

Talking to some of the industry experts lately, I've felt a certain pessimism in the catalog community. People are worried about the coming postal increase, privacy laws and use taxes. Several consultants I know are branching out of direct marketing consulting into general management work. I visited a nearby church and the pastor was preaching on living within your means. Step One was to rid your house of all mail order catalogs. Even my usually bulging mailbox has either gotten bigger, or possibly, people are mailing less.

This industry concern has caused me to do some soul searching. If the doomsayers are right, perhaps I should reconsider my market.

I keep asking myself, "Why do I love catalogs so much?" It probably all started back in 1939. It was before my time, but my father borrowed a catalog from his high school biology teacher. He doesn't recall the company, something in Colorado. He bought a Courtney Rilie Cooper bamboo fly rod with matching reel and line. He absolutely loved it, still has it, and has been hooked on cataloging ever since (excuse the pun).

Needless to say, I grew up in a catalog family. Living in a cabin west of Milwaukee, we welcomed contact from the outside world. Our mailbox was one of those jumbo kind; we painted it orange so people could find our driveway. It was a third of a mile from the house, so we valued everything that came to us. It was an especially big event when Sears, Penney's or the Sunset House catalog came. When a package came, well...like my Serbian barber says, "In America, every day is Thanksgiving, and every Sunday is Christmas!"

Those were the days when the toys were at the back of the big books, so we skipped over the shoes and hardware (and ladies' underwear). These catalogs were especially popular at Christmas time. I believed in Santa till fifth grade, but I wasn't sure he would know the items without the right model numbers. Mom ordered many of our housewares through the mail, but I can't say our experiences were always perfect.

I clearly remember the famous twin comforters. Mom decided to order one and see how she liked it. It was orange and it was nearly perfect. The only problem was that my brother and I were in the same room, so she needed another one. When the second one came, it didn't match. No problem, send it back and get another. The third one came and matched perfectly...but was a double-bed size! This time she got smarter...sent both back and ordered two at the same time. Well, she got the same size, but they still didn't match. Convinced she'd never get it right, she went out and got some orange Rit and dyed them herself. She almost broke the washing machine and they never looked quite the same afterward, but she stayed committed to direct mail.

Sunset House had the most interesting stuff. The hummingbird feeder worked great. We mounted it over the petunias in the flower boxes. We knew it was working because it was almost empty (but we wondered why we never saw any hummingbirds)...

...One morning, we came down early and found a line of chipmunks waiting behind their leader, all stretched out on tiptoe - sucking out our sugar water!

The colored ice balls were even better. "Keep your beverage cold without diluting your drink. Refreeze over and

over." These really did work. They were colorful and a real hit at parties. Then the FDA found out they could break open and were full of bacteria. Did we complain? Never!

Dad's nose pads to keep his eyeglasses from slipping were too big to fit, so he trimmed them down. But his glasses kept slipping. The battery-powered socks worked well, but it seemed that either the batteries were dead or the socks couldn't be found when it was really cold.

The battery charger saved maybe hundreds of dollars, except that dad always used regular batteries (which one should ever do) and they would leak and get messy. The solid brass butterflies beautified our house for years and years. And what about super glue? I'm sure our first tube came from the mail.

I have to admit that I didn't start making personal purchases right away. First, I didn't have any real money for several years, and I suppose I lost touch, and I wasn't a multi-buyer.

I did buy my first PC (as well as the one I'm typing on now) through a catalog. Perhaps an even greater act of faith was buying Mershaum pipes from a Turkish catalog barely translated into English. They didn't have exactly what I wanted, so I drew them a picture - just six months later I had my \$8 classic.

What I'm trying to say is that cataloging in some way captures the American spirit. It takes faith to sow all those books to the wind.

What really makes catalogs great is that they don't have to limit themselves to high-volume products. In a recent study, I came across actual products that would rarely be found at your local hardware store. Some of my favorites include: a 50-foot indoor plant hose (so you don't have to refill your watering can); binocular shades (would people really use these?); a bug vacuum (rechargeable, cordless); a disposal stuffer (to push refuse down into your garbage disposal without risking fingers); a doggie raincap; an underwear organizer; a hair spray shield; a talking toilet paper roll; and even an electric nose hair clipper.

The people selecting these products are clearly walking by faith! On the other hand, everyone knows it would take hours if not days to find a similar unique selection of products in the suburban shopping mall. I don't have to tell you all about the interesting stuff available, but you see why it is a privilege to work in this industry.

It also takes faith to order a \$3,000 toy from a company that may be no more than a garage. A good friend likes the process so much, when the telemarketer recently asked if she had her credit card number handy, she answered, "I have it in my head."

"That's scary," he replied.

This trusting spirit is part of what makes America great. You really have to believe the best about people to mail to the winds, place orders and take orders.

In cataloging, there is a special spirit, an independence of both merchandise and method. My word for the future is, hang in there. America loves its catalogs, and somehow - damn the torpedoes - we'll figure out a way to buy from you.