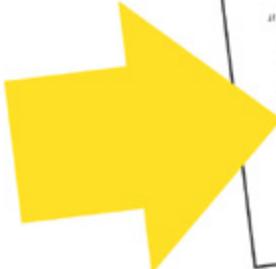




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To Mom

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In some ways, this book began twenty years ago when I found myself watching television in my room late at night when I really should have been doing homework or sleeping. So I suppose I should start off by thanking my mom and dad for buying me a TV at the age of thirteen against their better judgment.

I was fortunate to talk to many, many people who work in the trenches of the infomercial and home shopping industries as part of my research. From inventors to marketers, entrepreneurs to production personnel, I'm enormously grateful to the people who took time out of their busy schedules to sit down and talk with me about what they do every day. This is an industry that rarely gets much positive attention in the mainstream media and, understandably, some were reluctant to pull back the curtain. I think my personal passion for the material gave many of them confidence that I could cover the subject fairly and address both the positive and the negative. I hope I've done that.

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INTRODUCTION

I'll come right out and confess the truth. There was a point in my life when I watched infomercials with alarming regularity. I didn't sit up all night and watch them, mind you. And I wasn't a shopping addict, running up my credit card with the purchase of countless mops, blenders, self-help books, and cubic zirconia rings. But I did find myself often turning on the TV late at night and bypassing the other shows on television to watch Ron Popeil try to sell me on a pasta maker, Tom Vu explain how I could make millions in real estate, and Tony Robbins convince me that he could help me chart a new career direction and get along better with my wife. The fact that I was a high school student who didn't have any interest in cooking, had no career to speak of, and wasn't even of legal age to get married or purchase real estate hardly mattered. These were some of the most amusing characters on television in the wee hours of the morning.

Of course, there wasn't much competition at the time. I didn't have a digital cable box with 1,102 channels, thousands of hours of video on demand at my fingertips, a TiVo capable of storing my favorite shows, or a subscription to Netflix. There were a couple dozen channels, and almost all of them seemed to magi-

cally turn into a flea market late at night as smarmy men took to the airwaves with their dubious wares. A few hours earlier, these same channels had been broadcasting sitcoms, dramas, and weighty news programs. When night turned into early morning, they became home to people like Tony Little, a manic ponytailed personal trainer, and Matthew Lesko, an equally hyperactive man famous for his suits decorated with gigantic question marks who assured audiences that he had the secret to extracting free money from the government.

As it turns out, my interest in infomercials coincided with the golden age of the medium. In the late 1980s and early '90s, the airwaves were flooded with products, many of which were about as dubious as the notion that the government had billions of dollars sitting in a bank account somewhere that they were just itching to hand over to me as long as I filled out the right form. The advent of cable had unleashed dozens of new stations, many of which had little in the way of original programming. Deregulation of the industry had given broadcasters the right to sell the airtime to advertisers. And buying time on these channels was cheap, which meant that almost any marketer could come along and offer, say, a car wax so powerful you could set your luxury vehicle on fire without doing any damage. As this new phenomenon of paid programming flooded the airwaves, Americans responded by doing what they've always done best: they opened up their wallets and went shopping.

I wasn't the only one fascinated by this parade of bizarre late-night pitchmen. There were millions of perfectly intelligent people tuning in to these characters. What led me—and so many others from my generation—to this wacky world was an affection for the campiness of it all. Like other kitschy staples from the '80s, the infomercial quickly became a fixture on the American pop culture landscape. But we weren't just sit-

ting back and laughing. We were picking up the phone to order these products, too. When I mentioned to an editor at a fashion magazine that I was working on a book about infomercials, she whispered that she'd purchased the Showtime Rotisserie oven a decade earlier but had made sure to keep it hidden away. An investment banker described how he purchased a get-rich-quick program as a teenager. Before realizing that Wall Street would be the quickest path to making millions, he briefly thought that Dave Del Dotto held the key to everlasting riches.

