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The Rise of the Louisville Slugger in the Mass Market

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ABSTRACT

The following article is a historical case study on the obstacles confronted by Hillerich & Son and the strategies the company employed to survive in a tumultuous industry. Three key marketing strategies will be discussed. These key strategies, although historical in nature, are still effectively used by manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers in the 1990s.

Furthermore, Hillerich & Son's marketing strategies defy the historical production era model. According to the production era model, production was manufacturers' primary concern until 1930. Customer research was inconsequential since demand exceeded supply and competition was scarce within product markets. Hillerich & Son's marketing strategies in the first decade of the 20th century exemplify that following eras, production (1870-1930), sales (1930-1950), and marketing (1950s), were not a sequential evolution. Competition in the baseball bat industry was indeed fierce. Consequently, manufacturers concentrated on the customer to ascertain desired products and product attributes. This case study suggests that marketing has always been an integral part of company strategies. This proposition is exemplified by Hillerich & Son's three key marketing strategies, 1) the 1912 push rule, 2) the 1914 youth market decision, and 3) the 1919 national advertising campaign.

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In 1907 Hillerich & Son was a relatively small bat manufacturing company with meager profits. The company produced its own trademark bat (the Louisville Slugger) and its own brand-name bats (the Autograph Model Sluggers). Hillerich & Son also made special-order bats for individual customers and brand-name bats for other companies. In 1907 the sale of the Louisville Slugger and the Autograph Model bats accounted for less than 26% of total bat sales (HB, 1907-1923). Brand-name bats manufactured for other companies, like the "Buster Brown" bat, were the company's number one seller and accounted for over 74% of total sales. Unfortunately, there was little opportunity or future in the brand-name bat industry as it existed in 1907.

By 1923, Hillerich & Bradsby¹ had become the number one bat manufacturer in America. In 1923, the majority of revenue was generated from the sale of Louisville Slugger bats and Autograph Model bats. Hillerich & Bradsby sold only their own trademark and brand-name bats. The Louisville Slugger and the Autograph Models now accounted for 64% of total bat sales in comparison to the approximate 26% of total sales that these bats captured in 1907. Bat sales increased from \$17,000 in 1907 to \$680,000

¹ *The company name, Hillerich & Son, is changed to Hillerich & Bradsby in 1916. Frank W. Bradsby joined Hillerich & Son in 1911. He previously worked for Simmon's Hardware as both a buyer and seller. Bradsby's background and experience is influential in the adoption and implementation of the key marketing strategies adopted by Hillerich and Bradsby.*

in 1923 (HB, 1907-1923). There are several reasons for the success of the Louisville Slugger in the mass market. This paper will concentrate only on sales and advertising decisions. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how three key decisions contributed Hillerich and Bradsby's success between 1907 and 1923. The three key decisions that will be discussed are (a) the 1912 "push" rule, (b) the 1914 youth market decision, and (c) the 1919 advertising and promotion campaign. A brief summary will follow the discussion of the brand-name bat industry and the three key decisions identified above.

The Brand-Name Industry

The brand-name industry refers to the manufacturer of a product by one company (Company A), and the sell of these products to another company

The Louisville Slugger trademark bats required top-grade ash wood, and Hillerich & Son purchased large quantities of the best wood available.

(Company B). Company B sells the products under its own brand name although Company A actually manufactured the products. The brand-name industry was popular for one primary reason, it provided smaller, less-established companies with a market. Well-established companies were limited in production capabilities yet eager to sell diversified lines to an established, loyal market. Hillerich & Son were in the brand-name bat industry as early as 1890s. There were both advantages and disadvantages regarding the manufacture of brand-name bats for other companies. A brief discussion of these advantages and disadvantages provides with additional insights into the workings of the brand-name bat industry.

