

On the Road with Vicks



Bill is shown (eighth from the left) with the well-outfitted Vick Chemical 1958 recruiting class as they started a sales campaign in Detroit.

MY WORK EXPERIENCE immediately after college showed me it is naïve to assume that a person will be good at conducting business simply because he or she has studied business successfully in any school. Instead, I have found that some people are happy to fill up their minds with facts and information to store, like a squirrel hoarding nuts, with little capacity for ideation. Oftentimes they can recite the information with scant ability to interpret it, or even fully understand it. Education is working when it teaches us to take information into our minds as increasingly, students of business seem to learn about theories and theorems and about computer models for maximizing profits. They may learn about real estate syndications, limited partnerships, tax strategies, and how to make the numbers work, but what do they learn about how to build or create? They may also learn all sorts of ways

to convert other people's money into their own. But how much do they ever learn about managing production, motivating people, and creating jobs? Job creation, I think, is the single greatest factor in evaluating new businesses.

Certainly, undergraduate and advanced degrees can be highly valuable, but businesses make great mistakes when they persist in focusing so much on academic qualifications before considering what an applicant might really bring to the company. When making hiring decisions, examine a person's drive and determination. What about honesty, character, and personality? Steer your conversations with a job applicant to determine whether he or she has the ability to size up situations and opportunities and achieve positive results. Obviously, there is no science in this subject, but often a personal interview will reveal vastly more about character than will any resume.

Even in an age when it is highly fashionable to be an entrepreneur, many people remain averse to risk-taking and innovation. Especially in large firms, which, perhaps only coincidentally, have more than their share of MBAs, there seems to be a great fear of doing something wrong. Many employees don't want, or care enough, to rock the boat. Similarly, many managers lack the confidence and maturity to encourage suggestions, or even involvement, from the employees they supervise; instead, they persist in treating them as underlings. Events, staff, and entire companies will often just drift along.

While it is true that I studied economics at Tufts University, my professional interests have always been more directed toward business, and I took enough practical business courses to receive my bachelor's degree in either economics or business administration. In the end, I selected the latter to the mild consternation of my department chairman, Professor Louis Manley. I was likely one of the last Tufts graduates to receive a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Tufts' Department of Economics.

That Economics Department today is probably staffed entirely with academic economists, to the exclusion of any practical teachers of how to do business. They may not look down on the more plebian side nearly as much as they did when I was a Tufts undergrad, but they are well aware that there is a difference. In any case, I have never regretted my decision. Ironically, however, which degree I held has probably never once made an ounce of difference to me or to anyone else over the sixty or so years since I graduated. A degree in philosophy would have been almost as useful, as long as I had picked up the few practical business courses that I was fortunate enough to find.

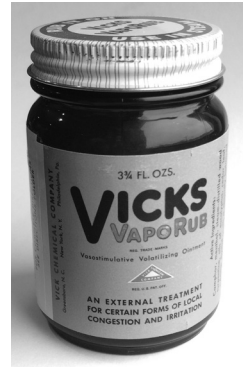
JACK KEROUAC READERS will surely remember his timeless classic *On the Road*. Kerouac included in that book many of his own memorable experiences while doing the same Vick Chemical Company sales training job I was about to begin. Indeed, it was perhaps his only real job before he attained great fame as the Voice of the Beat Generation. Kerouac's mass appeal was surely one of the reasons for Vick's special employment allure in my age group in 1958, but I had not yet read the book, nor did I know then anything about him or his history with the firm.

By some accounts, Vick may have played an inadvertent role in the actual writing of *On the Road*, which Kerouac supposedly completed in just three weeks. Some writers have suggested that many writers of that day used stimulants made from wads of crushed up Vicks inhalers that contained the decongestant L-methamphetamine. According to several online sources, this common ingredient could become the dangerous street drug known as "speed."

Although the Vick job paid less than any of the four other offers I received through the Tufts placement service, it held unique value and potential. A seven-day expense account covered 100 percent of my living expenses, with the exception of personal air travel and entertainment. I spent every night between early June 1958 and Christmas week in a hotel or motel, for instance, and was able to bank my entire paycheck every month. There was also a significant salary increase after the first nine months. Just wait until March!

The Vick orientation team had a carefully arranged program and did a superb job of conditioning and exciting each year's new class of trainees. They emphasized the large number of candidates interviewed and how carefully we were selected. The majority, plus another dozen summer trainees who were hired for ten weeks only, were mostly from far more privileged backgrounds than I was, and I found myself quietly learning from several whom I came to know fairly well. I particularly noticed their easy manner and smart attire, even though I was not the type to buy luxurious Hickey Freeman suits.