The first product I ever purchased was Didi Seven, a stain remover that came in a small tube and was imported from Germany. Didi Seven inundated the airwaves in the late '80s with a demonstration that is much like the one you can see today in commercials for OxiClean, InstaGone, and OrangeGlo. A large bowl of filthy water turned clear instantly when a bit of Didi Seven was added to the mix. Grass stains and mustard splashes disappeared instantly; yellowed curtains that hadn't been cleaned in three decades looked brand new. Didi Seven could remove iodine and blood stains, the infomercial assured viewers. I still have no idea who handles iodine on such a regular basis that they need to have an iodine cleanser on hand at all times (and I'd venture to say that if you're drenched in your own blood—or anyone else's—you probably have bigger things to worry about than a ruined shirt), but as the host ran through all the potential uses for the product, each one seemed to serve as ample proof that *not* having a tube of Didi Seven in the house would be a major liability. And so off I went with my father's credit card. A week later it came in the mail, and I went around the house ready to conquer every blemish in sight. I still don't know what Didi Seven's active ingredient was (it remains a secret even though you'd be hard-pressed to find Didi Seven these days), but I can't imagine it was all that different from bleach. I left a half dozen white

splotches on the carpet in my bedroom and on several pairs of pants hanging in my closet before I tossed it in the garbage.

My Didi Seven experience should have taught me the defining lesson of the infomercial industry: if it's too good to be true, it probably is. But it wasn't the last product I ordered on the phone. Not long after that, Ron Popeil convinced me to plunk down my parents hard-earned money on a Ronco Automatic Pasta Maker, despite the fact that I didn't have any interest in cooking regular, prepackaged pasta, much less making pasta from scratch. (It was Ron's demonstration of chocolate pasta that hooked me, I'll admit it.) About a year later, I convinced my grandmother that we desperately needed to order the Juice-man, a device that the white-haired inventor of the product, Jay Kordich, promised was the "greatest insurance policy in the world." After regurgitating a few facts I'd gleaned from the infomercial, I successfully made my case; several days later I was the proud owner of a hulking piece of plastic that took up half the counter space in our kitchen and sounded like someone had placed an industrial wood chipper in the middle of the room every time I turned it on. I probably ended up using it three or four times before burying it in the closet, where it remained for a decade before someone had the decency to throw it out. Filling up a grocery basket full of produce to extract a couple of glasses, it turned out, was a pain and not particularly cost-effective. And despite Kordich's claims to the contrary, parsley and beet juice tasted awful.

Once again, I wasn't alone. While I was spending money on "revolutionary" gizmos, just as many people were responding to the notion that for \$59.99 you could change your life in an instant. Many of the shows seemed to provide cure-alls to life's most challenging problems. There were potions to cure your acne and regrow your hair and various regimens, pills, and de-

vices to help you lose weight instantly. Get-rich-quick programs offered viewers a way to solve all their financial problems in a matter of weeks. All of them promised to change lives. And millions of Americans succumbed, spending millions—and, later, billions—dialing up 800 numbers to place their orders.

It's been twenty-one years since the first modern-day infomercials appeared on television, and it has since become a massive industry. Today direct response marketing—which includes infomercials, home shopping, and online commerce—is a \$300 billion industry, which makes it larger than the film, music, and video game industries combined. Infomercials alone, which represent nearly a third of the overall total, managed to convince one out of every three Americans to pick up the phone and place an order in 2007. Each month, more than 300,000 infomercials air on stations in the United States and Canada. It's a business with many moving parts. At the tip of the iceberg are the people who create these products and market them on the air. Then there are vast manufacturing facilities that turn out these items: as you read this, there are thousands of men and women in China sitting in a factory assembling the junky product that is now being pitched as “state of the art.” Telemarketing firms earn billions every year fielding the calls that flood into call centers. Cable networks remain solvent thanks to the airtime they unload to the highest bidder every night. Even large chain retailers earn billions every year marketing the products that became famous after they became television staples.

Built on the hopes and dreams of Americans, it's also become an extraordinarily sophisticated business. Thanks to years of experience—and a good deal of testing—the creators of direct response programming have become some of the savviest mar-

keters around. They've figured how to get lethargic telecitizens off the couch in the middle of the night to pick up the phone and order mops, rotisserie ovens, blenders, vacuum cleaners, and beef jerky machines. They've managed to tap into the minds of consumers in ways traditional retailers haven't dreamed about with a never-ending stream of upsells, cross-promotions, special offers, and continuity programs.

