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Manufacturing and the importance of global marketing

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MANUFACTURING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GLOBAL MARKETING

Paula de la Cruz-Fernández

Introduction

Shortly after winning the sewing machine patent war in the United States in 1863 and establishing itself as a major US manufacturing company, Singer plants opened around the world to meet increasing global demand. This was an epoch-making event in the history of global manufacturing and illustrates the determinants behind why and how manufacturing companies expanded to global markets. As with the makers of radiators, reapers, bicycles, and automobiles, mass manufacturing and patenting were pivotal for Singer to win domestic and global markets for sewing machines. During the first five decades of activity, the US-headquartered company exceeded the production and international sales of any other manufacturer of sewing machines (Wilkins 1970; Hounshell 1984: 94–96).

The Singer case is known for its manufacturing, yet the company’s adamant goal of controlling the demand side was also important (Davies 1976; Hounshell 1984: 84). While other small technology makers also invested in sales branches, Singer was particularly innovative because it built up its own global selling organization (Wilkins 1970: 35–64). “By 1905 Singer employed twice as many workers in marketing compared with its production operations,” Andrew Godley calculates, mostly in canvassing: taking domestic sewing machines to virtually every interested home was a marketing pillar of the corporation. A system of installment payments was also offered to individual purchasers and a network of Singer (only) shops and warehouses greatly advanced Singer over its competitors at home and abroad (Godley 2006: 267, 280).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Singer was not the only US-headquartered company producing and selling its goods abroad. Other companies such as Kodak, the American Radiator Company, and International Harvester also produced and sold outside the United States (Wilkins 1970). The American Radiator Company had manufacturing and selling subsidiaries in France and Germany by the end of the nineteenth century, where consumers had demonstrated interest in the American technology over local manufacturers (Wilkins 1969). International Harvester’s agricultural machinery was also distributed across Europe. In Russia, the company realized the importance of providing credit to farmers and having a sales organization that could better understand the consumers’ economy (Carstensen 1984: 225–229). What made Singer unique, and successful for so long, however, was the building of globally connected markets based on cultures of private consumption.
When Singer sewing machines were introduced in households, they generated new markets for clothing. Their availability also attracted new female consumers in countries like Japan, and India, where sewing was primarily done by men (Gordon 2008; Arnold 2011). High demand for sewing machines worldwide was met by hundreds of canvassers who traveled across countries and cities knocking on doors and selling sewing machines to individual households. Although millions of sewing machines were used in workshops, whether large or family based, such a system worked because most sewing and embroidered products were done inside the home. Even in advanced industrialized nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where family or home-based workshops also remained important alongside factory establishments, wide availability of ready-to-wear clothing was not generalized in urban centers until the early twentieth century (Burman 1999; Green 1997; Zakim 2003). The same household-focused marketing system was gradually introduced, and generally successfully, throughout the world (Davies 1976).

Along with traveling agents and salesmen, Singer was made up of a robust and extended salesforce that focused on the products of machine sewing, namely embroidery and plain sewing, to make sewing machines more marketable. Although often outside official employees’ records, women within the organization created marketing strategies that connected with the practices of everyday life, such as the making of house linens or embroidering for infant clothes. “Singer women,” i.e., sales people making products for the home and representing the company by using only Singer sewing machines, created a strong connection between private, customary household practices, and the global organization. Because it extends to the realm of culture, historians of international business have largely overlooked the role of sewing and embroidery household practices in building the multinational corporation. This chapter looks at window fronts, sewing and embroidery exhibitions, and home sewing and embroidery lessons that were part of Singer’s organization in every country where it operated by the 1920s. These visually attractive scenes demonstrate that marketing reached within the limits of the private home and thus explains the importance of maintaining a global, centrally managed organization for more than a century. While historians of multinationals focus primarily on manufacturing operations, a market analysis of how the products reach the consumer captures the role of culture and social practices in global business. This chapter builds upon the current scholarship on Singer and US multinational corporations (Bucheli 2005; Bonin and de Goey 2009; Wilkins and Hill 2011; Arnold 2013; Gordon 2012), by bringing women, culture, and the consumer side into the analysis of global corporate organization. By exploring why women sewed and embroidered, the products they made, and how these became symbols and marketing strategies of the Singer Sewing Machine Corporation globally, this study brings the company–customer relations element to the front of the analysis of multinational corporations.

