

Tupperware

Great ideas don't necessarily sell themselves

TUPPERWARE'S CREATOR, EARL SILAS TUPPER, MAY HAVE invented groundbreaking plastic food-storage containers but this demanding perfectionist from New England had no idea how to sell them. Tupper was said to feel physically ill if he found himself at a large gathering of women, so how on earth was he going to make money out of these milky-white airtight plastic bowls for housewives?

The early days of Tupperware were a long way from today's annual sales of \$1.2 billion. The first Tupperware became available in 1946, and in the early years, the product was marketed in traditional retail stores. It did not sell well. Enter Brownie Wise, a single mother from rural Georgia, a dynamic babe with a beaming smile, and the antidote to the reclusive Tupper. She was excited about Tupper's bowls, and she had found a way to sell them, the Tupperware home party. (She needed the money to pay her son's medical bills.)

Wise argued that the brilliance of Tupperware needed to be explained to women, to be demonstrated to them, how it seals in freshness and how it "burps" (the characteristic sound when the lid is sealed properly); after all, the bowls themselves couldn't talk. Wise had been doing great business directly selling Tupperware for Stanley Home Products, and she convinced Tupper to switch to selling Tupperware at patio parties.

Despite their differences, Wise became the vice president in charge of sales in 1951 and began to build her army of Tupperware women.

Direct selling was the answer. By 1954, Tupperware sales had hit \$25 million and there were 9,000 Tupperware salespeople in the United States, only 1,000 of whom were men. Wise was a celebrity and made the cover of *BusinessWeek*, the first woman ever to do so. She drove a pink Cadillac given to her by Tupper and had a Florida mansion complete with flamingos.

Wise cultivated the Tupperware lady persona, perfect for post-war American women embracing a new era of consumerism and affluence. The Tupperware lady always wore panty hose and heels, was immaculately groomed, intensely house-proud and charming—she became a role model for many women of the time as she was earning her own money while maintaining her role as homemaker. Said Anna Tate, a Tupperware recruiter, the man made the bread, the women “a little cake.” Tupperware was able to ride the post-war boom, with housewives hell-bent on modern comforts and the latest consumer products.

Wise was almost religious in her zeal for Tupperware. She worked her sales troops up into a frenzy at her sales conferences, referred to by Tupperware as “Jubilees.” There, Wise offered extravagant gifts, for star sellers (fur coats, jewelry, cars), “wish fairies” would present gifts and Wise even instigated a walk of fame to pay tribute to top sellers. There were fancy dress parties and trips to Europe. Wise offered thousands of women a source of income regardless of education or previous job skills.

Wise’s success irked Tupper. “He didn’t want the limelight for himself. He hated the limelight,” says *Tupperware!* documentary maker Laurie Kahn-Leavitt. “He wanted the limelight for his product and it irked him when Brownie got all the credit for the success of his company.” After all, he was the one who had invented the storage containers.

Tupperware was not Tupper’s first invention. Tupper had devised a bizarre collection of inventions, from an entire theme park to a surgical procedure for removing the appendix through

the anus. After his tree-surgery business failed, Tupper took a job with Viscaloid Co., a plastics company owned by DuPont. He worked there for just a year before starting his own plastics company, the Earl S. Tupper Company, in 1938. During World War II his company made such items as gas masks. His breakthrough came after the war when he began working with pure polyethylene pellets that would become the material for Tupperware products. For the first time, a plastic was made that was not smelly and brittle (it had been developed for weapons during the war). He then spent ten years improving the product and devising his patented tight-seal lid. After the war, Tupper could concentrate on making household items and the first Wonderlier bowl appeared in 1946.

Despite her influence, or because of it, Wise was fired in 1958 after continuing disagreements with Tupper. Despite Tupperware's sales tipping \$100 million, she left with just \$35,000 severance pay. With no stock options in the company, Wise lost her pink house and pink car. The company was so keen to disassociate itself from Wise that they buried all remaining copies of her book of motivational talks, *Best Wishes, Brownie Wise*, a drama reported in Laurie Kahn-Leavitt's documentary *Tupperware!* Tupper subsequently sold the company for \$16 million to Rexall. (The company now has a market capitalization of \$936 million.) Tupper moved to Florida, then Bermuda, then Panama, and finally to Costa Rica where he died in 1983. Wise died in 1992.

Today there are more than 800,000 Tupperware sales representatives in one hundred countries. A Tupperware party begins somewhere in the world every 2.5 seconds. There is a line of Tupperware cosmetics and, in an effort to reach more markets, Tupperware has set up kiosks in shopping centers to introduce new customers to the products. There are even online Tupperware parties. But the essence of the company remains the same. Wise's direct sales theory still stands today. Those bowls still don't know how to talk.

NOTES

“A little cake . . .” *Tupperware!*, a film by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt, 2004.

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Apple

A great idea is not always enough

DEPENDING ON YOUR AGE, YOU MAY OR MAY NOT KNOW THAT long, long before Apple started selling iPod Shuffles, it was poised to become the most powerful computer manufacturer in the world. If history had been slightly different, that computer on your desk today would be an Apple rather than an anonymous box running Windows.

The Apple Macintosh computer changed the world. Before the Macintosh, computers were mathematical, complicated, and arcane. You had to learn lines of complicated commands just to make them work. The first Macintosh, launched in 1984, was intuitive and friendly. You turned it on and a little smiling face appeared. If you typed words in Times New Roman font, then that