

Cross Current



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Pitch Perfect



His pitch was always perfect, but we're talking marketing, not music.

Long before Billy Mays (OxiClean) and the Slap Chop guy, there was Ron Popeil, the TV pitchman who sold everything from the *Veg-O-Matic* and *Pocket Fisherman* to the *Showtime Rotisserie* and *Hair In A Can Spray*, which he used on his own bald spot.

Ron learned most from his father, Sam, who invented simple, inexpensive household gadgets, and his uncle, Raymond, who oversaw production. The brothers sold millions of items through product

demonstrations in stores, at county fairs and on street corners. But it was television that made them rich.

Quick to realize TV's selling potential, Ron became a household face when he went into business for himself, pitching a parade of household items that caught the eye and interest of consumers across the continent. By 1970, the Ron in *Ronco* had sales of \$20 million.

But just a decade later, business was falling apart. An explosion of electronic products was making Ron's gadgets look cheap and outdated, and some of his biggest retailers were closing, including Woolco. After losing almost everything, the entrepreneur fought his way back to success by perfecting the 30-minute TV commercial. In person and on TV, Ron used the same techniques.

When he was in stores, he always set up demonstration booths near the busiest aisles — and near the bathrooms — to ensure an audience. He'd get one or two people to stop and listen, piquing the curiosity of others walking by, and pepper his patter with emotional words like "magic", "fantastic" and "miracle". While talking about the product's usefulness, versatility and value, Ron would show how it worked,



When it comes to the cross, most of us would rather wear one than bear one.

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emphasizing that anyone could use it. "You're probably asking yourself what a product like this costs," he'd say to his audience, always careful not to reveal the price so he could build suspense.

He'd start with a high number, saying it was worth every penny of that, then progressively move down the price until he reached "the low, low price" of the gadget. To seal the deal, he'd warn that supplies and time were limited. "But wait, there's more!" he'd say, pulling out a smaller product, citing its "retail" value and giving it away with the larger purchase. Those tactics worked. In 2005, Ron sold his company for \$55 million.

This story made me think about the gospel and how it's presented in today's consumer society, not just on TV but by churches and ordinary Christians. In many circles, faith has become just another commodity that must be slickly packaged and sold to the target audience.

To appeal to the what's-in-it-for-me instincts of the culture, priests and preachers have focussed on the practical aspects of faith and how it promotes inner peace, strengthens families and provides a sense of community, all of which is true. We don't want to scare off any prospects, so we emphasize how easy it is to put faith to good use. The last thing we talk about is the cost of Christianity, except to stress that you get so much more than you have to give because God just keeps piling on the freebies.

What's often lost is the message of sin, salvation and sacrifice; absolute commitment and accountability; and the consistently savage price paid by all who heed the radical call of Jesus when he says, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, pick up your cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23). Daily. But when it comes to the cross, we'd rather wear one than bear one.

When marketing becomes more important than the Message, it's no wonder people compare cheap, easy, feel-good faith with the other commodities competing for their attention and decide spiritual things are outdated and unnecessary. But rather than show the real power and value of sacrificial faith, many groups have only intensified the pitch.

Having said that, Ron Popeil was right about one thing. People need to see that faith works. Talk is not enough. They need to see us demonstrate the Spirit's ability to change hearts and lives and redeem this dark world. Faith does make life better. But wait, there's more!