First, this chapter examines the organization of international exhibitions, where manufacturers met to showcase their progress in the late nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century. These exhibitions became Singer’s initial marketing strategy to address global markets. Second, the chapter explores Singer’s system of shops and window fronts, well established by the 1920s, to situate Singer’s marketing efforts both locally and globally. The sources of this research, mostly visual culture materials or marketing tools elaborated with the aim of selling, are unconventional in the study of multinationals’ history. These were made at different Singer departments such as the Embroidery Department, a unit created in the 1890s to support the company’s marketing efforts, and the Education Department, created in the mid-1920s. Andrew Gordon (2012) points to their development and clear influence in creating new consumers for sewing machines in Japan in the twentieth century. These efforts, this study demonstrates, were global and constituent of the multinational corporate organization. Departments
that focused on marketing were key both for the success of the company and for its corporate global organization that only continued to grow after 1900.

Going global, going domestic: international exhibitions and the global marketing of traditional home sewing and ornamental embroidery

Beginning in the 1870s, Singer developed a unique strategy that combined marketing with family and traditional sewing and embroidery practices and focused on international consumers. At international exhibitions in the United States, manufacturers celebrated modernity through their exhibits of machines, large and small, linking industrialization prowess with civilization and economic advancement. Singer, unlike its sewing machine competitors, placed special emphasis on these events, organizing large displays at the Philadelphia World’s Fair in 1876, the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition of 1904. The 1851 British Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations had set up a precedent for international meetings concentrated on manufacturing progress around the globe. International exhibits, celebrated regularly in the United States after the 1870s to show the country’s recovery from war and its world leadership in machine manufacturing, were exemplary encounters of manufacturers and consumers embracing the novelties of a new era of industrialization (Rydell 1993). At the Machinery Hall in Philadelphia, for example, thousands of newly invented machines, from stoves and typewriters to foundries and engines, were exhibited.

At its first large exhibit in 1876, Singer began hiring women to oversee these events (or at least to decide what and how to display). Rather than highlighting mass manufacturing of clothing, Singer maintained its preference to display how and what women sewed and embroidered for private purposes. In doing so, the company elevated the consumer (as a producer) to an important element of its organization. Sewing machines were sold to make products, becoming a household tool continuously running and thus making home manufacturers dependent on both the company’s maintenance service and its creative experts who came up with ideas of what to make with the sewing machine.

Singer’s attention to women and their sewing appeared even earlier on in the company’s history. In 1850, the Singer Co. was created. By 1865, Singer’s Family model became the company’s most popular machine (Hounshell 1984: 87–91). From then on, Singer’s technology varied slightly. Decorations in the machine or attachments for sewing styles were added, though changes to the basic model were limited. Before the American Civil War (1861–1865), in fliers and in store demonstrations in the United States, it was women who demonstrated for other customers what to do with a sewing machine. And it was women who the company was trying to attract when it began decorating its showrooms and hiring salesmen to take the sewing machine to households (Burman 1999; Bacon 1946; Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin 2009).

Singer was not alone in targeting women, yet the company’s investment in marketing with women was larger than other companies’ efforts. Other US manufacturers such as Domestic, New Home, Household, or Wheeler and Wilson issued trade cards that sought to attract women and housewives as consumers. In 1882, for example, Domestic published a trade card featuring a couple getting married. A sewing machine, the card explained, was the perfect present for the newly married woman. To show its manufacturing counterparts and competitors that the company was on the rise after the war, Singer hosted the largest display the company would ever organize at a national convention. Internationalizing enterprises such as McCormick or International Harvester also organized displays within exhibits manufacturing halls (Carstensen 1984).

Yet Singer went bigger than others. It put up an entire building to show what the family sewing machine, a sewing machine manufactured for individual and domestic use, could achieve.
At the Centennial Building, the products on display ranged from cushions to bibs, all items that were considered to make a comfortable home. Women across Singer stores in the United States, and some from the newly opened shops in Germany and England, sent samples of their work, such as embroidered table covers, curtains, and embroidered scarfs. Robes, pillow shams, children’s clothes, and embroidered aprons filled up the rooms of Singer’s building in Philadelphia’s most important industrial exhibit of the nineteenth century (Centennial Singer Manufacturing Co.’s Catalog of Exhibits, 1876: 4–9).

