

also ranked as the second best in the ‘novel’ category, fourth in the ‘most amusing’ and fourth in the ‘best illustration’ category.⁹⁶

The competition to identify the article which chemists found ‘the most popular in business’, (presumably intended to test perceived selling power) however, showed BW&Co. trailing behind Beecham’s pills (400 votes), Vaseline (made by the Cheeseborough Manufacturing Company), Pear’s and Vinolia soaps (from Blondeau et Cie). Tabloids ranked fifth and Kepler Malt Extract eighth. When compared with the different character of Beecham’s cheap all purpose pills, vaseline, the two toiletry items, and the competition from such varied advertisements for mineral waters, perfumes, and chocolate, the performance of BW&Co. in these competitions suggest success in establishing strong visibility in the market represented by retail traders. The outcome of a similar exercise held in 1895 when colonial and foreign retailers were invited to vote, showed a similar unanimity in placing BW&Co. first in the best price list category and leading or coming second in several others.⁹⁷

Two other methods of advertising employed to create a high profile were the publicity associated with the use of medicine chests and cases, and the mounting of extravagant displays at exhibitions at home and overseas. As a source of advertising copy BW&Co.’s medicine chest and cases offered a large potential which BW&Co. exploited fully. International explorers, including Nansen, the Duke of Abruzzi, Jackson-Harmsworth, Scott, Shackleton, and Amundsen, and many early aviators including Beaumont, Vedrines, Pecquet, Bleriot, Wellman, and the balloonist, C.C. Turner took ‘Tabloid’ medical cases or chests with them, enthusiastic reports of their value quoted in advertisements and printed price list circulars and booklets.⁹⁸ Striking visual representation of the company’s products were employed in a worldwide market and formed an essential part of the assiduous cultivation of a distinctive corporate image in which an international dimension was a major feature through which the company was associated with initiative, leadership, and achievements of a spectacular kind.

In addition to advertising in print, an important dimension of the partners’ policy of promotion was through exhibitions, at home and overseas. The first exhibition at which the company’s products were displayed proved to be a disaster, inasmuch as the International Medical and Sanitary Exhibition held in South Kensington in 1881 produced no awards. The company’s exhibits elicited praise from the medical journals and its failure to win a single award evoked an outcry in the medical press which accused the executive committee responsible for organising the event of perpetrating a ‘glaring injustice’ against the American partners, one correspondent drawing attention to the award of a prize by one of the judges for an item for which he was the English agent. The organisers were also criticised for permitting (and making awards to) ‘injurious quack articles’, such as



‘the infallible worm specific’ and the ‘marvellous Oriental Balsam’.⁹⁹ The partners ignored the calls for instant correction of the injustice, doubtless regarding the sympathy as well as praise extended by the press as an unexpected bonus and added publicity. In the future, the company’s prizes were to accumulate in large numbers, the partners treating exhibitions as an opportunity to attract attention beyond the curiosity stimulated by new products. During the company’s first quarter century, its products had received 190 highest awards for scientific excellence in international exhibitions across the world.¹⁰⁰ Presentation, informative but also ingenious and spectacular, was a method by which the company and its products would be remembered and would reinforce the efforts of the travelling representatives on the road.

FIGURE 2.9
Display of
BW&Co.’s
products at
the Inter-
national
Medical and
Sanitary
Exhibition,
London, 1881.

‘Detailing’ doctors to create a demand; sales representatives on the road

From the time Burroughs became an independent agent in London in 1878 he had adopted a marketing policy with which he had become familiar under the Wyeths in the US: ‘detailing’ doctors, issuing samples, and advertising.¹⁰¹ While this policy was developed further under the partnership when Wellcome contributed his own ideas, the difficulties that Burroughs had encountered in recruiting sales representatives before 1880 persisted. This was manifested in the rapid turnover of salesmen during the 1880s. Between 1880 and 1886, no fewer than thirteen travellers were recruited at one time or another to maintain a sales force of four or five at any one time. Five of the travellers appointed between 1880 and 1886 remained with the company for less than a year.

