

The New York Times

Lester Wunderman, Father of Direct Marketing, Dies at 98

By **Robert D. McFadden**

Jan. 14, 2019

Lester Wunderman, the advertising executive credited with pioneering the hugely successful modern techniques of direct marketing, with sales pitches aimed at targeted prospective customers in their homes and geared to their interests or characteristics, died on Wednesday at his home in Manhattan. He was 98.

A spokeswoman for his agency, the Wunderman Group, confirmed the death on Monday.

The chairman emeritus and co-founder of what became the world's largest direct-marketing ad agency, Mr. Wunderman never graduated from college, had no formal training in advertising and got into the mail-order business on a two-for-one offer: one salary split between him and his brother. It proved to be a big bargain for Madison Avenue.

Long before anyone had ever heard of internet sales or interactive communications, Mr. Wunderman was widely credited with coining the term “direct marketing.” For decades he championed an industry that sent personalized ads to preselected people for products and services that they might actually want to buy, as opposed to the scattershot approach of general advertising for the mass audiences of printed publications and broadcast media.

Using ZIP codes and research databases to identify likely customers, Wunderman teams reached them at home with mailings, promotional letters, phone calls, and newspaper and magazine inserts. Sales rose dramatically with his inducements: toll-free telephone numbers for ordering, postage-paid subscription cards, buy-one-get-one-free offers, “loyalty reward” programs for brand buyers who came back.

“A computer can know and remember as much marketing detail about 200 million consumers as did the owner of a crossroads general store about his handful of customers,” Mr. Wunderman said in a 1967 speech. “It can know and select such personal details as who prefers strong coffee, imported beans, new fashions and bright colors. Who just bought a home, freezer, camera, automobile. Who had a new baby, is overweight, got married, owns a pet, likes romantic novels, serious reading, listens to Bach or the Beatles.”

To exploit such details about customers, he predicted, direct marketing would evolve to a point where absorbing a sales pitch and making a purchase would be almost instantaneous — or, as he put it, “where advertising and buying become a single action.”

American Express liked his ideas and created its customer rewards program. Ford, Citibank, Lufthansa, Pfizer and Burger King became clients. Record companies, book clubs, magazine publishers and other advertisers that wanted to sell directly to consumers without middle men also joined his parade.

In the 1980s, Mr. Wunderman created a form of subscription coffee, called automatic replenishment, for the Scandinavian brand Gevalia, which for decades sold products in America directly to consumers by home delivery. Gevalia also offered free introductory coffee makers and other incentives, first in direct-mail ads and later in online advertising.

With the rise of the internet in the 1990s, the opportunities for direct marketing grew exponentially. The use of cookies — small text files created by websites and stored in a user’s computer to enable websites to keep track of consumers’ preferences — created an explosion of data about people, much of it usable by direct marketers.

A study by the Direct Marketing Association in 2010 found that commercial and nonprofit organizations had spent \$153 billion on direct marketing — more than half of all advertising expenditures in the nation — and generated nearly \$1.8 trillion in sales. It also found that direct marketing employed 1.4 million people in the United States and accounted for more than 8 percent of the gross domestic product.

Mr. Wunderman joined his older brother, Irving, and two colleagues, Ed Ricotta and Harry Kline, in founding their own agency, Wunderman, Ricotta & Kline, in 1958. Starting out, they had a staff of seven, worked out of a \$30-a-night hotel room in Manhattan and had no clients.

But the agency drew \$2 million in billings in its first year, and it was soon known as the most enterprising direct marketing agency in the business.

In a 1973 merger, it became the direct-marketing subsidiary of Young & Rubicam, the largest American ad agency. By 1984, Y. & R.’s direct marketing group, composed of Wunderman and two other agencies, with Mr. Wunderman as chief executive and chairman of the group, was the largest organization of its kind, with collective billings of \$257 million — the equivalent of about \$625 million in today’s dollars — and a global reach.

The group became Wunderman Worldwide in the late 1980s and expanded into interactive, strategic and data-analysis fields. In 1998, when Mr. Wunderman stepped down as chairman of what was then Wunderman Cato Johnson, the agency had 65 offices in 39 countries and annual billings of \$1.8 billion, the equivalent of about \$2.75 billion today.

“Direct marketing was out there,” Mr. Wunderman told Adweek, referring to his early days. “I didn’t invent it. But it had no definition and no strategy.”

Lester Wunderman was born in the Bronx on June 22, 1920, to Harry and Dorothy (Horowitz) Wunderman. His father, a fur manufacturer, died when Lester was 10.

A gifted student, Lester graduated at 16 from DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx. He dropped out of Brooklyn College after one year to take an office job and help support his family in the Depression.

At 19, he and Irving organized the Coronet Advertising Service. It failed. But in 1942 they fashioned a kind of buy-one-get-one-free offer to work for a single salary for a mail-order agency, Casper Pinkster.

Irving was soon drafted by the Army, and Lester earned the whole \$55 a week. His major coup was to place advertising in comic books, a strategy that proved profitable and popular.

In 1947, the two brothers joined Maxwell Sackheim, another mail-order house, which sold cut-rate items from catalogs and solicitations to people on mailing lists bought from research firms. They quit a decade later to start their own mail-order shop.

While it flourished, Mr. Wunderman began thinking of a wider reach. He called it direct marketing and first used the term in a 1961 speech to the Hundred Million Club of New York, a mail-order trade group.

Mr. Wunderman’s marriage to Liljan Darcourt in 1947 ended in divorce in 1967. In 1975 he married Suzanne Oksman Cott, better known as Sue Cott, the editorial director of WCBS-TV in New York for many years.

Mr. Wunderman is survived by his wife; two children from his first marriage, Marc and Karen Wunderman; three stepsons, James, Thomas and Patrick Cott; two grandchildren; and four step-grandchildren.

He wrote “Being Direct: Making Advertising Pay” (1997) and “Frontiers of Direct Marketing” (1981) as well as articles for newspapers, magazines and trade publications. He lectured at universities and museums, was a visiting professor at New York University and was inducted into the halls of fame of the Direct Marketing Association in 1983 and the American Advertising Federation in 1998.

Mr. Wunderman collected art, particularly statues, sculptured metalwork, jewelry, carved containers and masks from the Dogon, an African tribe in Mali whose works are prized in the West. He donated nearly 300 Dogon works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“In the room devoted to the Lester Wunderman collection of Dogon art, we are lifted clear of our everyday selves,” John Russell said in a 1982 review in *The New York Times*. “Faced with sculptures whose nature, history and original function are unknown to most of us, we feel our way, try one test after another, and most probably end by feeling that these are some of the most mysterious objects we have ever come across.”

Mr. Wunderman, who had homes in Manhattan and the South of France, was a notable photographer who exhibited at the Metropolitan and other museums and in galleries in the United States and France. With Cornell Capa, he helped found the International Center of Photography in New York. A volume of his photographs, “Wunderman,” was published in 2008.

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 15, 2019, on Page B12 of the New York edition with the headline: Lester Wunderman, Pioneer and Visionary of Direct Marketing, Is Dead at 98