Philadelphia’s exhibit meant an important shift in corporate organization. Although a specific department was not created until the company prepared to participate in Chicago’s World Exhibition in 1893, significant employee and branding efforts were directed toward making Singer look like a company that cared for households, or at least for their ornamentation and for keeping sewing and embroidery traditions alive. As Elizabeth Bacon (1946: 90) put it, Singer “blaz[ed] the trail” in marketing and advertising sewing machines. The world’s largest manufacturer of sewing machines, the Singer Sewing Machine Company, had already taken the lead in marketing by 1900 (Bacon 1946; Godley 2006). By displaying the insides of an ideal household and the products that women could put in it, Singer penetrated the environments of private life more effectively than issuing trade cards with images of aristocratic looking women and families. At exhibitions, women were talking to women and showing them that sewing machines were there to ease their labor and to enhance their role in the home. The company recognized that sample making of household items, such as tablecloths or curtains, something that was generally taught to girls along with reading or cooking, was an effective, low cost marketing strategy. Although women did not become Singer canvassers, because traveling and selling were not considered appropriate activities for respectable women to engage in, they became a pillar of Singer’s permanent marketing strategies (Friedman 2004: 53, 60).

For the Chicago exhibit, Singer had already created a department to make samples to be displayed in stores and in international showrooms. Women working at stores in the United States and in Singer’s foreign markets in the early 1890s, such as Germany, England, and Spain, sent samples to demonstrate the products of their labor. By 1893 the Embroidery Department, filled with women both skilled and in training, took care of sample making. They also oversaw the preparation of showrooms for domestic sewing machines at exhibitions. At the Chicago’s World Exhibition, Singer announced its exhibit of “Fine Sewing and Art Needlework” to be hosted in the Manufacturers Liberal Arts building. Here, the official catalogue for the exhibit explained, “a half core of young ladies, [demonstrated] all the different kinds of sewing and Art Needle Work that can be accomplished on the Sewing Machines.” Embroidered curtains, bed covers, and tablecloths, all made on Singer domestic sewing machines, transformed household rooms into modern homes, they explained (The Singer Manufacturing Co.’s Exhibit of Family Sewing Machines and Art Embroidery 1893; A New Era in Family Sewing Machines for Fine Sewing and Art Needlework 1893).

Machines made a home modern because domestic tasks were done more efficiently and economically. Such was a common association among advertisers of new technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Advertisers of washing machines focused on time saving before the twentieth century, and on washing efficiency in the 1940s (Woersdorfer 2017). Also, common among manufacturers, though not specifically US sewing machines companies, was Singer’s extension of its product’s association with modernity to its international consumers. Singer sewing machines were manufactured at three locations, the United States, England, and Germany in the 1880s, and in at least four factories in four different countries by 1900. By 1905, machines were delivered by thousands of canvassers and sold throughout the world. For Chicago’s grand exhibit in 1893, Singer prepared a collection of postcards portraying either families
or women by themselves from around the world using the sewing machine in a domestic looking setting and making traditional embroidery items. Only in the case of India’s postcard were men the ones using the sewing machine because they were mostly in charge of tailoring. The darzi or tailor was commonly seen with a sewing machine, but the idea of sewing as a domestic and proper activity for women in the home gained acceptance over the nineteenth and twentieth century (Arnold 2011: 411–416, 426). The same type of advertising was used at the Pan-American Exhibit in 1901 (Buffalo, New York) and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 (St. Louis, Missouri). In St. Louis, as had happened almost thirty years earlier, Singer had its own pavilion where “examples of beautiful needlework done on Singer machines for family use,” were on display while trade cards were given as a handout (Sewing Machine Times 14(312) 1904). Following nineteenth-century cultural attitudes that highlighted the United States’ superior role in terms of development and industry over indigenous peoples and overseas competitors, Singer cards described the sewing machine as a modernizing tool (Adas 2009; Domosh 2006).

Cultural constructions of race and gender traveled alongside commodities such as sewing machines and reapers as their advertisers built up an image of civilization and modernity around their consumption (Domosh 2006). The gender component was key as well within Singer’s descriptions and images, showing the sewing machine as woman’s most important technology to satisfy and achieve a western-based definition of domesticity around the world. Singer’s homogenizing assumptions of what it meant to be a woman in the 1900s, and the race-based characterization of a civilized world versus the yet-to-be civilized indigenous peoples, was part of most of its advertising for exhibits in the United States. Women in Cuba, a territory under US jurisdiction after 1898, commonly used Singer sewing machines to make their “light, loose dress[es], befitting the climate and her surroundings.” The Philippines card, which like the Cuban one showed a woman alone wearing traditional attire, praised the US role in liberating and developing this part of the world after centuries of formal colonialism. “Ladies of Manila” now used Singer sewing machines, which, “like in every other part of the world, [are] one of the foremost factors of civilization.” In most cases, Singer trade cards celebrated women’s beauty and their devotion to the home or the family. The descriptions averaged both a condescending and a celebratory tone, placing the responsibility of social progress, modernity, and the protection of culture, tradition, and even racial superiority upon women and their prescribed domestic role in the home. “The Spanish woman,” a 1904 Singer card for Spain described, “has none of the creole languor of the Spanish-descended woman of Cuba, Mexico and tropical America.” By “industrious[ly]” making traditional embroidered items and sewing on modern Singer sewing machines, she, “better than the man of her race,” would light Spain’s future (Singer National Costume Cards, Wolfsonian Museum, 1904).