Of three Americans appointed, only William Shepperson remained long with the company. Becoming one of its most effective salesmen during the 1880s, after two years in Britain he was sent to India where he was responsible for organising the company’s display at the 1883 Calcutta Exhibition and for promoting the company’s goods on that continent.¹⁰² Nationality, though, was less important than qualifications. The partners’ policy was to try to recruit only those possessing knowledge of medicine and/or pharmacy.¹⁰³ General practitioners, pharmacists, and a surgeon can be identified. Neither qualifications nor experience, however, guaranteed effective salesmanship; the surgeon, taken on for a month, was regarded as unsatisfactory, whereas Weld, of unknown experience but to become ‘chief’ of the travellers department, was one of the few representatives appointed in the early 1880s to stay with the firm. He became the first manager of the newly established Australian branch in 1886 before returning to the London office to fill an administrative role.¹⁰⁴ Experience of business was an additional advantage valued in travellers and reflected in the salary the partners were prepared to pay. Weld’s starting salary in 1883 was £100, rising to £280 by 1895, the year when George Pearson, a young, qualified pharmacist with trade experience (and a future general manager of the company), joined the firm at a salary of £200.¹⁰⁵ This compared with a dispensing chemist’s salary offered by the London Government Board of £120–£140, which the *Chemist & Druggist* considered average.¹⁰⁶ Salaries were regularly reviewed by the partners on the basis of travellers’ sales records and the annual reports each was required to submit. In 1892 Wellcome noticed that Maddox – whose salary which exceeded £500 plus expenses implies the possession of most of the desirable attributes of a drug salesman – was receiving the same salary as another who had recorded five times the value of sales. This discovery led to a reduction in Maddox’s salary to £500 plus expenses.¹⁰⁷ Several years earlier, when Burroughs wanted to appoint Dr Smith, a young physician, at

a salary of £1,000, Wellcome considered that his lack of business experience justified no more than £800.¹⁰⁸ These salaries appear to define the upper limit of the salary range. Even after fourteen years experience with the firm, Weld’s salary had risen to only £375 by 1897, a promotion to the office staff in the new sales department in 1898 increased that to £500.¹⁰⁹ These figures compare with estimated doctors’ net annual income after ‘expenses’ of less than £500 for over 50 per cent of their number in an over-populated medical profession;¹¹⁰ fewer than 18 per cent of general medical practitioners could earn more than £1,000.¹¹¹ The difficulty in recruiting satisfactory salesmen, therefore, is not explained by financial incentive but by the unusual and exacting requirement of a combination of some knowledge of medicine or pharmacy with business capability and personal sales drive. The partners did not always see eye to eye on this; Wellcome emphasised medical experience, Burroughs a commercial record. When in the US in 1883, Burroughs offered a position to H. John Van Schaack. Wellcome, who knew Schaack well, ruled this out. He described Schaack, who had previously worked in his father’s business, as clever and active, but that ‘his brusque harem scarum manner will never be accepted in this country’. Wellcome insisted that even if Schaack was to *pay the partners* \$2,000 still he would not consider employing him.¹¹² Wellcome insisted that no travellers should be appointed who might push the company’s goods as if they were patent medicines, a risk that he evidently felt Burroughs did not see. For that reason he vetoed appointments when the candidates’ experiences were limited to that line of goods.¹¹³

