



**SENTENCES THAT SELL**  
merchandise are the commodity  
that Elmer Wheeler deals in

# Selling the Sizzle

*by Robert Littel*

**A** UNSCHOOLED soda jerker asks if you'll have an egg in your malted milk. Almost automatically, you answer "No." But an attendant trained by Elmer Wheeler, the inventor and copyright owner of "Tested Selling Sentences," holds up an egg in each hand and asks whether you'd like one egg or two. Almost automatically, you answer, "One," and the cash register rings up an extra nickel. Hundreds of thousands of such profitable answers, deftly suggested to the patrons of filling stations, hotels, department stores, and retail chains, have made Elmer Wheeler conspicuous in the annals of applied psychology.

"Don't ask *if*," says Wheeler, "ask *which*." Don't ever give a customer the choice between something and nothing; don't ask questions easily answered in the negative; frame them so as to lead to the answer you want. People who ordered Coca Cola at a Brooklyn department store soda fountain were being asked by the attendants whether they wanted a large one or a small one. Few ordered large ones. When Elmer Wheeler had finished his tests, the clerks merely said, "Large one?" and a large one it was two out of five times.

In 1927 Wheeler was on the advertising staff of the Baltimore *American*. A store owner complained that, while his merchandise was good and newspaper ads pulled crowds into his store, people didn't buy enough when they got there. Wheeler went behind the counters, listened, watched, and soon realized that the clerk's words and actions were haphazard, mechanical; that a counter could be a bottle-neck where even the best sales campaign got stuck. He experimented with shirts. He taught the clerks to say, "these buttons are anchored on," meanwhile letting the customer tug at the

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buttons. This, and the vivid word "anchor," moved mountains of shirts.

Here was born one of those ideas which, like most original ideas, are so simple that no one else has thought of them. For ten years it has been Elmer Wheeler's profession to find out for his clients what words, spoken across the counter, will sell merchandise. It is shrewd psychology applied to a neglected link in the chain of business. Wheeler and his staff, when they set to work, do not immediately fill the clerks' mouths with polished, ready-made slogans. For a long time they listen, test, keep score, eliminate. Often the selling sentence finally chosen comes from one of the clerks, who was saying it without quite knowing why.

Engaged by the Barbasol Company, Wheeler set up his "field word laboratory" in a retail store and found that clerks were using 146 different sentences to interest men shoppers in Barbasol. By trial and error he eliminated all but one sentence, and had the clerks say, "How would you like to save six minutes shaving?" Sales of Barbasol doubled. Later this sentence was further simplified, and at a store where the clerks said, "How would you like to cut your shaving time *in half*?" sales of Barbasol tripled.

A shoe store asked him to help dispose of a surplus of children's moccasins. Mothers, and the children who came with them, were indifferent to sales talk about the moccasins' stitching, wired beads, or blunt toes, but when Wheeler taught the clerks to drop a pair in front of the child and say "The kind the *real* Indians wear, Sonny," every fourth boy made his mother buy him a pair.

Another merchant sadly showed Wheeler a great pile of square clothespins, which no one seemed to want. Wheeler watched customers come up to the counter, look at the square clothespins, then at the cheaper round clothespins, and ask the clerk, "What's the difference?" "Three cents a dozen difference," came the answer. Wheeler sought for a deeper, more attractive "difference."

**O**NE OF THE basic principles laid down in *Tested Sentences That Sell*, is "Don't sell the steak, sell the sizzle." What were the sizzles in these clothespins? They were smooth and they wouldn't tear garments. They wouldn't split on clotheslines. They weren't slippery when wet. But wasn't there a super sizzle? Accidentally, Wheeler dropped a square clothespin on the floor. It didn't roll. Soon, when asked, "What's the difference?" clerks were answering, "They won't roll when dropped," and were selling so many more square than round ones that the latter became a problem.

In hundreds of cases, Wheeler has found the key words which will unlock customers' hearts and purses inside of the first crucial ten seconds. Thanks to him, filling-station attendants who used to say "Check your oil?" now ask, "Is your oil at proper driving level?" Armed with

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his "Tested Selling Sentences," clerks in a New York store saved \$7000 in delivery costs by suggesting to those who bought clothing how pleasant it would be to wear their purchases that same night.

"It gets them in the corners" quickly disposed of square fly swatters. "It won't rub off" increased sales of white shoe polish 300 per cent. "Have you ever used a *scientific* toothbrush?" sold out a several months' supply in one week. Lately Wheeler has been planning a campaign for steel coffins. His "Tested Selling Sentence" for undertakers to use will probably be: "They won't cave in."

Wheeler's activities extend beyond store counters. He advises moving men to arrive with soap and towels and, before touching the furniture, ask where they can wash their hands. At his suggestion, laundries instruct their telephone solicitors, married or single, to introduce themselves to housewives as "Mrs."

His field investigations have improved the technique of selling vacuum cleaners from door to door. He cut the Hoover "Condensed Door Approach" by 25 words. He advised Hoover salesmen, once they were inside the door, to look for birds, dogs and children. If there's a canary in the home, the salesman's "Tested Sentence" to the prospect is "Will it sing?" If there's a dog, he asks its name; if a child, its name and age. This may explain how a Hoover man once sold vacuum cleaners to 92 per cent of the people who had signs on their doors reading "No Canvassers or Beggars Allowed." Incidentally, Wheeler tells those who use dogs to guard their sales resistance that "Beware of the dog" isn't nearly as effective as "Beware of the *hungry* dog."

For the Statler Hotels, Wheeler's tests upon guests and staff brought excellent results. He coached room clerks to quote prices from "\$6 down" instead of from "3.50 up." After a good deal of trouble, he discovered that the best thing for a bellboy to say, when showing a guest to his room, was "Have you been with us *recently*?" If the guest hadn't, the bellboy could show him the room's gadgets and describe the hotel's unusual features. Wheeler told bartenders to let guests pour their own drinks. This flattered the guests, whose less steady hands could not fill the glasses to the brim as did the bartenders'. And, as an added advantage, the hotel reaped an extra profit of \$2 per bottle. Flattery paid dividends.

Usually twice a week, sometimes as often as three times a day, Elmer Wheeler expounds his principles in vivid, humorous talks to trade associations and meetings of Rotary or Kiwanis. He tells them that his files contain 105,000 sentences tested on 19,000,000 customers. But he doesn't claim exclusive possession of the key-ring of magic words. He points to gifted amateurs—the railway station porter who, instead of a stale "Red cap?" or "Carry your bag?" asked "*Which* train are you catching?" Or the blind man who increased his May income

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by wearing the sign, "It's spring, and I am blind."

On one occasion Elmer Wheeler's sentences kept a man from jumping off a roof. He was spotted climbing onto a narrow ledge, eighteen stories above the street. A secretary in a near-by office screamed. The man hesitated. People rushed up to the roof. For over an hour they pleaded with him not to jump. A fireman told him to get back. A rabbi reminded him that suicide was against his religion.

Then one of Wheeler's associates, Miss Diane Gregal, was called to the scene. She tested sentences on him. "Shall I get you a cup of coffee?" didn't work. Neither did the suggestion of a glass of wine. Finally, she cried: "You look *silly* on that ledge! Get down before your wife sees you making a *fool* of yourself!" The would-be suicide got down, touched at the most vulnerable point in any prospect's armor—his vanity.

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