Exhibit visitors who read and kept Singer’s cards were possibly affirmed in their conviction of the international attraction and wonders of modern, and American, industrial innovation. The 1901 and 1904 cards included more locations in Latin America where Singer sewing machines and other US-made manufacturers were being delivered beginning in the twentieth century, and where the United States had more and more geopolitical interests (O’Brien 1996). By publishing the cards depicting people from 36 nations, from every location in the world where the company had a manufacturing plant (five in Europe and the United States by 1905) or a retail organization, however, Singer also showed the extension of its marketing system. At the turn of the twentieth century, Singer had a distribution system in place capable of moving hundreds of thousands of machines across borders and oceans, and on a wide variety of transportation systems including canoes and donkeys, whatever it took to connect with consumers all around the world (Red S Review 1920–1950).
Singer’s investment in marketing in the United States and overseas was high. There is no data to compare with other sewing machine manufacturers in the nineteenth century mostly because Singer’s overseas marketing operations were larger than any of its American competitors. Singer spent half of its earnings in retail stores, employee salaries, and travel all around the world (Godley 2006). Singer’s marketing developed quickly as a response to high competition in the United States in the 1860s and 1870s, yet global marketing took its own path as the company did not have plants everywhere its machines were sold. Merchants and wholesalers were selling goods made in plants in the United States and Great Britain all around the world, but Singer’s exclusive selling system already in place in 23 countries by 1905 was incomparable to any other global manufacturer at the time (Jones 2005: 195; Godley 2006: 285; Singer Sewing Machine Co. Directory of Shops 1905).

Contracting canvassing men to transport sewing machines, and staging elaborate displays at international exhibitions, were the company’s main interests around 1900. Singer shops, however, became Singer’s best way to market in a more permanent way in the United States and abroad. Unlike temporary international exhibitions, shops could act as showrooms. While other sewing machine manufacturers chose to sell their machines at new and expanding department stores opening in large urban centers throughout the world in the last third of the nineteenth century, Singer refused to do so, maintaining exclusivity through a unique system of selling, demonstrating, and technology maintenance all within one location. Within stores, all sorts of activities to sell machines were organized. Singer shops hosted permanent demonstrations, group lessons, manuals, contests, and schools. At the stores and in the manuals, what mattered was household sewing and ornamental embroidery. The Embroidery Department, initially created to make samples for exhibits and schools, was now composed of women and men from all around the world applying and adjusting the sewing machine to household and family purposes. The strategy was so successful in increasing sales of the family machine that Singer created another department for marketing purposes in the mid-1920s, the Education Department. While the Manufacturing Trade Department had grown in the first four decades of expansion by opening plants across Europe, both the Embroidery and the Education Departments were on the rise. Globally, during the first half of the twentieth century, they would become Singer’s most important and successful part of the corporate organization.

Global marketing for global domesticity
Salesmen knocking on doors and retail establishments were a common scene of early twentieth-century urban centers. This was a time of automobile manufacturing expansion, for example, and yet the Singer Sewing Machine Company, after opening its Russian factory in 1902, almost exclusively expanded through its marketing organization (Carstensen 1984; Wilkins 1970). While Singer shops and buildings were opening in large cities and small towns throughout the world, the number of company manufacturing plants stayed static (except for Italy’s 1934, Australia’s and Istanbul’s in 1960) and were capable of supplying Singer retail locations in every continent. Trade limitations of Singer’s first global expansion, namely counterfeiting and competition, had been tackled through marketing as well; and this strategy continued to be effective against other global manufacturers such as the German Pfaff at least until the mid-twentieth century (Gordon 2012: 151–185; Arnold 2013). Since the 1870s, Singer sewing machines were only sold at Singer locations and by Singer agents, and such strategy was applied overseas as well. Singer built up its name by making it visible not only in its sewing machines, but also in stores in the most crowded locations of towns and cities, at schools, at exhibitions, and through their hundreds of salesmen and saleswomen that traveled all throughout each country where the
company operated. Sewing machine companies worldwide were using stores and canvassers as well, but well below the level of Singer (Berghahn 2014: 58–62; Hausen 1985; Iza-Góñola de Miguel 2005; Gordon 2012). Although by the 1920s, canvassers were still an essential part of Singer’s (retail) organization, Singer’s marketing focus was turning to two departments – the Embroidery Department and the Education Department. Both remained concerned about reaching remote locations and offering credit options to consumers, but the idea that the Singer sales person had to be more in alliance with the customer’s sewing and embroidery preferences and practices gained more relevance.

