



I'm a history buff. And, obviously, a loyalty marketing nerd. Sometimes those two passions intersect in unexpected ways.

A YouTube channel about architecture recently featured the Larkin Soap Company factory and headquarters in Buffalo, NY, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright at the turn of the 20th Century, and demolished in 1950. The video also mentioned some of the history of the Larkin Company, touching on some of their late 19th Century marketing strategies, which included tactics that are quite familiar to us today.

I was intrigued, and took a deeper dive into the history of this company.

The Larkin Soap Company, established in 1875 and in business, though in diminished form in its later years, until 1962, was, much to my surprise, the Amazon of its day. A relatively early player in the mail order industry – pioneered by Montgomery Ward in the mid-19th Century – Larkin learned early that direct-to-consumer sales were more efficient and profitable than selling through retailers or their own proprietary sales force. In some regions, they eventually opened brick-and-mortar stores as local distribution centers, when the US Post Office proved too slow. Vertical integration, a term not yet invented, served Larkin well as they became manufacturer, distributor, marketer, retailer, and delivery service.

Here are a few of their marketing innovations:

- Curated boxes of multiple products, called the Combination Box
- Subscription (pantry-loading) service
- In-package premiums with purchase
- Premiums customers could earn over time with multiple purchases
- Influencer marketing, recruiting homemakers to promote Larkin products to neighbors

While these were not all first-to-market, Larkin was certainly an early pioneer and highly effective at leveraging these strategies. Taken all together, they form a loyalty ecosystem not that different from Amazon Prime or Walmart+. They even took to marketing their goods under the name, The Larkin Plan, a precursor to modern lifestyle marketing that turns mere products into an embracing experience.

Interestingly enough, these marketing strategies were the brainchild of Elbert Hubbard, the founder's brother-in-law, who went on to become the father of the American Arts and Crafts movement. The furnishings and artifacts produced by his Roycroft artisan community in upstate New York had a massive influence on American design, as did his books on philosophy and design. Hubbard's nephew, L. Ron, founded Scientology – a contribution whose value I will leave to your own judgment.

Some people, including my own family, have been known to make fun of my arcane interests. But just look what interesting stuff one can learn, including history that provides context for some of today's best marketing practices. *Your thoughts?*

©2025 schneideronloyalty | 6919 SE 144th Ave, Portland OR 97236

[Web Version](#)

[Forward](#)

[Unsubscribe](#)

Powered by
GoDaddy Email Marketing®