

EVERY CLOUT HAS A SILVER LINING

The product-pushers have made
“clouting” a big business. But
in TV nobody talks about it



■ IN THE LONG GONE days of my electronic innocence, I would sit before my television set and, with what now seems a monumental na-

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iveté, assume that when a performer said: "I just flew in from California on Siberian Airlines," or "This studio is as hot as Toby's Turkish Baths," I was hearing no more than a casual ad lib.

Then I went into television. I became a writer on the staff of a network show. And I discovered that behind the TV screen lurks a highly developed, enormously lucrative, but not quite respectable system of operations that most people never heard of. It is called "clouting."

Translated from the vernacular of New York's underworld, where the term originated, "to clout" means "to steal." But as used in television, it is a little more subtle. For one thing, a clout is a double-edged critter. It means a particular kind of plug. But it also means the payoff received for that plug.

Suppose you are a writer on a TV variety show. Suppose, further, that there is a brand of tobacco called Old Cowhand. Suppose, further yet, that you are writing the dialogue with which the master of ceremonies will introduce a singer known for his easy style of delivery. And you include the following line: "This young fellow always sounds as relaxed as an old cowhand by the campfire."

That is a clout. You have clouted Old Cowhand Tobacco. The next morning you get a check for \$100 (mailed to your home) or a case of Scotch. That, too, is a clout. Old Cowhand—or some representative thereof—has clouted *you*.

Because a smart writer can dou-

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ble or even triple his weekly income through such means, clouting is a very big business in television. But its most bizarre aspect is that it is the business nobody talks about. Even its most flagrant practitioners would never admit to playing the clout game, because the game is really more of a racket. Unlike a plug, which is a matter of you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours, a clout is a something-for-nothing proposition.

To illustrate: after a guest vocalist finishes a song, she may plug her new album. But in return for that plug she has given the show a performance that provided entertainment and filled program time. It's a fair bargain. If, on the other hand, this same singer should say to the M.C., as one recently did, "How do you like my new dress? I took a reducing course at the SylphMaid Salon so I could fit into it"—that is a clout, and it may mean a check from SylphMaid for the singer, but it has done the show no good whatever.

Like any other good racket, clouting is extremely well-organized. Its center of operations is a person known variously as a clout-maker, a clout merchant or, more simply, a clout man. The clout man is widely considered the very lowest form of press agent. He has "accounts" which he gets directly from clients themselves, or from advertising agencies handling those clients. The agencies devote a portion of their budgets from various accounts to the miscellaneous expenses of clouting;

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but since the agencies are too "respectable" to carry on this end of the business openly, they hire the clout merchant, who they pay either by the week or by the clout.

"IT'S WELL WORTH IT to the agencies," one NBC executive explained to me. "A minute of time on the *Jack Paar Show*, for example, costs \$9,000. If you manage to set up a clout on that show and you can stretch it for just ten seconds, you've gotten \$1,500 worth of free advertising. It costs the client or the agency a mere \$200 (the going rate) or a couple of cases of liquor, payable to the clout merchant. He splits the take with the writer, or whoever sets up the clout, and the client is ahead by \$1,300."

(The Paar show, incidentally, keeps a sharply disapproving eye on such shenanigans and is relatively clean of clouts, in marked contrast to its short-lived predecessor, *America After Dark*, on which program one could scarcely hear the show for the clouting.)

With the clout merchant comes a further indispensability known as a "clout list"—actually, a simple listing of the names of his clients. He circulates this list among writers, performers and miscellaneous celebrities whom he knows to be "O.K."—that is, those who are not above the deliverance of an occasional clout or two.

A writer who receives these "clout lists" then, as he sits down to do the script for an upcoming show, checks the current lists from various clout-merchants-about-town to see

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which client he can work most smoothly into the dialogue. He notes that Magic Moments Perfume is on one of the current lists. He writes this introduction to a dance act: "And here, ladies and gentlemen, is a girl whose dancing has created many magic moments for us all, Miss . . ." and so forth. (You will notice it is not necessary for him to use the word "perfume." The brand-words associated with the product are enough.)

Then the writer calls the clout merchant. "Monitor the *Freddie Finley Show* tomorrow night in the 9:00-9:15 segment," he says, "I'm clouting Magic Moments Perfume." The merchant watches, the clout is delivered as promised, and the next morning the mailman is at the writer's door with the return clout.

Of course, things do not always go so smoothly. Sometimes the clout may be edited out by a higher power. To avoid such pitfalls, writers often use other means of working the magic words into a show. One of the most popular, I found in my intensive research, is to prearrange them with a guest who may never know he is being set up to deliver a clout.