The brand-name bat industry offered five distinct advantages to small companies like Hillerich & Son. One, because salesmen visited only the large jobbing houses, only a small sales force was required. Two, because Hillerich & Son sold predominantly to the jobber and large sporting good companies, the advertising and promotion costs directed towards the final customer were eliminated. Three, Hillerich & Son saved money on distribution expenses as the jobber or large company ordered in bulk. Four, Hillerich & Son could fully devote all resources and energies into the manufacture of a

quality product. Advertising, promotion, sales, and distribution responsibilities and expenses were picked up by someone else. Five, the brand-name bat industry allowed Hillerich & Son to more fully stretch the use of their timber purchases. The Louisville Slugger trademark bats required top-grade ash wood, and Hillerich & Son purchased large quantities of the best wood available. Hillerich & Son began its inspection for quality while the timber was still standing. The entire inspection period lasted over two years as Hillerich & Son sought to secure only the finest timber available. Regardless of this elaborate inspection process, between 40 and 50% of the timber was still rejected as unfit for making the quality Louisville Slugger bat. Instead of throwing the second-grade wood out, Hillerich & Son used it in the manufacture of brand-name bats.

The brand-name bat industry had two major disadvantages for Hillerich & Son. First, the brand-name bat industry presented a barrier to entry into the mass market for small companies like Hillerich & Son. It trapped companies into the manufacture of bats for other companies without the opportunity to expose their own trademark and brand-name. Consumers purchased thousands of bats manufactured by Hillerich & Son. However, the Louisville Slugger trademark remained relatively unknown in the mass market. The bats Hillerich & Son manufactured were stamped with the names of the purchasing companies. When Hillerich & Son attempted to enter the mass market with its own trademark bats, the bats competed with the very brand-name bats produced for other companies.

The limited company profits generated by the brand-name bat industry was a second disadvantage. Jobbers and retailers wanted to purchase inexpensive bats from small manufacturing companies like Hillerich & Son. The jobbers and retailers would, in turn, mark up the price of the bat. This allowed them to generate larger revenues. The Buster Brown bat, for example, sold to Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett for 30 cents a dozen. The final customer paid between 5 and 10 cents for each Buster Brown bat, a markup ranging between 100 and 400%. Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett made a profit of at least 25 cents for each dozen sold. Hillerich & Son, on the other hand, made at best only 3 cents for each dozen sold.

Hillerich & Son made more profit on the sale of its own, higher quality Louisville Slugger Bats. The Louisville Slugger Junior, for example, sold to jobbers for two dollars a dozen. Hillerich & Son earned nearly 80 cents for each dozen sold. The retail price for the Slugger Junior was 25 cents. However, the local customer was typically not willing to pay this higher price when a youth bat could be purchased at

less than half the cost.

In addition, this advanced price brought the Slugger Junior into direct competition with the better grade bats sold by the larger manufacturers of sporting goods. The Slugger name was not as well known, and Hillerich & Son had difficulty convincing jobbers to purchase its more expensive bats. The brand-name bat industry permitted larger companies to control the kind and the number of bats sold by small bat manufacturing companies. This control restricted the profit a small company could earn (HB, 1907-1912; "Market Reports," 1907-1911).

Hillerich & Son was typical of many small bat manufacturing companies such as Pontiac Turning Company, Bingler Bat Company, and C. W. Dickenson Company that competed in the brand-name bat industry in 1907.² Hillerich & Son manufactured bats for large sporting goods manufacturing companies, such as Rawlings Sporting Goods, Chicago Sporting Goods, Goldsmiths, C. C. Carr, and Stall and Dean. Hillerich & Son made brand-name bats for hardware jobbers like Simmons Hardware, Tracy Wells, and Seattle Hardware. Hillerich & Son produced brand-name bats for sporting goods houses like E. K. Tryon, A. G. Alford, and Leacock Sporting Goods. The company also sold to department stores like Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Bourne and Bond. It made bats for chain stores like Butler Brothers and mail order houses like Montgomery Ward. Between 1907 and 1912 nearly 75% of Hillerich and Company's sales were in the brand-name bat industry. The company's number one seller, the "Buster Brown" bat, was the brand-name of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett, a Chicago department store (HB, 1907-1923).