The Embroidery Department had been created to organize displays at international exhibits and stores, and it concentrated on ornamentation and artistic sewing. Prescriptive literature on domesticity in the nineteenth century included sewing as an activity that girls would ideally learn as they became young women, and eventually wives and mothers. Embroidery was fundamental for legitimizing the use of an industrial technology in the house because it allegedly uplifted the practice of home sewing from a house chore to an artistic, female identity enrichment practice. Embroidered or decorated family and household objects carried the maker’s unique touch, the embroiderer’s original sense and appreciation of beauty, and an understanding of decoration (Boris 1986; Burman 1999). An additional element that embroidery brought to marketing was its culturally specific attribution. Decorative motifs were distinct depending on location. Whether geometric, floral, or figurative, many embroidery designs were exclusive to certain regions, cultures, and nations and such diversity of patterns and styles added even more value to the work that women around the world were doing by making samples of embroidered objects with a Singer sewing machine. Because it could be used in decorating the home, or in adding a personal touch to the family’s clothes, embroidery brought the private sphere to Singer.

Embroidery schools were a widespread practice in every region where Singer had a branch or a retail organization by the beginning of the 1930s. These schools became the company’s central method of marketing traditional and household-related sewing and embroidery. The official establishment of these courses began in the early 1910s (Red S Review 2(3 and 4) 1930). They were a result of the success of sewing and embroidery one-to-one demonstrations. Since the company opened its first stores, sales people had been encouraged to show potential clients the range of objects that they could make with a sewing machine. Canvassing agents, mostly with the help of instructresses, also found that demonstrations would attract more customers. It was extra time that the sales agent could spend with a client. Either inside homes, at markets, or in the streets of small towns, sample making was an extended Singer practice throughout the world. In a market in Kajang, British Indies, a location controlled by the Singapore Agency, two men demonstrated sewing to a crowd in a street market. Similar reports arrived at Singer’s British Central Office from agents in Spain and Portugal. In the early 1900s, women accompanied Mexican Singer agents to advertise sewing machines in rural areas. Later in 1931, Singer’s Mexico City Office reported that “travelling instructresses” that went with male sales agents in their automobiles, “[were] helping the business along and creating enthusiasm in embroidery.” (Red S Review 9(1) August 1928, 14(3) March 1931, 15(11) July 1934, 12(7) March 1932; González 1974: 99).

Courses generally enrolled about fifteen students but fluctuated significantly. For example, when the Mexico Academy of Instruction opened in Mexico City in 1928, 300 students enrolled over the course of two months. Classes took place within Singer shops unless there was a specific room or even an entire floor of a Singer building that could be dedicated to instruction and sampling. Such was the case of Teheran’s School of Embroidery, for example, which had “attracted much attention, [embroidery] being a traditional art in Persia.” The items made
within Singer embroidery lessons were often used for window decoration and for occasional exhibits. At times, local exhibits also served as an extraordinary event to connect not only with the regular customer but also with government officials that were implementing needlework and sewing within public education systems. Peru’s president Augusto B. Leguía, along with other Catholic Church and government officials, visited the inauguration of Lima’s central office exhibit in January of 1927. They greeted exhibitors, admired their work on Singer sewing machines, and they contracted with the company to supply machines for mandatory sewing instruction at girls’ schools (Red S Review 7(2) October 1925, 9(9) May 1928, 8(11) August 1927).