On one of those shows in which the M.C. goes out to speak to members of the audience, one writer recently pressed into service a little gray-haired old lady who looked like a storybook grandmother but was actually an obscure actress in need of pocket money. He costumed her in a sprightly bonnet riotous with great red roses and planted her on the

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aisle, figuring—rightly—that the M.C. would not pass up the on-camera value inherent in an interview with a little old lady in a grandly flowered hat.

“And who,” said the M.C., sure enough swooping down upon her with microphone in hand, “is this sweet little lady with the beautiful hat? What’s your name, dearie?”

Whereupon grandmother issued forth upon a full minute’s rapid-fire monologue in a stunning example of the delicate art of the clout deluxe. “My name,” she said, “is Daisy Peachum . . . P-E-A-C-H-U-M . . . just like in those delicious Peachum Homemade Pastries, and I live in Cloister, Pennsylvania, where they make that lovely Ever-shine Glassware, and every night at eight sharp, when our Impeccable Alarm Clock goes off, we go into the parlor and watch you while we drink our Golden Brew coffee . . .” and on and on and on, in happy oblivion to the distress of the helpless interviewer.

Ernie Kovacs, when he had his own local New York show, devised an extraordinarily effective way to discourage chronic guest offenders. Any time a guest slipped in a particularly obvious clout, Kovacs’ sound effects man would let go with the loud jangle of a cash register in the background. Many a guest was seen actually to shrink into his chair when that jangle rang out. Kovacs had his show very nearly clean of clouts in record time.

One writer who planned a party where he hoped to serve the results of a successful clout, didn’t fare so

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well. He worked a perfume called, let us say, Devastating Lady, into a script he was writing. The clout went off as planned. The writer invited his guests—fifty-odd—and sat back to await the case of liquor he expected in return. He did indeed get the case, but it wasn't liquor. Instead it contained 20 king-sized bottles of Devastating Lady—"and," as he later told me mournfully, "it smelled awful."

NOBODY SEEMS to know precisely how or when clouting originated. There is no doubt, however, that it was first used to gain laughs rather than profits. In the heyday of radio, comedy writers would often build a gag out of a funny brand name. One of the earliest such instances—and a memorable backfire—was heard in a skit in which two men were discussing a date one had had the night before.

"We had a great time," said the first. "Gallons of champagne. . . . Boy, did I get sick!"

"From champagne?" asked the other.

"No," he answered. "I was drinking out of my girl's slipper and I swallowed a Professor Comfy's Footpad."

The gag got howls. The writers were happy. The Professor Comfy's Footpad people were furious. Not because the company's name had been used in vain; but because Professor Comfy's Footpads are *not supposed to come off*.

At any rate, clouting didn't remain innocent long. Hollywood soon learned that many manufac-

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turers were willing to pay handsome prices for the appearance of their products on the screen. There followed monotonous multitudes of movie scenes in which, as the heroine entered the store, a package of Scrunch Breakfast Cereal could be glimpsed on a shelf behind the grocer's head; wearisome series of gangster films in which, when the badmen stopped at a gas station to refuel their stolen car, the Swifty Gas sign shone bright as sunlight. But all this was minor-league stuff compared with what happened when TV came along. Television, with its many variety shows, its many guest appearances, its loosely written scripts and endless opportunities for the ad lib—television opened up vast new horizons for the farseeing. The smart money men, soon to become known as clout merchants, took over. They got their clients, set up their clout lists, made their TV contacts, stabilized the fees . . . in short, they set up a complete organization which is today as charted as many more legitimate enterprises in TV.

Despite their repudiation of the practice, however, many executives find that they have to tolerate occasional clouting to keep their writers. "If I cracked down on clouts altogether," a producer told me, "the writers would start screaming that they didn't get paid enough. Then I'd either have to raise their salaries or lose them to another show that would look the other way when the clouting starts. The best solution is to allow its discreet use and try to

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hold it within reasonable bounds. It works.”

A circle of West Coast writers, well-stocked on heavy merchandise, is actually said to trade and sell it. (There is even the story—possibly apocryphal—of a prospective buyer who came to one writer and asked the price of a refrigerator. “Two hundred and twenty-five dollars,” said the writer. “Keep it,” said the customer. “There’s a guy who works for the other network who says he’ll give me the same thing for two hundred.”)

But compulsive clouters are in the minority. Most writers and performers who clout at all will—for the sake of their jobs, if nothing more—keep it within reasonable bounds. But within those bounds the big game flourishes behind the 20-inch screen, and it will so long as people continue to have that age-old attraction of a something-for-nothing complex.

Jack Benny perhaps best summed up the peculiar and undying allure of the clout in a succinct and dandy bit of dialogue spoofing the whole disreputable business.

“Rochester,” said Mr. Benny, “go out to the garage and get the Cadillac.”

“But, boss,” said Rochester, “we ain’t got no Cadillac.”

“We have *now*,” said Benny. ■■

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