

THE INCOMPETENT VACUUM CLEANER SALESMAN

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An interesting and rather pretentious set of initials, you suppose? Now why would I insist on displaying my qualifications? Not through vanity I assure you. More below. Read on and enjoy the Engineer's Revenge!

Door to door salesmen have a tough life – rightly so, especially if they arrive on your doorstep unannounced. The regulations have changed over the years, but I do know a story about one vacuum cleaner salesman who had his just desserts.

Many years ago I used to work at the UK research labs of the Philips organisation. We were divided into four or five divisions that undertook logically separated blocks of work in targeted or applied research. Philips was not an entirely philanthropic organisation, and depended on harvesting the fruits of research to develop new or interesting products. Or, more often than not, to secure watertight international patents that could be traded with other companies for exploitation on a profitable basis. Unhappily I must now confess that my work contributed in part to the worldwide development of radar controlled traffic lights and to the worldwide radar controlled speed trap, using the aptly named Gunn diode – mea culpa.

One division at the labs acted as a service division. It was known as the “Engineering Division”. You will now learn of my pet hatred – the use of the term “Engineer” to describe anyone who can wield spanner, tyre lever or soldering iron. Such people are service agents and should properly be known at best as technicians. Professional engineers tread a long and very comprehensive road before becoming accredited as an “Engineer”. They need an extensive professional education at university; professional mentoring; evidence of several years training and leadership experience plus sponsorship by a professional engineer before being even allowed to apply for membership of one of the incorporated engineering institutions. This does not square with Wayne fixing your television aerial and boldly proclaiming on the side of his white van “Television and Aerial Engineer – Satellite and digital specialist”. To be fair, the engineering professions have only got themselves to blame for this unholy mess. One can now apply for a protected European title - European engineer, or “Ingenor” - somewhat unhappily abbreviated to the awful sounding “Eur. Ing”. (That won't be a problem now we have left the EU ofcourse). However the Dutch and Germans do not have this problem – just the British. Professional engineers (Chemical; Electrical; Civil; Software, etc,) can also apply for the status of Chartered Engineer, or C.Eng, – which many do and which

of course costs an annual fee. You can now see from the title of this piece that I did it the hard way, and in due course became a Chartered Engineer.

Enough of my pet hatred about the stupidity of our engineering professions and their corporate inability to prevent TV repair jockeys from calling themselves engineers. You want to know about the poor unfortunate vacuum cleaner salesman.

I need to stop talking about irrelevancies, my pet hatred and getting sidetracked. We were talking about the "Engineering Division" at the Philip Research labs. This division boasted professional engineers *and* technicians with the highest specialised engineering skills. Each of the functional divisions was serviced by an engineer within the Engineering division, and could thus call upon the services of numerous really competent technicians. Whilst dealing with one of them, over a cup of coffee after a "job" successfully designed, constructed and completed to my complete satisfaction my technician related to me the story of *The Vacuum Cleaner Salesman*. Like me, this technician believed in keeping his home equipment properly in order by oiling and greasing the appropriate bits; tightening bolts and screws where necessary and generally keeping a proprietorial eye well focussed on his domestic equipment. One day, whilst he was at work, a vacuum cleaner salesman called at home, and would not take "Go away!" for the answer from my colleague's wife. So he insisted on returning to show her husband the superiority of his company's wares at eight pm, by which time her husband would be home, fed and watered and available for a fight. Poor fellow. One almost feels sorry for him already – the salesman I mean. He turned up on cue and proceeded to demonstrate his wares. Unfortunately he made a key mistake. He claimed that his product was so constructed that it made use not only of the vacuum generated but also of the air pressure left behind where the air used to be before it became a vacuum. Thus it had TWICE the sucking power....!! Now any physicist or engineer would see through that load of baloney straight away. To give my colleague his credit he kept a straight face. The salesman – now on a roll - attempted to demonstrate how powerful his machine was by lifting up an (old style) penny. My colleague immediately sized up his prey and suggested a comparative test between the two machines – his own and that of the interloper. Through increasing tests of lifting power and two cups of tea later the interloper eventually failed to pick up a half crown coin whilst the old machine happily held on to the currency and to a number of even heavier items. Partial collapse of salesman! The noose was beginning to tighten.

It was now 10:30 pm. My colleague decided to go for the jugular. His teeth were beginning to tighten upon the salesman's neck. "How about checking the machines for comparable serviceability?" he suggested, in a friendly enough manner. The salesman

blanched and said that in his view servicing would never be necessary. “Nonsense!” said my colleague. “Let’s dismantle both machines to their fundamental components and see exactly how to service them.” Foolishly, the salesman agreed. He had probably never seen the inside of his offering, let alone be taught how to parry questioning blows about disassembly; maintenance; checking or replacing brushes or bearings, followed by successful reassembly.

And so it proved. Two hours later the outcome was a cast iron certainty. My colleague’s cleaner, an ancient Hoover Senior model 652 was disassembled; checked and reassembled in minutes. The disconsolate salesman beat as hasty a retreat as he decently could, carrying an armful of disassembled and broken plastic parts out to his car at around half an hour after midnight. He was never seen in the area again.

John Wells