

BUT WAIT . . . THERE'S MORE!

Tighten Your Abs, Make Millions, and Learn How the \$100 Billion Infomercial Industry Sold Us Everything but the Kitchen Sink

By Remy Stern

Collins Business, \$24.99

A book exploring the world of infomercials could hardly fail to entertain, and Stern doesn't disappoint, introducing us to a rogues' gallery of hucksters, the products and programs they tantalizingly plug, and the millions of Americans who just can't resist the pitch. He begins with a visit to the home of the immortal Ron Popeil—he of the Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ and dozens of other as-seen-on-TV products—and briskly skims over a history of on-air selling before tackling the psychology of “this weird world of late-night entertainment,” including the “American quest for self-fulfillment.”

And then Stern settles in among the wacky guys chopping vegetables, the pitches for Trump Institute seminars, and the testimonials to no-pain weight loss and extreme beauty. Halfway through the book, he dives into murkier waters, exploring those who dangle promises of riches before drowsy viewers. Most of these salesmen trail checkered histories, phony qualifications, legal judgments, and even criminal convictions; in fact, hardly any late-night seller of anything seems to have escaped altogether the long arms of the FTC, IRS, or BBB.

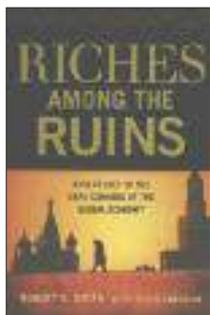
Perhaps the worst offenders are those hawking programs to make millions through buying and selling real estate, a scheme whose victims never come out ahead and whose outlines have remained intact for years. “Almost every get-rich-quick infomercial on television is a sham,” Stern notes in a chapter titled “Crooks and Liars.” He also takes on dubious vitamin salesmen before brightening the narrative with a tour of QVC and a report from the annual industry convention in Las Vegas.

Along the way, Stern asks most of the questions that might occur to anyone interested: “So where do all these products come from? Do any of them work? Is there anything real that gets sold on late-night television?” Few of the answers are shockers, but they're all dinner-conversation-worthy: how much Erik Estrada's Arizona developments are really worth, what shipping and handling *should* cost versus what it *does* cost, whether supplies truly are limited. And Stern manages to shine a light on a genuinely dark side of consumer culture while still seeming to remain tickled by the whole idea of late-night infomercials. As he remarks, “We enjoy being sold to.” —MATTHEW BUDMAN

RICHES AMONG THE RUINS

Adventures in the Dark Corners
Of the Global Economy

By Robert P. Smith with Peter Zheutlin
AMACOM, \$24.95



If the U.S. economy is terrorizing you these days, then you clearly haven't been to El Salvador, Nigeria, Turkey, Vietnam, and some of the world's other

chaotic financial frontiers. In these “dark corners of the global economy,” unpredictability is all that's predictable.

But that hasn't stopped Robert Smith from making—and losing—millions of dollars trading the sovereign debts of these nation's governments. In *Riches Among the Ruins*, Smith recounts his travels to emerging markets devastated by war, revolution, and corruption. “On a single day in 1998, I lost \$15 million in the ruins of the Russian economy,” Smith begins. From there, the book is a rambunctious rollercoaster that dodges bullets and missiles, maneuvers around shady characters, and speeds through all sorts of danger.

For example, Smith vividly describes trolling Baghdad's dodgy streets looking for leads in his effort to cash in on Iraq's enormous debt in 2004, surviving a hotel blast in El Salvador, and avoiding shake-

down artists in Nigeria. But Smith's experiences are provocative not because they reveal that really scary things go in really scary places—as if you didn't already know that Baghdad had some “security issues”—but because they highlight the pitfalls of entering what are perhaps the world's last untapped markets.