Hillerich & Bradsby's success in the mass market resulted from its understanding of the bat manufacturing industry and its ability to adjust to new developments within the mass market. Hillerich & Bradsby's entrance into the mass market began in the brand-name bat industry. Bradsby, a young salesman and buyer previously employed with Simmon's Hardware, joined Hillerich & Son in 1911. Bradsby clearly realized the limitations of the brand-name bat industry and led Hillerich & Son in the break away from the brand-name bat business in 1912. The company's understanding of the limitations of this industry led to its attempt to break

away from the brand-name bat business in 1912. The 1912 "push" rule, the 1914 autograph model Slugger Junior, and the advertising and promotion campaign have allowed Hillerich & Bradsby to remain a viable competitor in the baseball bat industry.

The "Push" Rule

The "push" rule, the first key influence, was instigated in 1912 also at the urging of Bradsby³ ("Market Reports," 1914). Bradsby's "push" rule required a company to purchase one of the quality Louisville Slugger bats for every three brand-name bats purchased. Bradsby was "pushing" the sale of the quality bats, which generated greater revenues, on to those wishing to purchase the cheaper brand-name bats. Bradsby's application of the push rule

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varied among companies depending upon the size of the company's orders. Large, well-established companies ordering in large quantities had more leverage. Hillerich & Son was more willing to negotiate a more lenient deal. For example, these companies typically negotiated for less than the one-to-three ratio. However, companies ordering in smaller quantities were often forced to buy Louisville Sluggers at a two-to-three or a three-to-three ratio. Part of Bradsby's initial success with the push rule resulted from his ability to convince jobbers and large sporting goods houses that the Slugger trademark bats would sell and provide larger profits. Bradsby's arguments relied upon the widening perception that the sporting goods market was changing. Starting in 1907 and continuing through 1913

² Our research indicates that 23 small bat manufacturing companies existed in the early 1900s. None of these small bat manufacturing companies have survived with the exception of Hillerich & Bradsby.

³ Bradsby was exposed to the push rule during his tenure as both a seller and buyer for Simmon's Hardware. The success of the push rule at Simmon's Hardware prompted Bradsby to adopt a similar rule at Hillerich & Son.

and 1914, market reports announced that higher grade sporting goods were in demand. Bradsby's appeals about selling a higher grade bat, the Louisville Slugger, made sense to jobbers and sporting goods houses already convinced about sales trends ("Market Reports," 1907-1914). Louisville Slugger sales increased dramatically from 6.5% of total sales in 1911 to 33% of total sales in 1912. The push rule appeared to work (HB, 1907-1923).

However, bleak sales in 1913 forced Bradsby to adjust the above push rule. The Louisville Slugger bat sales had dropped from approximately 7,000 dozen in 1912 to less than 1,000 dozen in 1913. Brand-name bat sales dropped nearly 7000 dozen. Total bat sales were approximately at 18,000 dozen, a decline of 20% from 1912. Instead of the original one-to-three purchase ratio, Bradsby established

The growing popularity of baseball brought change to the baseball bat industry during the second decade of the twentieth century.

an "average cost per order" requirement. This adjustment gave the buyer greater flexibility. The buyer could purchase any combination of brand-name bats and trade-name bats as desired, so long as the total order averaged \$1.25 for each dozen bats. Unfortunately, the adjusted push rule had little influence on Slugger sales during 1914 and 1915 (HB, 1907-1923).

There were various reasons for the decline in bat sales between 1913 and 1915. Although Hillerich & Son had been successful in pushing Slugger bats in 1912, its success had been largely confined to the jobbing market. The retail market was not as eager to purchase the Slugger bats because the Louisville Slugger bats cost more than brand-name bats and the Slugger name was less well known. Retailers who had purchased Slugger bats had difficulty selling these higher priced bats, which had little name recognition. Jobbers and retailers bought fewer Louisville Slugger bats in 1913 because they still had large stocks remaining from 1912 which they were unable to sell ("Market Reports," 1914).

The problem was further complicated by three other developments. First, there was a depression in 1913. "Market Reports" on the sporting goods industry during 1913 document a general decline in the purchase of all types of sporting goods. Second, the spring of 1913 had been especially wet. Baseball

goods do not sell well when spring rains prevent outdoor participation. Third, Hillerich & Son's business was influenced by the entrance of new manufacturers into the baseball bat business. Between 1911 and 1915 the number of bat manufacturers competing for a share of the mass market increased from 14 to 29 ("Market Reports," 1914).