Singer students and Singer instructors around the world all made products related to home activities and family traditions. The patterns and motifs, however, varied across borders. Images from Singer schools in Central Europe and the Middle East showed rows of students using sewing machines to make cushion covers, tablecloths, bed sheets, monochrome pillow covers and napkins, and children’s clothes such as “pinafores, frocks, [and] jumper suits.” They made these using Singer’s updated domestic sewing machines attachments such as the binder, the under braider, the ruffle, or the quilter (Red S Review 1(1), 2(2–5, 7) 1920). Eventually, the company’s marketing organization gathered these designs and products and created sewing machines manuals, which would then be used in schools and stores to provide the client with a quick look of what the sewing machine could do. In the early twentieth century, household appliances like vacuum cleaners were accompanied by general user manuals. Kitchen appliances, such as blenders, might have been sold along with cook books or recipes for usage with the technology. Singer published both of these manuals, in different languages, explaining the mechanics and how to use different parts of the machine. Singer’s sewing departments published the applied sewing manuals, a more instructional, personal manual that explained how to make products for the home and clothing for the family. These were also translated, yet their content was the same for all markets, thus assuming homogeneity of embroidery making (Singer Manual of Modern Embroidery 1893; Libro Singer de bordados 1922). Women in each location, however, adjusted the manuals’ instructions to their own needs and loves. In a photograph from the Hardanger office in Norway sent in 1927, for example, women wore the “traditional head-dresses and aprons of countrywomen.” Here, the Singer editor reminded, the sewing machine was “assisting the preservation and use of these traditional costumes” (Red S Review 9(1) 1927: 16–18). Singer encouraged this as locally tailored advertising. The company praised instructors who taught how to make local designs in each school. The appeal to local traditions continued to be present throughout the twentieth century in Singer’s marketing efforts, as it had been at international exhibitions in 1893 and 1904 showing images of women and men in regional attire using the sewing machine.

Items taught at Singer’s exclusive embroidery schools were then displayed in the company’s store windows. Besides “cleanliness, neatness, activity, colour, [and] simplicity,” windows would be sources of “magnetism” when properly decorated with embroidery and sewed objects made with a Singer sewing machine (Red S Review 10(9) 1929: 6). “Appealing to the Spanish taste,” saleswomen in Spain decorated store windows with embroidery hoops that were used to make “elaborate arrangements” for individual store displays. Singer allowed and supported locally made advertising, knowing that the ultimate focus of it was the company’s sewing machine. The company granted independence in the way exhibits and products followed local and traditional calendars and motifs, which also appeared to solve the idea that sewing machines were all about making women work more hours. In addition, it gave the name of the company a local flavor that made local consumers not necessarily know where the machine was made. To encourage employees from each of the retail locations to commit to marketing, in Spain and
Uruguay, for example, managers organized window display competitions. Onsite and window demonstration were also popular. Saleswomen could make “little articles, simple in construction, [and] neat in appearance,” so that viewers could easily see how to use the sewing machine at home (Red S Review 2(5) 1920, 3(12) 1922, 6(6) 1923, 9(4, 5) 1928).

Embroidery became so crucial for Singer marketing strategies that by 1927 all staff members at every store were urged to learn to make small items or ornaments on the sewing machine. “Study groups,” as staff courses were called, were at first all taken by women. Offices in Aradippou (Cyprus), Khartoum (Sudan), and Ebiar (Syria), sent photographs of their establishments offering such classes and making goods that would be shown to potential clients at their homes, in street markets, or inside the stores. Over the years, managers and employees realized that “giving demonstrations” would get sales people “into more homes.” As they put it, “something simple and something original” would have a “dramatic effect,” as customers would see both the speed and beauty that using a sewing machine would deliver. Male employees, especially the canvassers who worked on commission, would benefit from knowing some basics of home sewing and embroidery making. In England, instructional courses to staff began in 1924. The company began issuing employee certificates in the early 1930s to encourage this group of employees to come aboard on the demonstration marketing strategy (Red S Review 9(2) 1927, 7(9) 1926, 9(5) 1928, 12(8) 1931). Whether this specific practice was fully applied around the world is difficult to track due to the independence that regional offices had in terms of marketing. There was, however, a global, an all-encompassing level of commitment to institutionalize embroidery as a marketing strategy.