The relatively strict criteria insisted upon when appointing the firm’s representatives was crucial because of the precise character of the firm’s innovative approach to marketing from the beginning. The *Medical Press & Circular*’s report on the firm in 1881 drew attention to the ‘new line of practice not hitherto followed by English firms: of presenting samples of new preparations to practitioners who desire to test them, and by not advertising in any but medical and pharmaceutical journals’.¹¹⁴ In 1888 the *Chemist & Druggist* remarked on those and other characteristics of the American practices the partners had introduced to Britain. They had taken up agencies of leading American firms, introducing their products in lavish style and adding their own specialities. By anticipating the demands of medical professionals, the partners had ‘acted with the utmost loyalty to their pharmaceutical colleagues’ by creating ‘an entirely new class of business ... by methods and manners sufficiently novel to record’.¹¹⁵ This was a remarkable tribute to the two Americans, for both the profession and many in the trade had been, and continued to be, deeply suspicious of proprietary medicines as an encouragement to self medication and a threat to trade. Evidence that this fear was slow to be allayed is found in a circular issued to all travellers in 1901 in which the question posed was:

‘What is the state of medical men’s bogey of self medication? Are more or less medical men mentioning it?’¹¹⁶

The partners’ marketing policy and the philosophy that lay behind it were described in detail, with characteristic pomposity, by Burroughs in 1882.

This policy must evidently succeed a policy of demonstrations of facts showing that the dealers and merchants benefited to a proper extent as well as the consumer and prescriber. Thus by leading and not crowding, by inducing and not urging, by showing favours and not

asking any, by proving our ability and purpose to benefit our customers as well as ourselves and make his interests our own and both mutual – thus will he effect to purchase instead of our asking him to order and encourage the sale of our own goods in every way. Such a policy gives one the right basis of equity, would make our business a mutual reciprocity of favours between our customers and ourselves – making it evident that we travel as much for their interests as our own and that in serving them and throughout the world we shall deserve to make through honesty of purpose and industry of conduct a competence for ourselves also.¹¹⁷

A note composed in 1883 headed ‘Instructions to Travellers’, probably sent to Wellcome by Burroughs, emphasised the importance of approaching the retailer before calling on doctors and persuading him to order so that the traveller could later refer to him as the company’s agent when visiting the doctors. In the event of retailer’s refusal to place an order, travellers were expected to try to secure an undertaking that he would order the company’s goods if presented with prescriptions issued by doctors from a list which travellers supplied to retailers.¹¹⁸ Retailers who stocked a full line of the company’s principal goods were provided with circulars and pamphlets each bearing the retailer’s name as ‘agent’ to BW&Co., the intention being to increase his authority to make recommendations.¹¹⁹

Burroughs also used his experience on the road before 1880 when advising Wellcome on the detailed logistics of enlisting the support of doctors. The somewhat didactic and repetitive manner in which the advice was delivered must have been irksome to Wellcome who also possessed experience as a sales representative, though he acknowledged Burroughs’ expertise.¹²⁰ From Lahore early in 1883, Burroughs wrote to Wellcome recommending that he canvas doctors in the London hospitals, beginning with St Bartholomew’s and the Royal Free, rather than at their homes where they saw private patients. He explained why Wellcome should ‘go for the hospitals strong’ for a few hours during afternoons. One reason was that the doctors and surgeons were assembled in the same place and therefore were more accessible, particularly if he gained entrance to the private room where they usually gathered to chat at the end of the day: ‘The time of a London doctor which at hospital is nothing to him is worth a guinea a minute’ [in private consulting rooms]. The second reason was that he had found doctors to be more likely to try novelties on hospital than on private patients, partly because of the hope that reports of tests might be published. He also urged Wellcome to ‘get in with hospital surgeons’ and to visit the hospital apothecary who would make appointments to see all the leading surgeons’ others at convenient hours. Finally, he noted that Formula Lists should be given to students and that he should ‘talk them up immensely’.¹²¹ How much time Wellcome could afford to spend on these afternoon rounds in person

FIGURE 2.10
Early
BW&Co.
products:
Burroughs
beef and
iron wine;
Kepler cod
liver oil with
malt extract;
Kepler
extract of
malt; Wyeth’s
compressed
tablets of
chlorate of
potash and
borax; and
Lawton’s
absorbent
cotton wool,
in a sample
case that
also contains
a price list
of other
products.