The formal training program began with several jam-packed days and nights at Vick's administrative headquarters in the Chanin Building, at 122 East 42nd Street, in New York City, and at what was then the Commodore Hotel, directly across the street. A half century later, I learned from Roger Lowenstein's 1995 Warren Buffett biography that Buffett, one of my personal



heroes, was affiliated with the mutual fund Graham-Newman, and worked in the same Chanin Building shortly before I worked there.

Vick's program was well known and respected in the proprietary drug industry, but after the first ten weeks, the wide range of sales and marketing challenges in which new staff participated was even better for building substantial sales skills. The other trainees and more senior colleagues with whom I worked were an extremely talented and interesting group. Their drive, when aligned with their good training and high self-confidence, made them strong team members.

One of the first lessons business leaders must learn is the importance of identifying their own and their colleagues' strengths and weaknesses, and the Vick management team did that with great skill. For some managers, that may be difficult, especially if they equate evaluating other people's abilities as being "judgmental," but that task remains one of any manager's prime responsibilities. From an employer's perspective, the end goal must be to keep staff engaged by having them do the things at which they excel, whenever practical.

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Even though I did well on the graduate school aptitude tests, I never considered returning to school after I was "deferred for two years" by Harvard Business School, which I fully interpreted as being rejected. Rather than using management styles learned in business school, most good entrepreneurs will develop the management styles that are appropriate for their businesses. They generally have a strong bias toward acting ingeniously, discounting explanations, and discarding excuses. They make things happen.

For a not-so-poor-anymore Medford kid, always mindful of being from the less-affluent side of the tracks, my Vick training eventually served my needs better than any MBA degree might have. The Vick job, with a brand-new company car, seven-day expense account, and constant travel all over the country, was a dream job for almost any young single guy of my day, or at least it was for me.

Known around the world by its familiar blue glass jar, Vicks VapoRub was a mentholated chest-rub for relief from the symptoms of the common cold. It was widely promoted during the almost-worldwide influenza pandemic of 1918. John Barry, in his book *The Great Influenza*, chose,

however, to liberally asperse Vick as an almost villainous predator of that day.

VICK MANDATED a rigid dress code of business suits with white or blue shirts and conservative ties. Probably every new hire in my twelve-member “class” also had to go shopping for his first straw hat before showing up “properly attired” on his first day. (There were most certainly no female colleagues in 1958.) We then needed to purchase our first felt hats immediately after Labor Day. Although business dress codes elsewhere were much less stringent by 1958, we always respected our program. We were much in the minority regarding our clothing, but most of us felt a quiet pride in our roles as “the Vicks guys.”

Our clothing style may tell others a great deal about us, but clothing is only one small part of anyone’s lifestyle. How do we act, talk, and think about things? How do we live, work, and treat others? What guidelines do we try to live by? Individually, where are we going? What are our objectives? What is our overall lifestyle? Where do all the pieces fit together? Do we have a separate business lifestyle, too? How do we meld the often-conflicting forces in our lives to achieve real fulfillment? What examples do we try to set?

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Each of us has dozens of opportunities every day to demonstrate the style we have programmed for ourselves. We may often flounder and waver in this regard as young adults, but with age we gradually develop consistency and responsibility. Vick mandated the image that it wanted us to project at all times as representatives of the company.

Eager and ready to soak in each new experience, I worked to be the best first-year recruit Vick ever had. And according to the weekly recap summaries Vick shared with me, I typically made more sales calls, had higher average sales per call, and had much higher sales of new products than my peers did, and I just had so much fun. This was especially true during the company’s big campaign every summer to promote oversized orders of Vicks cold remedies before the start of cold season. I made it a game to attain the best results I could. We never saw any kind of interim cash incentives, but my sales record paid off well in terms of salary after early 1959.

The setting of realistic life goals is one of the biggest decisions most of us will ever make, because we may spend the rest of a lifetime pursuing them. To many of us, the next question may inevitably be, “How hard am I willing to work to achieve my goals?” Some people achieve their goals because of

extraordinarily good luck, just as others may be destroyed by really bad luck. Sometimes good luck is as simple as positioning ourselves and conducting our lives in such a way that good things can happen. Positioning ourselves often involves taking chances on colleagues, including our superiors, and making determinations about their character, presumed good intentions, and reliability.

One of the most important things to remember about good luck is that we must train ourselves and our colleagues to recognize it when it comes along. Although mudslingers love belittling people with whom they disagree as “opportunists,” they are entirely missing the point. Indeed, taking advantage of opportunities is really the essence of how and why businesses exist. Businesses thrive by recognizing a need as an opportunity and then filling the need. My dad liked quoting Thomas Edison: “Most people miss opportunities because they look too much like work.”

