

TROJAN CANS

How did the self-service economy emerge? **Franck Cochoy** displays the ‘pico-infrastructure’ behind modern consumption.

CLASSIC BUSINESS HISTORY links the evolution of markets and consumption to underlying macro, classic, and web-like infrastructures such as energy grids, transportation systems, and communication networks, which have transformed the economy. However, recent scholarship has also addressed the impact of small, mundane, and “disconnected” market-things as market drivers. In this tradition, I look at “canned goods” (Hine, 1999; Strasser, 1989; Twede, 2012) as an underappreciated but highly important “pico-infrastructure” underlying these same transformations.

More precisely, cans were like an inverted Trojan horse, transforming American consumption just like the Greeks’ gift to king Priam reversed the course of the Trojan War. In the myth, the spectacular free seductions of the container—the horse—served as a voluntary means to introduce a hidden content: a military squad with defined purposes. By contrast, with ordinary canned goods, the hidden paying promises of the content—the canned good—served as an involuntary way to introduce a visible container: the can. Despite its visibility, this container carried less-foreseeable implications. The can’s ability to be read, stacked, and manipulated without affecting its content helped goods move beyond the limit of the counter, escape the retailers’ mediation, and be handled directly by consumers. Well before the advent of supermarkets, cans thus heralded the shift from service to self-service arrangement, the rise of modern consumerism, and the development of the brand economy. The spread of canned goods after World War I triggered an unplanned shift of market infrastructures and structures: in advocating preserved foods and the technical means to carry them, their promoters more or less surreptitiously introduced

important changes linked to the features of this new container.¹

A CHANGE OVER TIME

Progressive Grocer, a trade journal founded in 1922 that targeted small, independent grocers and played a key role in promoting canned goods, advertised the can’s two distinct advantages: the ability to transcend seasonality and the power to store foods. In its very first year of publication, the magazine launched a “Canned Foods Week” that became a yearly event each fall (October 1922: 7 sq.). Stressing—or rather constructing—the seasonality of cans, along the principle that “every business has its harvest period” (October 1924: 9), may seem totally paradoxical.² Indeed, aren’t cans actually intended to transcend seasons, allowing the consumption of produce throughout the year? Yes, but *Progressive Grocer*’s marketing genius was to note that the natural seasonality of fresh produce can build the commercial seasonality of the containers aimed at preserving it. It is precisely when fresh produce becomes scarce—when the fall season comes (November 1923: 11)—that it becomes possible to sell the solutions that claim to compensate for such a shortage. *Progressive Grocer* invented the annual autumn can fair as a device designed to

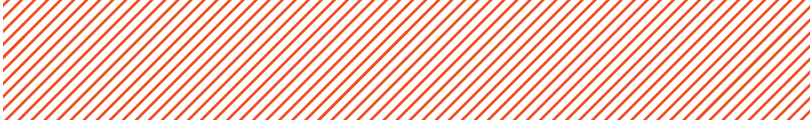
capture, along a sexist and almost animal scheme, the squirrel that supposedly hides inside each consumer:

Even in this day of prompt delivery, women have a feeling of security if they have a well-filled cellar or pantry (November 1923: 11).

[In the fall] [t]he old nesting instinct arises in the breast of the housewife and she wants to fill the larder (October 1924: 10).

The autumn moment and, more broadly, the 1920s, were indeed very favorable conditions for the consumption of canned food. Domestic refrigerators, introduced in the previous decade (Anderson, 1953), were still very rare. Therefore, most consumers continued to adapt, as they always did, to the seasonal eclipse of fresh produce. Traditionally, families prepared preserves for the winter, and the consumption of dried fruit and smoked meat was still part of American life. Thus, the burdens of the past created promising conditions for the development of a future market. Such a project was not totally obvious, of course: if the wide acceptance of substitutes for fresh food created a favorable environment for the consumption of canned foods, the habit of homemade preserves was a clear obstacle to their commercialization. But again, the general evolution of the economy and the American society changed the odds: *Progressive Grocer* noted that more than half the population lived in cities, away from the individual gardens that supported self-production, hence the likely decline in homemade preserves and the corresponding rise of a market for their industrial substitutes (October 1923: 23).

