

BUSINESS POLICY.

BY D. A. VALENTINE.



WHEN gradually drawing near to the serious consideration of the subject assigned me, and, let me say, it was a gradual process—so gradual, in fact, that it almost if not quite escaped the due and serious process, I was confronted with the growing conviction that there was no such thing as a well-defined business policy in the average weekly newspaper office. And, as I understand it, we who amuse you are expected always to deal with the average office and not the exceptional.

Business ability of the determined, watchful, cool, calculating, careful, competent, economical variety is sadly deficient in the average office. It may be scarce in many vocations and professions, but in ours it is almost an unknown quantity. We do business by inspiration, trusting to luck for results. Instead of these requisites we sometimes find only penuriousness of the penny-wise, pound-foolish stripe that passes current for true, high-bred economy. There may be brains and brightness on the editorial page, faithfulness in the country correspondence department, but as a profession we are as sadly deficient of business sense as is the average lawyer who can take care of every other man's commercial affairs save his own.

First-class business ability is hard to find and hard to secure. It is paid better wages than is the reportorial talent. This is a significant pointer. The Star, just across the line, pays its solicitors, I understand, more money per man than it does its reporters; pays its business heads better than it pays its display heads. It seems that young men who are jostling and crowding each other for the places in our profession would notice this and govern themselves accordingly. For when analyzed to its last ingredient, money is what we are all after. The man who is in the business for the money there is in it is a newspaper man; the other fellow is a journalist, and the newspaper man always get out the best paper.

To particularize a little, few of the craft have any knowledge of correct and comprehensive bookkeeping, even though we really have more running accounts than any other business or profession I know anything about, and should have the best and simplest system on earth, the best understood. There is more necessity for sharp, aggressive collections, because of the lack of size and the multiplicity of debits we have to contend with. We are notoriously poor collectors. Compromise is our general practice, and standing by our books as do other business men is almost an unknown practice.

There is reason why prices governing advertising should be plain of comprehension, exact and equitable. That reason is cold, entirely separated from all that is sentimental, self-evident when studied, and, while the tendency has been the past few years among well-established papers to reach this condition, there are still a great many where prices vary outrageously and where practices exist that would swamp any other business in the land. In my humble opinion the practice of swapping advertising for store truck is most pernicious and demoralizing when adopted as a settled policy by the management of a paper. It cheapens the product of your money and your genius, and,

merchandising being an exact science, where ours is largely only a speculative result, a more or less shrewd guess, this swapping nearly always results to our disadvantage. The mere exchanging \$3 worth of space for a \$3 pair of shoes seems on its face fair, legitimate, and of strict equality before the commercial eyes of a discriminating public, but it is not when adopted as a settled rule of action. Without going into detail concerning a very important matter, I give it to the young man just establishing himself in the newspaper business, as the result of careful study, some practice and wide observation, that it is always accompanied by a large loss of commercial dignity and a cheapening of the values of advertising space in the eyes of the shoe man. Better by far pay the merchant in good hard dollars, then demand of him the same treatment. You then occupy with him the true plane of commercial dignity and relative importance. Unconsciously, perhaps, but truly, he elevates the value of your trade and puts you on equality with his cash customers, entitled to and receiving all the courtesies, favors, discounts and thoughtful consideration he accords spot cash buyers. Mr. Merchant cannot, under these circumstances, dictate to you details of dicker; he does not try it. Advertising takes on new rules of business etiquette in his eyes, and you and your enterprise are elevated and receive dollar for dollar of his consideration and wares.

Speaking of exactness, did one of you ever think it that you cannot state exactly the cost of an inch of space in your paper, or the exact cost of the job you are soliciting? Long experience and familiarity with the cost of the articles used teaches how to guess with more or less accuracy. But it is a guess after all. The merchant knows exactly what every article in his store costs him, then, after a few years, he takes average sales for a twelvemonth, compares them with average cost of doing business for the same time, and thus reaches figures that to all intents and purposes are mathematically correct. Not so with the newspaperman, whose principal reliance must always be a series of shrewd guesses, reinforced with a few exact cost prices. From this we can see why we are nearly always worsted in a dicker. The other fellow knows more about his business than we know about ours. Few there are in this large audience of pretty competent publishers who can tell within reasonable limits the cost to them of an inch of space. They should know as nearly as possible, then they can go to the merchant and solicit advertising on pretty nearly an equality. Then they can meet the foreign advertising agent on an equal footing. Cost sales, clearance sales, surplus stock sales, and all such, are denied us. Our prices must be fixed so that the law of averages will step in and harmonize in dollars and cents the poor seasons and the good seasons of the year, making of all combined paying average seasons. If a merchant of ordinary acuteness is made the beneficiary of a material reduction, ever afterwards he must enjoy the same privilege. He reaches the logical conclusion that you are making a little money out of his patronage at the reduced price, and he thinks a little is enough, and he sees to it that you shall not make more. Suppose in a burst of confidence he tells his neighbor in some other line! There you are.

Another thing of immense importance to a newspaper, and that is exactness. An honest but mistaken attempt to collect the same bill twice is a grievous error, and, believing as I do, and as some other good pious men do, that one mistake is