

Have You Got A Match?

by

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[Since most of us weren't adults in the 1950s, this article gives us a nice perspective on how things used to be and furnishes some details on the evolution of the matchbook that might be new to you; and, yes, that's the author's real name!]

On her first day in America, a German girl walked into a tobacco shop and asked for a pack of cigarettes. As she was about to hand her money to the clerk, she noticed he had included a match book with her purchase.

“No thank you,” she said. “Matches I still have. I bought them on the ship.”

“You might as well take them,” the clerk smiled. “They’re free, you know.”

The girl was at first incredulous, then delighted. For matches are by no means taken for granted in Europe, where most governments have monopolies and matches are often poor in quality and hard to find. In Germany, they cost about three cents for a booklet of five.

In the United States—the only country in the world where matches are given away free—tobacco dealers, restaurant cashiers, druggists and hotel clerks will hand out 12½ billion match books this year to 112 million Americans. The other 50 million will have no trouble getting a light, since the odds are that seven out of ten people they stop on the street can supply one. And in spite of the fact that nine out of ten are given away free, these little booklets make money for practically everyone who touches them.

It has become so profitable to give away matches that industries in practically every conceivable field vie with each other to see who can hand out the most. Scores of dry-cleaning establishments slip a match book into the pocket of every suit they return. Many businesses watch the birth reports in the daily papers so they can send match books labeled “It’s a Boy” or “It’s a Girl” and carry advertisements of their products to new parents.

Not content with giving out matches free, some advertisers even clip their products to the booklets. That is how Gillette blue blades were introduced—a sample blade attached to each of the five million match books. Cough drops and chewing gum have been hidden under the covers, and perfume companies have impregnated match books with their odors.

Individuals, too, have tried match-book advertising. Following World War II when many families could not find apartments, they told about their needs on match-book covers—and got results.

Some 250,000 firms spend \$26 million a year to supply America with free matches. Extensive surveys have shown them that their money is well spent. They know that less than one booklet in 1,000 is thrown away before its matches are used up, so that virtually all have a chance to win friends and influence customers 20 times. They know that three out of eight Americans can name the advertisers on the match books in their pockets. And they know that an advertising campaign on match books can double, triple and quadruple sales if it is kept up long enough.

The match book, however, was not always a rip-roaring success. It's history is a rags to riches story.

The PAPER MATCH was born 64 years ago on a pot-bellied stove in the office of Joshua Pusey, a Philadelphia patent attorney. One day it occurred to Pusey that the wooden matches then in use were troublesome to carry in the pocket. Paper burned as well as wood, he reasoned, and didn't take up as much space. So why didn't somebody make paper matches?

Pusey waited a year or two for someone to invent a paper match, but nobody did. So one morning he got together the chemicals used in making match heads and proceeded to brew them in his office stove. Then he borrowed his wife's scissors, cut 50 thin strips from a piece of cardboard, dipped them into the match-head solution, and stapled them to what was left of the cardboard.

Since he knew what happened to inventions that were left unpatented, he sent this crude ancestor of the modern match book to Washington and was granted a patent on September 26, 1892—the date the match-book industry now celebrates as its birthday.

Unable to manufacture match books himself, Pusey had to stand by while others helped themselves to his idea. Finally he raised money enough to sue the most important violator of his patent right. A few days after that lawsuit was announced, a man with a briefcase came to see him.

Pusey was not surprised. He had expected the company would attempt to buy his rights for a few dollars.

The stranger said the things Pusey expected to hear. A company he represented—he did not wish to say which one—would like to buy the patent rights. Pusey was trying to think of a polite way to say no when suddenly he realized the man was offering him \$10,000.

While signing on the dotted line, the inventor remarked that for a sum like that he would be glad to drop the lawsuit anytime.

“Lawsuit?” asked the stranger. “What lawsuit?”

[Gosh! How will this ever turn out? Stay tuned for Part II in our next issue.]