- 1 Of course, canned foods existed from the early nineteenth century, but the production of tins was industrialized from 1881 only and the totally hermetic modern tin (without the hole on the top of its ancestor) was invented in 1897 only. Based on these innovations, the commercial boom of canned foods began only after World War I, with a shift in value from \$100 million a year to more than \$300 million between 1915 and 1920 (Twede, 1912).
- 2 All parenthetical citations for *Progressive Grocer* indicate the month and year of publication and page number(s).



Modern Merchandising

THE old-time store-keeper kept only what he knew people wanted to buy. The modern merchant makes people want to buy what he has to sell. That is modern merchandising.

Your own customers, Mr. Grocer, buy ten times as much milk from others as they buy from the grocer.

There are greater possibilities of increased business for the grocer on milk than on any other item in your store.

More than half of your best customers are reading Pet Milk color pages in national magazines. On those pages we are telling your customers why they should buy their milk from

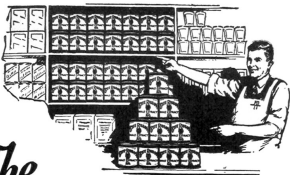
the grocer—telling why Pet Milk is the safest, most convenient and most economical form of milk for every household use.

Pet Milk displayed in your store and window reminds your customers of the story we have been telling them—makes our advertising your advertising—tells them again in your store why they should buy their milk from the grocer.

When you display Pet Milk you appeal to people who are "almost persuaded." You tell them once more to buy their milk from the grocer—and you sell them.

That is modern merchandising.

PET MILK COMPANY
(Originators of evaporated milk) Arcade Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.



"The Most Profitable Space in my Store — is the space I use for Blue Ribbon Malt Extract."

"Every can of Blue Ribbon Malt represents so large a profit compared with the small space it takes up and it sells so fast that I've dropped slow-moving brands. From now on—it's Blue Ribbon for me!"
—So writes Joe. Sanginotti, dealer, of San Francisco.

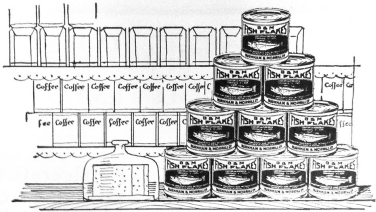
A tip for you—friend dealer! Protect your shelf space. Stick to the brand that sells—and sells fast—Blue Ribbon Malt Extract . . . "America's Biggest Seller."



Premier Malt Sales Co., Dept. C-507, 726 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago

Blue Ribbon Malt Extract

America's Biggest Seller and getting Bigger every Day!



Put them on the counter every Thursday!

During Lent, display B & M FISH FLAKES on your counter and take the extra profit that the Season offers. B & M FISH FLAKES supply the Sea Food that your trade demands at this time—select cod, haddock and Halibut, cooked, seasoned, broken into Flakes of firm white meat, and sealed in parchment lined tins, the same as the Fish are landed fresh from the cold deep sea.

Most grocers know the superiority of B & M Fish Flakes over other forms of Codfish. Every tin is guaranteed. Every tin may be sold. Serve your customers by displaying and recommending this wholesome and delicious Sea Food during Lent.

B & M FISH FLAKES
BURNHAM & NORRIS CO.
97 Warren St., Portland, Maine

"Write for supply of recipe leaflets."

"Sales jumped to 10 cases a month . . ."



when we put Jolly Time Pop Corn on the counter" Says E. M. Schafer

THE grocer in the picture is Mr. E. M. Schafer. E. M. and his brother John operate the famous Schafer Brothers store in the university section of Minneapolis, specializing in better class goods, and lines that show a real profit. They buy Jolly Time Hulleless Pop Corn in ten-case lots.