The 1914 Youth Market Decision

The 1914 youth market decision was a second key influence on Hillerich & Bradsby's rise to leadership in the baseball bat industry. The growing popularity of baseball brought change to the baseball bat industry during the second decade of the twentieth century. Baseball participation increased dramatically at all levels. However, the largest increase in participation was among young boys who populated school teams, recreation leagues, and sandlot games. Increased youth participation created a new market, a youth market that demanded quality bats in greater numbers (Seymour, 1990).

Sporting goods manufacturers had been aware of the youth market since the early 1890's. The bicycle industry, for example, produced lower priced junior models as early as 1893 (Fielding, Pitts, and Miller, 1992). Advertising, aimed at parental purchasers, provided reasons why bicycling was important for youth as early as 1895 (Fielding, Pitts, and Miller, 1992). The arms and ammunition industry followed suit during the late 1890,s by offering inexpensive .22 caliber rifles for the youth market and connecting marksmanship to the development of manly virtues (Fielding, Pitts, and Miller, 1992). In the baseball industry A. J. Reach and Company's 1898 nickel baseball had all the trappings of earlier youth market appeals. This inexpensive ball was manufactured by machine and was made from low quality leftover material. It was targeted for youth with little money and small concern about quality. Like other sporting goods manufactures before him, Reach connected sporting goods sales to nurture and believed that youth could be sold on price alone, quality didn't matter (*Sporting Goods Dealer*, 1899). Hillerich & Bradsby realized as early as 1912 that American youth were concerned about quality and were willing to pay higher prices for sporting goods.⁴ The company clearly saw the youth market as a chance to break away from the brand-name bat industry. Its problem was that the Louisville Slugger Junior, a high-grade and high priced bat de-

⁴ *Market reports do not begin to discuss the existence of a high quality, high price, youth market until late in 1916 ("Market Reports," 1916).*

signed for the youth market, had not competed well with brand-name bats. Price was only part of the cause. A second reason was lack of name recognition. The Louisville Slugger name alone was not strong enough to attract young buyers in 1912 and 1913.

Hillerich & Son needed a brand-name Louisville Slugger youth bat that could compete with established brand-names like Buster Brown. It needed a brand-name that every youth would immediately recognize and be willing to pay extra money to own. In short, the company needed a brand-name that was already a frequent household term.

For adults, Hillerich & Son manufactured Louisville Slugger bats for adults that were autographed by professional baseball players. Brand-names like Cobb, Wagner, Collins, Speaker, Lajoie were household names. The problem with the autograph model bat was that it was a replica of the bat used by the professional baseball player. The Ty Cobb autograph model Louisville Slugger bat, for example, weighed between 43 and 48 ounces. It was too heavy for youth to swing. However, a cut-down version of the Ty Cobb autograph model, a Ty Cobb Junior Slugger, could be manufactured at a lighter weight, and the identification with a professional player would serve as an inducement to purchase.

Hillerich & Son's decision to market autograph Louisville Slugger Juniors was made in 1914. The sale of these bats began in 1915. Initial sales were marginal. The number of autograph model bats sold rose by less than 40 dozen. However, in 1916 young ball players began asking for the autograph bats in great numbers. In 1916, the sale of autograph model Louisville Slugger bats increased dramatically. In 1914 and 1915 Hillerich & Son sold 622 and 660 dozen autograph model bats respectively. In 1916 the company sold approximately 7,000 dozen autograph model bats, an increase of over 600%. For the first time in the history of Hillerich & Son, autograph model bats were among the company's top ten best sellers. This trend continued despite the adverse effect of the First World War on the sporting goods industry.

The 1919 National Advertising and Promotion Campaign

Marketing and promotions were a significant component in the manufacturer's overall schema in the 19th century. For example, Singer's success in the 19th century is attributed to its vigorous marketing program in 1950 (Hounsell, 1976). The sporting goods industry relied upon strategic marketing and promotions to sell products during the 19th century. A.G. Spalding and Brothers was an early leader (Leveine, 1985). During the 1890's the bi-

cycle industry demonstrated the effectiveness of strategic marketing and promotion plans to sell sporting goods (Fielding, Pitts, and Miller, 1992). During the first two decades of the 20th century strategic marketing and promotion plans became standard tools in the sporting goods industry.