Of course, infomercial marketers rarely get any credit for any of this. You won't see any of them appear on the cover of *Fortune*. The ad industry sneers at them—as do most Americans. Perhaps for good reason. The blender you purchase may not actually work when it arrives on your doorstep. The exercise machine that looked so sturdy on television may crumble to pieces when your fourteen-pound baby climbs on top of it. You won't find a get-rich-quick no-money-down real estate program that will allow you to retire by next week. And there are dozens of people who have gotten very rich very quickly thanks to fraudulent infomercials who are sunning themselves in the Cayman Islands when they really should be confined to an eight-by-eight prison cell in Guantanamo Bay. More than two decades after it exploded, the infomercial industry still has its fair share of sleazy types who will do anything, say anything, and sell anything to make a buck; a business where ex-cons happily move from one scheme to another, all the while funneling cash to their offshore bank accounts. It's an industry where a sheetrock salesman became a real estate expert overnight and made millions selling a get-rich-quick package to the public before retiring to a life of peaceful tranquility on a Napa Valley vineyard; where a doctor who had his license suspended for sexually assaulting a patient found a new career marketing the fountain of youth. As one veteran of the trade joked, it's an industry where you never, ever ask what people were doing before they got into infomercials.

When I was watching these shows back in the day, the seamier side wasn't all that apparent. Sure, I had difficulty believing that a Vietnamese immigrant standing awkwardly in front of his chocolate brown Rolls-Royce and the "waterfall" on his front lawn really had the key to making millions. Part of my skepticism may have had to do with the fact that what he was calling his "waterfall" was actually a water fountain, and I figured if he didn't know what it was, he probably didn't own it either. But it was precisely because it was so preposterous that I couldn't turn away. I was just transfixed by the zany nature of it all.

This is a book about this weird world of late-night entertainment. It's also a book about one of the largest, most sophisticated industries in America that you're probably familiar with, yet know nothing about. It's also a book about spray-on hair, fishing rods that fit in your pocket, porcelain collectibles, and hydroponic vegetable gardening kits. Oh, and the cure for cancer, too.

County Fair to Cable Fare

Ron Popeil's assistant had sent me directions to his home in Beverly Hills, but as I climb the steep streets above Los Angeles, I'm having trouble finding the dead-end street off Coldwater Canyon.

If there's one person that Americans associate with a late-night TV pitch, it's Ronald S. Popeil. He's been on the air in one form or another for a half century. If you've watched any TV at all over the past, say, three decades, it's unlikely you've missed him. Popeil is the man who pitched Mr. Microphone, the Ronco Food Dehydrator, and the Showtime Rotisserie. He's the man who introduced the world to spray-on hair. He's the guy who popularized ubiquitous catchphrases like "Operators are standing by" and "But wait, there's more," and made the names Popeil and Ronco synonymous with gadgets and gizmos. Popeil is the grandfather of the infomercial, not because he was the first or has made the most money, but because he's the most famous TV pitchman that has ever come along. It was Ron who inspired Dan Aykroyd's famous "Bass-O-Matic" skit on *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s. He's played himself on *The Simpsons*. "Weird Al" Yankovic even wrote a song about him. Still not jogging

your memory? Turn on the TV. Although he hasn't filmed an infomercial for nearly a decade, there's a good chance the infomercial for his Showtime Rotisserie will air on some distant cable channel this evening.

Popeil is now in his early seventies and semiretired. He no longer runs the company he founded, Ronco, having sold his stake to a group of investors in 2005. He spends his time with his youthful wife and their young children on an estate he's owned for years. He's supposedly hard at work on a new invention, which may be the rousing finale to his six-decade career or may never see the light of day, depending on whether he sorts out the legal and financial issues that have thus far kept the project in limbo.

After nearly getting lost trying to find Popeil's house, I make a couple of quick turns and find my bearings. I pull on to the small street and arrive at a tall wooden gate. After ringing the buzzer, the gate opens, and I park my rental car in the driveway. A maid meets me at the door and escorts me inside, where I find the infomercial king sitting in the kitchen eating a bagel. I'm hardly surprised. What other room would Ron Popeil be in?

Ron looks a bit older since he last appeared on television with his rotisserie oven in the late 1990s, but he's in excellent shape. His thinning hair is painted a dark shade of brown. His skin is tan and wrinkle-free. As he bounds up from the kitchen table to greet me with a mouthful of lox, he doesn't seem to have lost a bit of the energy that propelled him to once stand on his feet for sixteen hours a day and demonstrate kitchen products in front of crowds at the Woolworth's in Chicago.

For the past sixty years or so, Popeil has been thinking of things to invent and sell. It's a family tradition: his father, uncles, and many cousins all did precisely the same thing. His approach hasn't wavered much over the years. He takes notice of life's

small annoyances and minor inconveniences—the sort that you didn't even know you had until you flipped the channel one night and landed on one of his programs—and then heads home to his garage-cum-workshop to figure out a solution. Unlike other men with big dreams who tinker away in their garage, Popeil has never been the sort of inventor to engage in flights of fancy. He's never tried to build a jet pack or a robot. He's never tried to construct a time machine or find a cure for cancer. He has, however, spent years obsessing over how to improve the spatula.