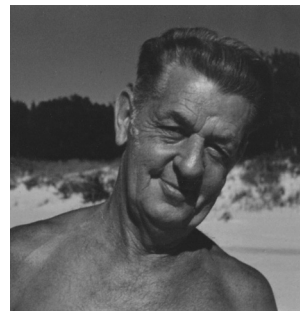
Knowing that I probably worked harder, completed more sales calls, and had better results than anyone else of my rank, I felt comfortable taking off most of one weekday to explore a coal mine in Clymer, Pennsylvania. I had serendipitously met the maintenance director of the Imperial Coal Mine at a nearby restaurant, and when he invited me to go into his coal mine with him the following morning, I nearly leaped off my chair to accept. The only way in and out was by lying face down on a rubber conveyor belt. One mistake could surely have ended my days, but at least my last one would have been the most exciting. I also took time that summer to rendezvous with my parents along Lake Michigan where we all pulled up for a day at the beach. They were on their way home by car after visiting with friends in Chicago.



| *Dorothy Cummings*



| *Bill Cummings*



| *Gus Cummings*

AFTER LESS THAN A YEAR with Vick, my professional career was briefly interrupted when, in early 1959, I was called (not unexpectedly) to six months of active U.S. Army Reserve duty at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Many young men in

that era elected to join military reserve units rather than perhaps being drafted for longer periods of active duty under the Selective Service process. I had assumed that my call to active duty would come eventually, and had alerted Vick of my status as a member of an Army field hospital reserve unit in Boston.

I reported to Fort Dix, and after eight weeks of basic training, I was assigned as a recruit to Company D, Specialists Training Regiment, otherwise known as Cook School. Vick was liberal about almost all benefit issues, but I did have to give up my company car for the duration of my service and was without a vehicle for the first time in quite a while. Since hitchhiking was still common then, especially for men in uniform, I never had one bit of



Ralph Nader

Bill (center) is shown above with U.S. Army Cook School classmates Barry Rich of New York and George Sxeney of Winchester, Massachusetts, in 1960 at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

difficulty hitchhiking to Boston whenever I had enough time off to make the trip worthwhile. One time, I took a bus to New York City and had a fine time crashing the after-hours portion of a Vick sales meeting while still in uniform.

U.S. Army Cook School was an enjoyable two months, especially because I was selected as class leader for the twenty or so other privates who needed someone in charge. The job included a temporary promotion to acting sergeant, albeit with no change in pay status. The other interesting part of Cook School was working and living with the now illustrious Ralph Nader.

I first met Ralph earlier at the old Boston Army Base, now part of Boston's Innovation District, when we were both receiving our pre-active-duty physicals. Later, he and I also sat together during our Greyhound bus trip from Boston Army Base to Fort Dix, and by the time we again ended up together through happenstance at Cook School, we knew each other fairly well.

Ralph, my *de facto* assistant class leader, had recently graduated from Harvard Law School following his undergraduate years at Princeton. He made my job as class leader much easier because he was such a steady, no-nonsense type of guy, and he always tried to assist me in making our class look as good as possible. Two classmates, however, were constant troublemakers.

As class leader, I enjoyed the luxury of a private bedroom on the second floor of the barracks, whereas Ralph was on the main deck below. I had few responsibilities beyond keeping track of the other recruits. One night, when I was sound asleep, however, Ralph rushed upstairs to wake me up. Even then a take-action kind of guy, Ralph already had my camera in his hand. “Come quick,” he said as he hurried out of the room. “We can get the goods on them.” Sure enough, our two troublemakers were excitedly conducting a craps game on the ground floor of the barracks. Ever the diplomat, at least in his Army days, Ralph decided that the photographic evidence of this “serious transgression” would be most useful in simply encouraging better behavior from the participants, and his logic did work, at least for our final two weeks together. My commitment to the U.S. Army included several years of service in the Reserves following six months of active duty between the years of the Korean Conflict and Vietnam. At one point I was actually transferred to the U.S. Navy and the USS Loeser while I was based in Norfolk, Virginia, but then I was honorably discharged after I moved to California with Vicks.

Ralph quickly went on to much greater things, including publishing his 1965 blockbuster book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, much to the chagrin of General Motors and the rest of the American automobile industry, though probably in their long-term best interests. Ralph’s national social activism led him to become a five-time candidate for the presidency of the United States, beginning as a write-in in the 1992 New Hampshire primary. It was no surprise to me that Ralph became so prominent. Where was he in November 2016?

It would be several decades until we reconnected, in early 1992, when Ralph called in advance of a trip to Boston. We were publishing three weekly newspapers by then, including Ralph’s syndicated column. The two of us spent some enjoyable time catching up during that visit, and we have kept in touch ever since. It was not too long after then that Ralph opened this country’s first law museum, the American Museum of Tort Law, in a former community bank building, in his one-time home town of Winsted, Connecticut.

