble and all, you probably knew what you were doing."

He had my attention. "Which cardinal rule would that be?" I asked cautiously.

"You really don't know what you did wrong?" he exclaimed. "You don't know why nobody came?"

Feeling defensive, I stuffily assured him that P&G, in its infinite marketing wisdom, had studied and analyzed everything about the circus from top to bottom.

"Well, I'm damned if I'm not gonna drop by Cincinnati next time I'm out that way just to tell you where you screwed up. I'll buy you lunch at that fancy Maisonette place." And of course, I agreed.

In the fullness of time I found myself looking at the Ringling Brothers marketing mogul over a Maisonette lobster salad. He was quite a nice man and not in the least patronizing. His message to me was, of course, riveting. "Here's where you went wrong," he said. "You gave it away. It was too cheap. Your price was too low. Everybody in show business knows that if the price is too low, people will assume it can't be very good.

Look at it from the mother's point of view," he continued. "She makes the decisions on family entertainment. And it's not easy. She has to convince her husband to give up his evening in front of the TV and put on a clean shirt after he gets home from work. She has to make the kids get their homework done early, and clean up for a night on the town. In other words, she has to go on the line to make something like an evening out happen - even an evening at the circus. And she wants upfront assurance that it's going to be worth the trouble. And the price of the ticket is one of the main things she looks at. And the price of your circus - free with box tops - didn't make any sense to her."

Was he right? We'll never know. It does sound sort of plausible, though.