The final stage of the Louisville Slugger's rise to sales leadership in the bat industry can be attributed to Hillerich & Bradsby's advertising and promotion campaign in 1919. The campaign was developed for two important reasons. One, the ineffectiveness of the 1912 push rule and the 1913 adjusted push rule as a strategy for increasing Slugger sales demonstrated the need for brand-name recognition. The autograph model Junior Slugger series linked Slugger brand-names to famous professional baseball players. This strategy permitted Hillerich &

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Bradsby to solve the brand-name recognition problem. However, success came gradually. The increase in the sale of Autograph Junior Sluggers was small until 1916. The European war accounted for some of the problem. The sale of all kinds of sporting goods declined in 1915, 1916, and during the first three quarters of 1917. The sale of baseball bats was not an exception. American entrance into the First World War in November of 1917 accentuated the downward trend. However, these influences did not fully explain the slow growth in sales of the Louisville Slugger Junior autograph model bat to the satisfaction of Hillerich & Bradsby (HB, 1907-1923).

Hillerich & Bradsby believed that the lack of Slugger Junior success in the mass market resulted, in part, from the lack of national advertising and promotion (HB, 1907-1923). Before 1919 Hillerich & Bradsby relied upon traveling salesmen and trade journal advertising to sell Louisville Slugger bats. These methods were directed at the jobber and retailer. Advertising and promotional efforts designed to reach the final customer remained the purview of jobbers and retailers. The autograph model Junior Slugger would attract buyers, but only if final customers were aware of its existence.

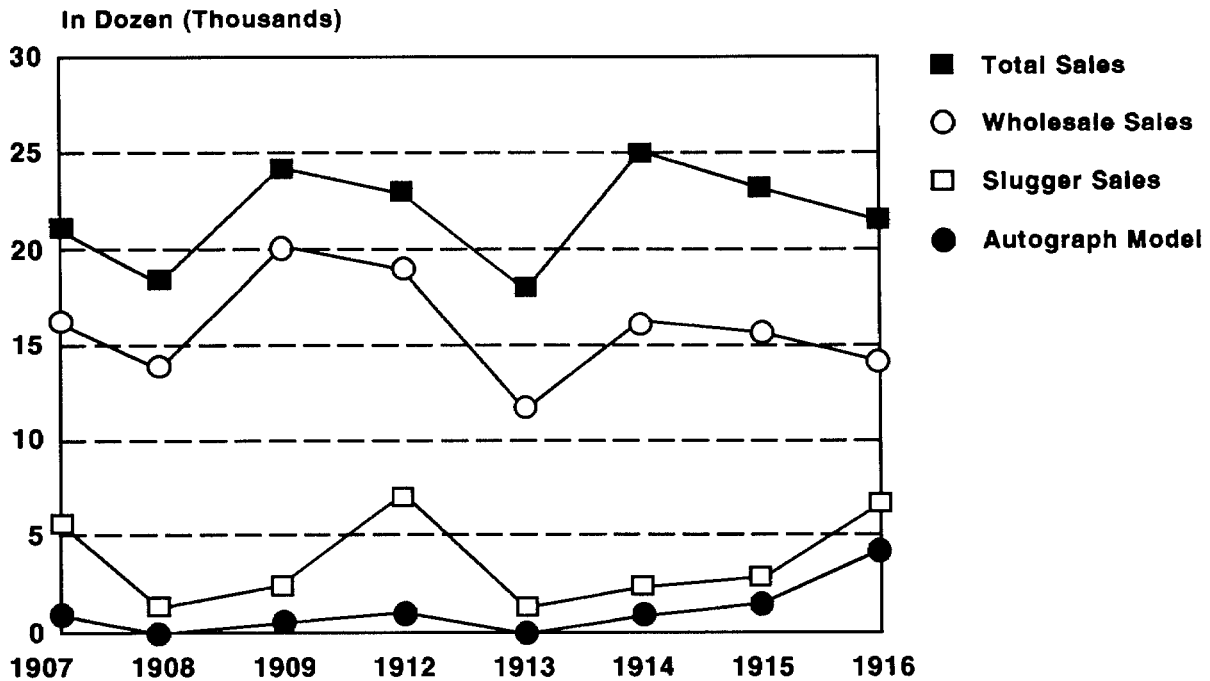


Figure 1. Bat Sales 1907-1916

Jobbing houses and local retailers had limited advertising budgets. Furthermore, local retailers and regional jobbers expected manufacturers to help sales through national advertising and promotion campaigns. Hillerich & Bradsby concluded that a national advertising and promotion campaign designed to reach the youth market was necessary.