"Jolly Time is a year-round seller with us," says E. M., "and getting it out where people can see it, has pushed our sales up over ten cases a month in the winter season. There's room for a tin or two of Jolly Time in nearly every order-bag these days, and by having Jolly Time right on the counter, it's no effort to make the extra sale."

The experience of Schafer Brothers, duplicated in thousands of stores, has made Jolly Time the national leader in tinned pop corn. It is an extra-fine grade of corn, specially cleaned and cured to insure perfect popping condition, then hermetically sealed in tin to retain its freshness indefinitely. Being absolutely guaranteed to pop, and being familiar to millions through national advertising, Jolly Time is proving a rich source of extra profits for grocers.

It is well worth while to feature Jolly Time right now. Get it out where your customers can see it, and just see how fast your stock will turn.

AMERICAN POP CORN COMPANY
World's Largest Exclusive Pop Corn Dealers
Box 784-L, Sioux City, Iowa

FREE TO GROCERS
Let us send you a can of Jolly Time Brand Pop Corn free, so that you can try it out yourself. Just send us one of your popped both in popping and in flavor. Simply clip this coupon, attach it to one of your sales slips or a letter head, write the name of your grocer in the margin, and mail to us. Enjoy Jolly Time with our compliments.

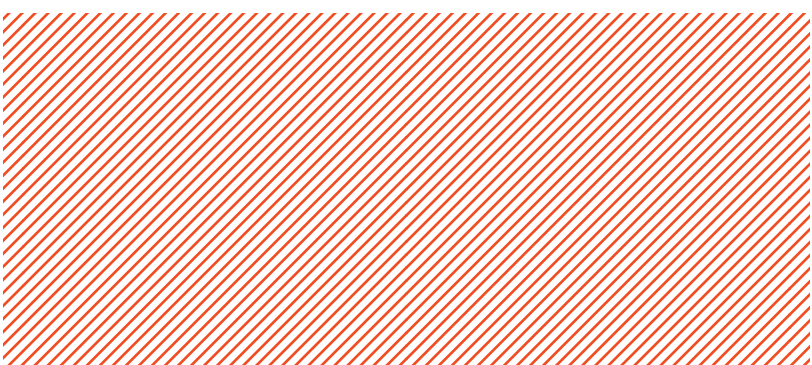
FIG. 1. Preserves and counters (Clockwise from top left: February 1926: 37; February 1926: 107; November 1929: 127; August 1929: 51)

A SPATIAL SHIFT

But *Progressive Grocer's* attempt to list every benefit of canned foods makes all the more remarkable the magazine's complete omission of two major advantages. First, this type of packaging, stackable and durable, required less furniture and less-expensive display and storage fixtures than other products. Second and most important, because customers could handle cans themselves without risk of damage, and because the cans could be clearly labeled with their contents, brand name, and origin, canned goods could "sell themselves" and reduce the need for service. Either *Progressive Grocer's* journalists were not yet aware of these benefits, or, more likely they were anxious not to disrupt the visceral attachment of the grocery industry to customer service and product substitution, as well as its hostility towards brand names that reduced its place and freedom. Regardless of the reasoning, *Progressive Grocer* in the 1920s avoided the most distinctive marketing appeals of the product they wanted to promote.

Can manufacturers and canners did "push" these benefits, but with extreme caution. In advertisements (Figure 1), most of the cans appear only behind the counter, in the old-fashioned way according to the traditional routine of grocer-mediated sales. The advertisers who designed these advertisements were well aware that most businesses were still working this way, so that it was prudent not to go too far against common practice, "all other groceries being equal," so to speak. Yet, in all these ads that use the same rhetoric, it is clear that the cans also highlight their ability to be stacked without need for shelves as well as their labels, which advertise their content and "speak" at the same time or in place of the grocer. Thus, by virtue of their superior "display" ability, the cans may slip surreptitiously and silently from the background shelves to the talkative foreground of the counter, and thus relegate the grocer in the middle, between the sales counter of old and the self-service system to come. This evolution continued through merchandising innovations like those of the Libby's Cannery (Figure 2).