Plain sewing and home dressmaking were also marketing allures along with ornamental embroidery throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet these gained more relevance later in the 1920s and 1930s. Such ascendancy coincided with the institutionalization and normalization of home economics within national education systems. Also called domestic science, women across the world were involved in the rationalization of housework, including cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Schools and leagues were created to train women in household management and the publication of home economics manuals and prescriptive literature boomed in the 1920s and 1930s following nineteenth-century educators like Catherine Beecher in the United States (1845) or Pilar Pascual de San Juan in Spain (1878). Companies were fully integrated in this movement in the United States, where salesmen and research departments from corporations such as General Electric collaborated hand in hand with government home economists introducing technology into the classroom. Singer was also able to work with government officials and private organizations around the world. In the United Kingdom and in Spain, for example, Women’s Institutes and schools welcomed Singer instructors to their sewing courses, and Singer women were major players in Japan and India as home-dressmaking and dressmaking professionalization systems developed in the first third of the twentieth century (Goldstein 2012; Gordon 2012; Arnold 2013; Red S Review 10(9) 1928).

Home-dressmaking lessons were easily added to Singer courses that took place at Singer locations because instructors were generally acquainted with the practice of family and home-based clothing. Home-dressmaking classes at Singer stores resembled those taking place at government-led education institutions (like the Bureau of Home Economics in the United States) and at companies’ research programs, such as Procter & Gamble that hired home economists to lead research and advertising of food oil, or Sears that incorporated a home economics graduate to test and demonstrate consumer appliances in the United States in the 1920s. Singer offered sewing and cutting courses directly to schools and vocational institutes and also supplied the sewing machines. The company’s Educational Department was created in 1925 to coordinate these courses and the supply of sewing machines to schools. Manuals were also published to
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supplement the lessons of public teachers, allowing total independence of lessons in the classroom (Red S Review 7(1) 1925). At Singer dressmaking courses, students would first learn how to draw patterns. Manuals taught them how to cut them too, and to alter already-made patterns to fit specific measurements. As the Singer’s manual, How to Make a Dress (1932) described, assembling the cloth parts was not the last step, however, because fitting and decorating a dress by tucking, ruffling, making buttonholes, or plaiting would also be possible on the sewing machine and it would assure that piece of clothing “to have a distinctive value.”

Like most of the students who took Singer-led courses, instructors of both the Embroidery Department and the Educational Department were women. The social composition of this group of employees is unclear. Mostly, they were lower- to middle-class young women who could apply their sewing abilities to the world of sales. At times, saleswomen left their positions when they married, yet because sewing was an activity accepted to be part of women’s domestic role, many of Singer’s saleswomen remained in the company throughout their lives. Women occupied other positions as well such as cashiers, clerks, and testing machines in the manufacturing plant. Regularly, Singer recognized “long periods of faithful and effective service” by issuing certificates or featuring the story of an employee in the company’s marketing magazine Red S Review. In 1923, the company praised the work of New York’s office art embroidery operator, Miss Elizabeth Boehm. A saleswoman as well, Miss Boehm was “an expert in hand embroidery” before becoming part of Singer where she stayed for more than thirty years (Red S Review 4(10) 1923, 8(2) 1926: 10–12).

To become part of Singer’s Embroidery and Educational Departments, knowledge and expertise on sewing and embroidery were a must. In England, both departments were clearly defined within the company’s corporate organization. Women instructresses attended company events as employees and both departments followed the structure of other parts of the business, having managers, employees, and apprentices. In some parts of the world, however, both departments existed because women had been participating in the business accompanying canvassers, organizing exhibits, and teaching embroidery courses, but there was not a clear separation between sewing experts and the rest of the selling organization. Ever since the company began having stores and traveling agents, the figure of the instructress has existed and throughout the twentieth century her presence and role continued to be shaped. “Moving instructions,” for example, which were Singer vans that carried sewing machines and samples in the back, were widely introduced by the 1930s in the United States, Mexico, and in Europe. In 1931, Mexico’s Singer central office reported that their automobiles, which were “equipped with samples of all kinds of sewing and embroidery work, machines, and accessories,” had an essential role in creating new customers. In all of them, “Travelling instructresses,” accompanied the district’s canvasser, and they “[were] creating enthusiasm in embroidery” and thus propelling sales, the manager assured (Red S Review 12(7) 1931: 18–19).

Singer’s marketing system varied little from country to country, yet it was a culturally flexible system. It was composed of local personnel that generally catered to local traditions and times which is evidence of both the flexibility of Singer’s marketing system and the openness of nineteenth and twentieth centuries culture to industrial consumer goods that forged the modern world. Scholars often search for organizations’ capacity to adapt, while undermining the demand’s side to adjust and rebuild itself to integrate novelty. Singer’s Embroidery and Education Departments were composed of local personnel in every country where the multinational operated. These units went from somewhat unplanned sewing and embroidery demonstrations in the 1870s to acquiring an official space in the organization worldwide by the 1930s. In each country, both departments adapted a versatile machine to local uses by creating samples and new manuals, decorating Singer stores, and staffing “moving instructions” vans. Women assembled
exhibits addressing local taste and traditions, and sewing experts connected with local officials, making Singer sewing machines part of schools. Marketing personnel made Singer local.