Hillerich & Bradsby began a national advertising and promotion campaign for a second reason. The baseball bat business was more competitive in 1919 than it had been in 1914. In 1914, 29 companies competed for market shares in the mass market. By 1919, 5 years later, 5 of these companies had been bought out or consolidated with larger companies. Victor Sporting Goods, a large bat manufacturer, had been amalgamated with Wright & Ditson. Two large manufacturers of sporting goods, Chicago Sporting Goods and Sell Sporting Goods, were part of the newly formed Wilson Sporting Goods company. A. J. Reach had acquired the Bradford Company, a small bat manufacturer. Hillerich & Bradsby had purchased the stock and equipment of the Granberg Company. Furthermore, 5 new companies entered the market between 1914 and 1919. Three of these new companies, Hilton-Collins, Wilson Sporting Goods, and Schmelzer Company, were large, well-established contenders for market share by 1919. Of the 28 companies that competed for a share of the baseball bat market in 1919, 20 companies maintained aggressive national advertising and promotion campaigns. This resulted in increased competition from larger and more aggressive com-

panies. Hillerich & Bradsby were aware that an improved market share would require national advertising and promotions (HB, 1917-1921).

In 1919 Hillerich & Bradsby launched a national multifaceted advertising and promotion campaign, targeting the youth market. The campaign had four parts. Each of the four facets will be briefly discussed.

First, advertisements appeared in popular magazines (*Athletic Journal*, *Popular Mechanic*, *The American Boy*, *Boy's Life*, *The Sporting News*, and *Youth's Companion*) during March, April, May, and June. These were important months for retail baseball bat sales. Hillerich & Bradsby planned to reach a readership of one million during these months (HB, 1917-1921).

The *Famous Sluggers* pamphlet, a second element within the advertising and promotion campaign, was published by Hillerich & Bradsby in 1919. This pamphlet contained data about the 1918 baseball season, the World Series, baseball rules and baseball records. It contained pictures of famous sluggers and their endorsement of Louisville Slugger bats. These professional players also offered tips on batting and fielding techniques. The pamphlet's message was that famous sluggers made their records with Louisville Slugger bats, the bats that produced more hits. Furthermore, the message indicated that those who had aspirations to big league status or who merely wanted to be sandlot heroes should copy the pros and use Louisville Slugger bats. Hillerich & Bradsby disseminated the