In this advertisement, Libby's takes a step further. The staging is the same, with the double exposure of cans on shelves or in a stack, and the presence of the grocer. However, the counter, now useless, has disappeared, causing subtle changes: by moving to the ground, the pile of cans has grown; in jumping on the other side of the counter, the stacked or shelved cans have become fully accessible to customers. Thus, as we gradually discover, the can initiated the era of self-service in small and traditional grocery stores in the 1920s rather than in the larger, subsequent supermarkets. Of course, the transition is conservative: the grocer is retained, but his stacking gesture is clearly reversible into a taking one and transferable on the client's side: the purpose is to "gently"



“Our sales show a 25% increase yearly for 8 years with this plan”

writes L. DeVos,
of Seattle, Wash.



ABUSINESS increase of over 250% in the last eight years! This is the record set by Mr. L. DeVos, Seattle merchant.

Much of the growth of the DeVos Stores, now four in number, he attributes to his sound merchandising policy on canned foods.

Starting in 1920, Mr. DeVos adopted a very definite plan. He concentrated on one line of canned foods which he knew would sell all comers. Each item of which could be depended upon to bring repeat sales—to help sell other items in the line.

“We chose the largest and most complete line of canned foods packed by one canner under one label,” he writes.

“A quality line backed by big-scale national advertising—Libby’s 100 Foods.

“We carry them complete from Canned Meats to Dried Fruits.

“Our business has shown a steady increase of 25% each year for the past eight years under this simple plan.

“We further find that our local advertising of three, six and dozen can lots of the items featured in Libby’s current national advertising frequently doubles our sales on those foods over a thirty day period.”

Mr. DeVos’ plan, used successfully by thousands of other grocers, is a simple, practical one for increasing your profit and sales on canned foods. It is known as the Libby Idea. For



One of the DeVos Stores, Seattle, Washington, featuring the Libby Line

free particulars, tear out this page, attach to your letterhead and mail today. Libby, McNeill & Libby, Dept. Q-22, Welfare Bldg., Chicago.



RADIO!

The Libby Hour is broadcast twice weekly over a great NBC Coast-to-coast chain of powerful stations.

TUESDAY evenings:

8:30 Eastern Time
7:30 Central Time
6:30 Mountain Time
5:30 Pacific Time

WEDNESDAY mornings:

10:45 Eastern Time
9:45 Central Time
11:15 Mountain Time
10:15 Pacific Time

Tune in — your customers do!

FIG. 2. Libby’s plan (November 1929: 6-7)

teach grocers that cans are not only stackable as highlighted by the previous ads, but that they can also be left to the direct manipulation of clients, without having to fear that such manipulation generates material risks (they are solid) or health hazards (they are hermetic).

All in all, the strength and sealing of cans greatly supported the advent of self-service, while their opacity supported the invention of a new transparency, that of packaging, which paradoxically enabled the consumer to learn more about each product by its outer label than through a direct contact with it, by means of the statements of its composition and origin (Frohlich, 2011); and second to bypass the mediation of the vendor, which before was almost mandatory (Strasser, 1989).

Thus, the generalization of cans is inseparable from the promotion of brands like Libby’s (November 1929: 6-7), Monarch (August 1929: 62-63), or Gerber’s (January 1930: 74-75) and from the emergence of new preferences, like the taste for vitamins (March 1937: 10; March 1941: 142-143; September 1942: 97). The “pico-infrastructure” of cans clearly prepared the move of the grocery store to self-service and mass consumption, “for better (the rise of canners’ and grocers’ profits) or for worse (the strengthening of a chauvinist consumerism),” as one says at weddings, along with other promises of long, happy life, with many children, but also with even more cans: 788 cans a year for the average bride in 1953 (Figure 3)! ■

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FIG. 3. A bride's future: opening 788 cans a year (July 1953: 51)

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