

JOSEPH SUGARMAN

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Marketing Guru Survived His Flops and Found Hits

By JAMES R. HAGERTY

In 1979, Joseph Sugarman promoted mail-order sales of the Bone Fone, a horseshoe-shaped radio worn around the neck.

Music would "resonate through your bones—all the way to the sensitive bones of your inner ear," Mr. Sugarman promised. Even so, the Bone Fone couldn't beat the Sony Walkman, which appeared around the same time.

His \$1,500 mousetrap, introduced in 1977, came with a laser beam to detect mice and a polished walnut base. It could be "handsomely displayed in any office, boardroom, or rodent-infested area," Mr. Sugarman said. He didn't sell a single one of those.

Though many of his wackier ideas bombed, Mr. Sugarman came up with a big winner now and then, including pocket calculators in the early 1970s and his Blu-Blocker sunglasses, designed to filter out ultraviolet and blue light waves, starting in the 1980s.

He wrote his own ads, long on words and short on images. He also offered marketing seminars, shared his insights in books, starred in infomercials and was a fixture on the QVC shopping channel.

A Wall Street Journal reporter asked Mr. Sugarman in 1978 how he picked winners. "Maybe you're just looking at a guy who has good taste," he said.

Mr. Sugarman, who developed antiaging potions in recent years, died March 18 at a hospital near his home in Las Vegas. He was 83. The cause was complications from cardiac arrest, said one of his daughters, April Sugarman-Smith.

Joseph Sugarman was born April 25, 1938, and grew up in Oak Park, Ill. His father sold printing equipment. In high school, young Joe earned enough money from odd jobs to buy himself a Corvette.

At the University of Miami in



Florida, he majored in electrical engineering, as directed by his father. In his free time, he honed his marketing skills. To raise the prestige of his fraternity, he hired performers from a strip club to pose as the members' girlfriends. To help a restaurant attract more students, he wrote an ad offering discounts to anyone who tore the roof off a Brink's truck.

Before he could graduate, Mr. Sugarman was drafted into the Army. His family said he served in an intelligence unit and worked for the Central Intelligence Agency.

After returning to the U.S., he marketed ski lifts and formed an ad agency. During the Batman craze of the mid-1960s, he printed 250,000 so-called Batman credit cards. The fake credit cards were designed as gag promotional items. Mr. Sugarman couldn't sell them.

In 1971, he began selling Craig electronic calculators through the mail for \$240 apiece. At first, he said, "I lost my shirt." When the price dropped to \$180, he rewrote his ad and tried again. Orders surged. He reported that sales totaled \$500,000 by the end of 1972.

He also pitched Midex burglar alarms, digital watches and mailboxes said to be capable of withstanding a nuclear attack, or your money back. His JS&A sales company initially operated out of his basement and later out of its own building in Northbrook, Ill.

Trouble came in 1979 when the Federal Trade Commission accused him of violating a rule requiring firms to send out mail-order items promptly or notify customers of delays. Mr. Sugarman said the delays were caused by blizzards and a computer breakdown. The FTC proposed a \$100,000 fine.

Mr. Sugarman counterattacked with a pamphlet, "The Monster That Eats Business," an indictment of the FTC illustrated with cartoons in the style of Mad magazine. He accused FTC officials of hounding him over trivial lapses. After six years of fighting, he agreed to a settlement requiring him to pay a fine of \$115,000 over four years. Mr. Sugarman said he had spent \$500,000 on legal fees and added that "we are completely innocent of the charges."

The success of BluBlocker sunglasses dug him out of that hole. Mr. Sugarman had a home on Maui, where he published a weekly newspaper. He flew small airplanes. He drove a Ferrari Testarossa. He looked dapper in his Blu-Blockers.

He is survived by three sisters, two daughters and two grandchildren. Two marriages ended in divorce.

In a 1991 interview, he extolled risk-taking. "If you go out and do something and you're successful, you've won," he said. "If you fail, you've learned something." Even those bogus Batman credit cards weren't a complete bust: He gave them to people who paid to attend his marketing seminars.