

The high-pressure encyclopedia salesman who uses misleading and deceptive techniques to sell his expensive **wares** in the home is still very much on the scene, despite new laws designed to **curb** door-to-door selling abuses..

The department charged, among other things, that Britannica salesmen used language “designed to instill fear and anxiety in parents that their children will fail in school unless an encyclopedia is purchased.”

It also said salesmen first offered the 24-volume set for \$1,200 and then came up with a “special deal,” which was actually the same set in a much cheaper binding.

One year ago, a law went into effect in New York State that gives home sales buyers a “three-day cooling-off” period in which to cancel a contract about which they have had second thoughts.

Bruce C. Rather, consumer advocate for the city agency, said Britannica and other companies “prey on the fears of parents” who want their children to do well in school. The main problem, he added is, “You just can't control a salesman in the home.”

Many of the tactics mentioned in complaints were heard by a reporter when, posing as a potential customer, she was visited by salesmen from Field and Grolier last month.

The two Field salesmen based their pitch on “concern” for “your children's education.” Declaring that children now must know a great deal when they enter kindergarten, they, suggested both the 15-volume Childcraft and the 20-volume World Book encyclopedia for a special price of \$320.35, plus finance charges if bought on an installment plan.

However, they could not say what the total cost would be after finance charges were added. “I've never been asked about it,” said one.

They did represent the 12 percent annual interest charge as a bargain. “It's the lowest you can find anywhere,” said the salesman. “The reason for it is Marshall Field is a multi millionaire.... He believes in education.”

The **Grolier** salesman based his pitch on a “special offer,” a technique often cited as deceptive by consumer protection agencies. He too suggested a combination — the 20-volume New Book of Knowledge, the 30-volume Americana, a life time “research service” and a bookcase.

Normally, he said, they cost about \$1,000, including finance charges, but if the customer were to “cooperate,” she would get a special price of \$399. The cooperation involved providing a list of five friends who might be interested in an encyclopedia, and allowing the use of the family's name in promotions.

'A One-Time Offer'

He added: "I am not permitted by company rules to make this promotional offer more than once. It's a one-time offer." This is also a pitch often cited in assurances of discontinuance and other government actions against sellers.

"What do I do to cancel? Write a letter to the company?" the reporter asked.

"That's right," the salesman replied. The salesman showed a contract that had no reply card visible when asked about the cooling-off period.

Finally, when told the \$399 price was too high for the family to pay, the salesman offered "the same offer we'd give to a teacher." This involved slightly used "display" sets of the books, for a total of \$299.50.

Rebuffed on this offer, the salesman **berated** the potential customer for wasting his time. "I would not have traveled here if I did not think you could make a decision," he said, going into a long explanation of how he received no compensation for his transportation time.

Earn 20% Commission

Mr. Murphy, the Grolier president, was asked to comment on this visit. "No matter what we do on the front end, things always slip through," he said.

Encyclopedia executives say it is very difficult to police the thousand of salesmen who are sometimes over-eager for a quick sale because their commissions are their only wages.

Field, for example, has more than 9,000 full-time salesmen and some 60,000 part time, many of whom are teachers. Their commission on a World Book sale is \$35 to \$40, or nearly 20 percent.

Some consumer advocates think the answer to encyclopedia sales abuses is greater consumer awareness. "So long as products as prestigious and respectable as big-name encyclopedias are sold in the manner of *snake oil at a sideshow*, consumers must greet salesmen with **unflinching** skepticism," said Consumer Reports recently.

But others are for more radical solutions. In the recent Columbia University study, "Debtors in Default," David Caplovitz wrote of home solicitation in general, "A great deal can be done to reform the present system by simply abolishing door-to-door sales of expensive merchandise on credit."

Wares- products or merchandise

Curb- restrain or hold back

Grolier- Fancy binding used in books

Rebuffed- To refuse to accept a helpful suggestion or offer

Berated- criticize angrily

Unflinching- not showing fear or hesitation