Few of his products have been revolutionary. Many of his most successful items were updated versions of products his father and great-uncle once sold; others were around long before Ron came along and slapped them up on television. But his gift for packaging products and marketing them to the public with catchy ads and slogans has made him both very famous and very rich. His perfect timing has helped! When he noticed people becoming increasingly concerned about the threat of secondhand cigarette smoke in the '70s, he debuted the smokeless ashtray, which collected the smoke in a filter. The growing popularity of the bagel three decades ago led him to come up with a bagel cutter, which, rather appropriately, he named the Bagel Cutter.

Popeil has had his share of losers, to be sure. He was clearly on to something in the mid-'70s when he came up with Hold-Up, a bulletin board that was covered with adhesive that you could use to attach notes and other little reminders. Unfortunately, 3M introduced Post-it Notes around the same time, relegating Ron's invention to the dustbin of infomercial history. His Glass Froster was a clever concept: inspired by a beer commercial, Popeil came up with a device that applied a thin layer of frost to your favorite mug. Alas, the gizmo relied on Freon, the environmentally toxic coolant that was later banned by the government. (These

days Ron frosts his glasses the old-fashioned way: he dunks them in water and puts them in the freezer.) But he's had more hits than failures. Over the course of his career, he estimates he's sold well over \$2 billion in products, and many Popeil products continue to sell, even though they haven't been marketed in decades. Popeil's Pocket Fisherman, for example, which Ron's father was responsible for inventing, can still be found at Ronco.com for \$29.99. (Adjusted for inflation, it's a relative bargain: it retailed for \$19.99 when it debuted in 1972.)

After walking through the kitchen—and after Ron shows me his stash of olive oil, which he claims is one of the largest collections in the world—we retreat to his office, a room that provides further evidence of Ron's obsession with all things cooking related. A giant bookcase that reaches up to the ceiling is stocked with every condiment, sauce, and marinade imaginable, which Ron explains he keeps on hand for when he's testing out one of his kitchen inventions. The other corner of the room shows off his other primary occupation: there's a giant stack of videotapes and a professional video camera mounted on a tripod.

As he sinks into his office chair and starts to spin yarns from the television battlefield, it's clear he still possesses the consummate sales charm that has made him so successful for so many years, which, as anyone who has fallen for his pitch (myself included) knows all too well. (Ron seems to know this, too: he humbly titled his 1995 autobiography *The Salesman of the Century*.) I'm quite convinced that even now you could drop Ron on any street corner in America with a folding table and a giant box full of just about anything and he'd amble off a couple of hours later with a stack of bills in his hand. He's both intensely charismatic and extraordinarily skillful at guiding the conversation away from subjects he doesn't want to talk about (his bankruptcy years ago, his first wife) and focusing on, say, all the genius prod-

ucts he's invented over the years. I ask him a question about his childhood, and a moment later we're talking about how his rotisserie oven revolutionized cooking in America. I'm sure that if you'd approached him on the streets of Chicago when he was demonstrating a vegetable chopper and queried him on the specifics of the money-back guarantee, within about ten seconds you'd have been discussing how to slice up an apple to prepare the perfect Waldorf salad.

The stories of Popeil's sales prowess in the 1940s and '50s are largely apocryphal at this point. Ron tells me the tale—which he's recounted on numerous occasions over the years—of how he faced off against the man who was once regarded as the consummate pitchman of the era, Frosty Wishon. Along with his cousin Arnold Morris, Popeil proposed a competition in which all three men would take turns selling the same item and see who did the best at the end of the ten-day fair. Given the joy Ron takes in retelling the story, it's probably unnecessary to mention that Ron handily beat them. "Frosty looked at me and said, 'Ron, I will never work with you as long as I live from this point going forward.' And he never did!" He leans back in this chair, beaming with delight.

You can't quibble with Ron's skill as a salesman, but it's been quite a while since it's been on display on television. His most recent infomercial was for the Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ, which was introduced in 1998. Like all of his products from the '90s, Ron was also the star of the infomercial, which you probably know all too well since the show has aired about a gazillion times over the past decade. Clad in a green Ronco apron, Popeil's pitch featured him cooking up chicken kebabs, lobster tail, and pork loin roast amid the near-constant refrain "Just set it and forget it!" It's since turned out to be his most successful product: By his own estimation, he's sold seven million of them,