RETURNING TO VICK CHEMICAL in late 1959, I took up my final assignment with the company—covering a terrific sales territory within Vicks’s

West Coast Division, working out of Long Beach, California. I was the most direct contact person for the company's business in Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, and part of New Mexico. And for some reason, my only accounts in California were in San Diego County. What a fun region that was to work in at age twenty-four, especially since I was sure I would not need to remain there. Instead of my constant driving each week, I now had a new routine of flying off to a different region each Monday morning. Once there, I would be off in my rental car until Friday afternoon, unless I chose to remain on the road over weekends to enjoy some local attractions, as was often the case.

By the start of that third year with Vicks, I was doing some interesting promotional work, but I was primarily calling on key accounts in the states to which I was assigned. This meant dealing with some of the largest accounts in the country, including a mammoth regional headquarters of Safeway Supermarkets. I was promoting wider displays and thus greater sales of Vicks on the shelves. There were also opportunities to participate with senior executives in representing the firm and its products at events such as the annual conventions of the American Dental Association and the American Medical Association.

One special project was helping to promote a major campaign in the fall of 1960 called the Vicks Care Crusade. The objective was to showcase numerous large display bins of assorted Vicks cold remedies on retailers' floors, with each display featuring advertising for the CARE organization, a prominent national charity that sent enormous numbers of food packages all over the world.

The campaign included a drawing for a grand prize: free passage on the first commercial flight into space. I have often wondered whatever happened to that grand prize. Was the prizewinner perhaps among those hundreds of high rollers who, in 2017, were reportedly on the wait list for the inaugural flight of Virgin Galactic?

In addition to doing guest interviews on a half-dozen regional radio stations, I had great fun doing live television interviews, promoting Vicks and the whole campaign, in Salt Lake City and Denver. The live TV interview in Denver was on a regional daytime show. I was pleased that the host invited me to rehearse, on the evening before the actual show, just how he felt the presentation should go. He was passionate about doing well by the Care Crusade, and I was grateful to have the opportunity to practice.

This interview had a full crew in the studio for the dry run and included everything except the makeup routine. The next day, the host seemed quite excited with the net results of the extra effort, and I was certainly impressed



KSL - Salt Lake City

Bill is pictured, in 1961, appearing on KSL TV, Salt Lake City. Bill did live interviews with two Rocky Mountains television stations. (He was not discovered to be a television star.)

with his work. I then learned this was the first time he had done a live interview.

I CONTINUED what turned out to be my final year at Vick, still feeling that as long as I was on Vick's payroll, it was up to me to see how much I could deliver in return. But weekends were still all mine, especially when I was stationed out West, with fun stays in several great ski resorts or national parks, depending on the season. I had more carefree weekends then than I would have for the next thirty years. Weekend lodging was always readily approved as part of the give-and-take that Vick managers encouraged. Resort lodging frequently came with built-in opportunities for activities like snowshoeing, group horseback riding, and equestrian care, which I especially enjoyed. My most adventurous weekend out West involved taking the famous mule ride down the trail that is cut into the south face of the Grand Canyon and is only three feet wide in some places. The mules were aging but apparently fully experienced.

Vick Chemical filled a critical role in my life and was an ideal first real job for me. I learned a whole lot about what one version of corporate America was all about, and I was able to do the job my superiors wanted done more than adequately. It was a magnificent learning opportunity, specifically because it frequently put me in meetings with other young guys, just a few years older

than I was, almost all of whom could help me to learn. I greatly enjoyed the associations, and as a group they really helped me broaden my skill set. I learned so much about not taking “no” for an answer and how to do it tactfully and gracefully. I learned to seek out sales colleagues who felt the same way and who would revel in finally closing a difficult account. When a prospect just wouldn’t say yes, I at least wanted to get him or her to change “no” to “not yet.” Among people with whom I talked regularly, I found that little trick of the trade often led directly to breakthrough moments.

But there was also the restlessness factor, which I have seen so frequently in my current life at Cummings Properties. Sometimes, irrespective of anything a company does, excellent employees will simply get antsy because of factors that are entirely unrelated to their work. Employees may be ideally suited, well paid, respected, and secure, but when some almost insignificant thing pops up, they will chuck everything and go elsewhere, often resulting in a great waste of talent. On the other hand, quite frequently such valued employees will quietly pack up and move on because they have been working, frustrated, at the whim of underperforming or disgruntled supervisors. Careful exit interviews with departing employees can be extremely useful in uncovering situations that senior managers might easily modify or correct.

Today at Cummings Properties we sometimes hire young people for professional positions that will be their first jobs, but our longevity factor with that sector is always troublesome. We have a much higher retention rate among new recruits who have first worked for a couple years elsewhere. The average seniority among our entire Cummings staff is slightly shy of eleven years (as of January 2017), with many employees now at or approaching forty years.