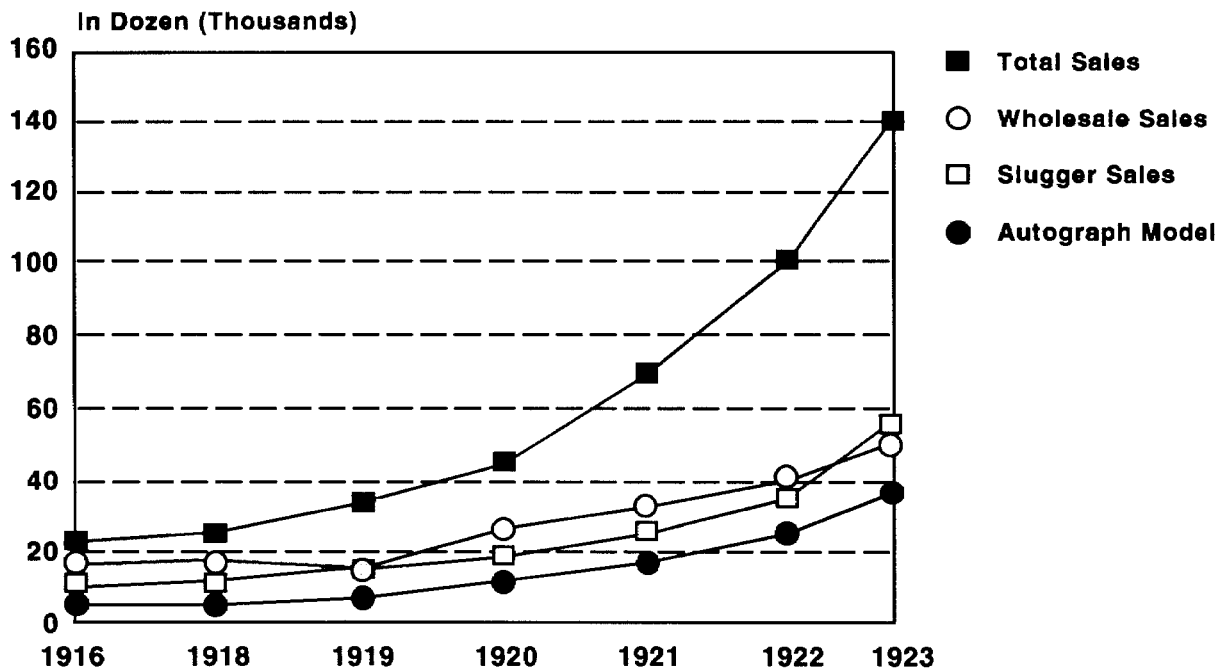


Figure 2. Bat Sales 1916-1923

pamphlets to retailers and jobbers and encouraged them to pass these pamphlets on to the customers (HB, 1917-1921).

Hillerich & Bradsby continued its advertisements in trade magazines, the third facet in its national advertising and promotion campaign. The *Sporting Goods Dealer* carried a full-page advertisement each month. *Hardware Age* published a quarter-page advertisement during the key selling months of March, April, and May. The Hillerich & Bradsby advertisements promoted Louisville Slugger baseball bats. They also promoted the *Famous Slugger* pamphlet. Retailers were informed that the pamphlet would help sell Slugger bats and bring business to the store. Retailers were also informed about Hillerich & Bradsby's national advertising campaign. The message was not only that Louisville Slugger bats were the best but also that Hillerich & Bradsby were helping local retailers to increase sales (HB, 1917-1921).

A fourth facet of Hillerich & Bradsby's national advertising and promotion campaign centered on the slogan "Ask the bat boy, he knows." The slogan was intended to function in three ways. One, it was a slogan that young boys would remember upon seeing the advertising message in popular boys' magazines and in the *Famous Slugger* pamphlet. Two, the slogan conveyed that the bat boy was no different from any other boy. Any young player, not just the bat boy, could recognize both his hero and his hero's bat. Three, the slogan played upon hero worship and youthful aspirations for baseball suc-

cess. Boys playing in sandlot games realized that their professional heroes also began as sandlot players. Boys imitated their heroes by using the same bat in the hopes that maybe one day they, too, would become professional players (HB, 1917-1921).

The national advertising and promotion campaign began in 1919 and continued through 1923 without change. During this period total bat sales increased from 23,000 dozen in 1919 to approximately 140,000 dozen in 1923. Louisville Slugger sales increased from approximately 12,000 dozen in 1919 to over 50,000 dozen in 1923. Autograph model sales increased from approximately 6,000 dozen in 1919 to approximately 40,000 dozen in 1923. The top four moneymakers for Hillerich & Bradsby in 1923 were the Babe Ruth autograph model, the Ty Cobb autograph model, the Slugger Special, and the George Sisler autograph model. In 1923 Hillerich & Bradsby sold over one million bats. Hillerich & Bradsby had become the recognized leader in bat manufacturing (HB, 1917-1921).

Conclusion

Hillerich & Bradsby's strategic movements in the early 1900s are an influential part of the company's history. The 1912 push rule illustrates how new products are often introduced in an already competitive market. The push rule also highlights the dynamics of buyer-seller negotiations. The 1914 youth market decision illustrates the importance of knowing the consumer's preferences, both real and perceived. The 1919 national market-

ing and promotion campaign illustrates a promotional mix still viable in the 1990s. Hillerich & Bradsby's interfunctional planning among operations and marketing remains a fundamental premise of success in both sport and non-sport industries.

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