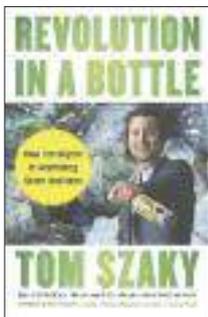
At the same time, Smith's portrayal of emerging markets shines an unnerving light on the state of today's economy. Indeed, in the book's final chapter, Smith asks, “What if I could see my own country through the lens that I used to assess my business prospects in El Salvador, Nigeria, or Guatemala?” Despite the United States' deteriorating infrastructure, mounting debt, rising unemployment, and huge deficit, Smith points out that

that the United States is *not* El Salvador, Nigeria, or Guatemala. “For all its economic problems, [the United States] is and will remain a stable and relatively predictable place to invest, create a business, and thrive.” —VADIM LIBERMAN

REVOLUTION IN A BOTTLE

How TerraCycle Is Redefining Green Business
By Tom Szaky
Portfolio, \$15.00

Revolution in a Bottle is a trashy read, even though there’s nothing dirty about it. In fact, the book is all about how to clean up the world. In writing about the founding and evolution of TerraCycle, a company that “makes the greenest, most affordable and effective products from waste,” founder Tom Szaky transforms the meaning of garbage. Much of what we throw away can—and should—be recycled, or, as the author puts it, “upcycled.” At TerraCycle, discarded



drink pouches blossom into tote bags, cookie wrappers become accessories, and yogurt containers transform into plant pots.

In launching his business,

Szaky admits a right-time/right-place fortune. However, *Revolution in a Bottle* is also a frank, gritty account of the challenges that all entrepreneurs face. As such, there’s little that’s unique to Szaky’s story: College dropout with a dream struggles to start his own business, quickly realizes that success demands more than just a dream, and eventually overcomes the odds to actually fulfill that dream. But the familiar

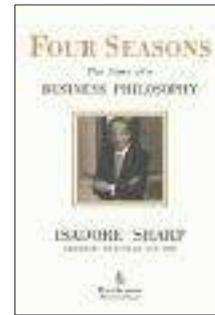
storyline doesn’t make the book any less refreshing to read, for you get the sense that, despite the business world’s Darwinian attempts to test his company, Szaky remains the same idealist he was when he first decided to package worm poop in soda cans to sell as fertilizer.

Sadly, the author offers little insight into other corporations’ attempts to greenwash the public, and if you’re looking for applicable business lessons, most seem either obvious or too specific to TerraCycle. Still, *Revolution in a Bottle* does manage to inspire without resorting to naïve and condescending I-did-it-and-so-can-you messages. How refreshing in a book genre that consistently spews such . . . garbage. —V.L.

FOUR SEASONS

The Story of a Business Philosophy
By Isadore Sharp with Alan Phillips
Portfolio, \$29.95

Hasn’t Four Seasons always been with us? Actually, no—the first U.S. hotel under the name opened in 1979, and New York didn’t get its flagship Four Seasons until 1993. In this pleasant account of a life and a business—one that at times feels more promotional than soul-baring—hotelier Sharp chronicles his rise, from joining his father’s Toronto construction business to entering the hospitality industry to realizing a five-star vision. It’s a story worth at least a skim for the bright tidbits—for instance, how along the way Sharp’s hotels introduced many amenities now standard in any Sheraton suite: “bigger bath towels and thicker hand towels . . . shampoo in all our rooms . . . bathrobes, overnight laundry, and shoeshines,” along with nonsmoking floors and fitness clubs. And it’s hard to resist smiling when reading of



how, for his first motel, Sharp came up with “Four Seasons” on a whim; his first choice, “Thunderbird,” was already spoken for.

By Hollywood

standards, the plot lacks tension and drama: People accuse Sharp of delusions of grandeur and tell him that his plans will fail, but, of course, they don’t; he acknowledges occasional errors and setbacks but doesn’t dwell on them; his tough decisions—for instance, his refusal to lower prices during the 1981-82 recession—pay off. Fortunately, Sharp’s writing voice is engagingly plainspoken if not exactly magisterial—he really does sound like just a guy who had the idea of building “a group of the best hotels in the world,” caught some lucky breaks, stuck to his principles, and came out on top, along the way setting a new standard and creating a household name.

And Sharp’s efforts to distinguish Four Seasons by “the consistent quality of our exceptional service”—service based on “a corporate culture” rather than via policy mandate—are deeply felt. In 1980, he determined that service was lagging and set out to enforce standards by cleaning house, firing people up and down the hierarchy. “It’s perhaps the hardest thing I ever did,” he writes. “But the fastest way for management to destroy its credibility is to say employees come first and be seen putting them last. Better to not profess any values than to not live up to them.” That’s as close as Sharp comes to pausing his narrative to deliver hackneyed homilies about how readers can follow his example. The lessons are implicit in the story. —M.B.