By 1914, Singer was one of several multinationals with factories overseas. However, its integrated selling organization continued to be unique in the sewing machine industry and even in the distribution of other branded goods. Manufacturers of branded goods and chemicals owned and managed factory locations across borders like Singer did by the beginning of World War I. French Saint-Gobain glass production was produced in eight countries, while the British Lever Brothers managed the production of soap in thirty-three locations. During the interwar years, Singer continued its multinational organization, controlling from production to customer relations. It did so like other multinationals such as Ford, Nestlé, or Coca-Cola that developed international operations, generally using a franchise system to sell products (Jones 2005). For Singer, canvassing continued to be the company’s key for selling beyond large urban centers and controlling accounts, and women were a fundamental part of this marketing strategy (Gordon 2008, 2012).

World War II disturbed global production and even though the company returned its factories to produce sewing machines, and revitalized its selling organizations throughout the world by opening new buildings and continuing investment in marketing activities, Singer never recovered its 1920s global market dominance. In locations like Japan or Spain, for example, local competition was already strong by the 1940s. After the war, product diversification also intensified, and Singer also sold vacuum cleaners, irons, and sewing accessories such as trimmers or electrical scissors. During this time, other manufacturers of washing machines, refrigerators, and vacuum cleaners such as General Electric or Hoover expanded and modernized their technologies rather fast. Household electrification intensified these developments, and the manufacturing and selling of small household appliances, especially for the kitchen, expanded greatly worldwide. Singer locations in 1951 were celebrating the company’s centenary, praising their canvassers and the potential of home dressmaking, but Singer had already lost its exclusivity as a manufacturer of consumer goods. Singer’s largest manufacturing plant, the Clydebank factory, closed its doors in 1980.

Conclusions

Through marketing, global manufacturer Singer connected industry to culture worldwide for almost a century. The scholarship on global manufacturing has mostly centered on manufacturing capabilities (Wilkins 1969, 1970; Wilkins and Hill 2011; Hounshell, 1984; Jones 2005), but marketing was equally important for creating and maintaining global sales. Mass marketing secured the Singer Sewing Machine Company’s corporate success around the world by making the company’s name and its sewing machines part of the private sphere, of family, personal, and local life. Targeting some of the most private practices of the home, the making of clothing and ornaments, became one of the pillars of one of the first US multinational enterprises. Paying attention to consumers as experts on sewing machines and making them part of the company’s selling organization beginning in the 1860s was central to Singer’s national and global expansion.

Manufacturers of chemicals, machinery, and branded consumer goods led multinational manufacturing at the turn of the twentieth century (Jones 2005). For Singer, manufacturing and marketing grew hand in hand between the 1860s and World War I, but marketing continued to advance throughout the twentieth century, opening markets in countries where manufacturing might have been non-viable. While expensive at first, building up an exclusive marketing organization in different locations – with most of its agents being native – across the globe paid
off by averting competitors and creating long-term relationships with consumers. Shops, international exhibits, sewing courses, embroidery contests, and the canvassers gave the company’s name and its sewing machine the opportunity to be part of everyday life, both in the home and in the public sphere, connecting these spaces in ways that not only promoted new forms of economic activity, but also generated cultural experiences that became ingrained within households’ economies and national cultures.

Though consumer goods were some of the first industries to expand multinational operations, and the distribution channels and relations with consumers prove essential to understanding global expansion, studies of consumers and producers are often done separately in the case of international business. This study demonstrates that women were key to building up Singer’s global marketing and rethinks the role of consumption and gender as elements that are central to understand global manufacturing and marketing. Experts on sewing, generally women, were not passive consumers of sewing machines. Women and others who sew were technically knowledgeable and experts in threads, patterns, designs, and traditions. Thus, consumers were producers as well, of clothes and house linens, of objects that often carried meanings important to local cultures and lives. Whether to create new consumers, as Singer women did in Japan (Gordon 2012), or to maintain local cultural practices that had embroidery and sewing at the center, the integration and understanding of consumption practices within the organization’s strategies opened new and exclusive markets for Singer throughout more than a century.

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