

September 5, 2020

The ULINE Catalog of Everything

My father-in-law (YB, or Your Blogger, the custodian of this blog) recently incorporated a business and listed his suburban residence as the mailing address. Doing so apparently put him on some kind of registry to receive mail for businesses, because today he received a catalog in the mail that might as well be a book. It's more than 800 full-color pages offering nearly forty thousand products. Incongruously undigital, it probably weighs five pounds; I could tell you with certainty if I bought one of the scales on page 617. There's one for "postal weighing" that's more than a hundred dollars. The one right above it goes for over a thousand; it's meant for "research and quality control labs"—in case there was one of those in YB's house.

The catalog is from a company called ULINE that I had never heard of before this morning. It is addressed to MANAGER SHIPPING DEPT in dot matrix lettering, right above the name of a company that has no physical product to ship (YB has a software business). They might get business from this blog post, but otherwise ULINE seems to have spent a lot of money on printing and shipping this issue of their catalog to a customer who will not likely use their merchandise.

Instead, many of the products seem to be focused on the needs of large commercial warehouses: cardboard boxes of all sizes, bubble wrap and peanuts to fill them, tape to seal them and retractable knives to open them up again. You can buy all manner of yellow-painted bollards and barriers; fire extinguishers and exit signs; shelving and cabinets and carts; fans and heaters; chocks, locks, and dock plates; steel drums, plastic pails, and glass jars. Clearly, someone actually buys these things, and they likely do manage a shipping department.

But the catalog isn't just marketing to them. Perhaps they go after the head of janitorial departments at malls and airports? ULINE sells mops and vacuums, those giant rolls of see-through toilet paper and the black plastic wall-mounted holders for them, and all kinds of wipes. You can get disposable cups and coffee creamers for the break room, and there's a few pages of office furniture for those white-collar workers before we're back to rolling ladders. You can outfit a retail clothing store with those white wood walls with the horizontal grooves that hold metal hangers for shirts, and shelves for athletic shoes. Apparently it's called "slatwall". You can buy cash register paper a few pages before, right above rolling aluminum shelves for industrial bakeries.

At first, it's not clear how the catalog is organized. It certainly doesn't appear to be by market segment: the chair mat isn't near the office chair you'd put it under; instead it's with industrial no-slip flooring. But as I leafed through it, I started to understand just a little. Bins led to lockers which led to locks. Trash bags led to indoor trash cans which led to outdoor trash cans, and from there on to picnic tables.

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The ULINE catalog is dated Spring-Summer 2020, which means it was written and printed mostly before the Covid-19 pandemic. I don't think anyone is going to be ordering the slatwall to set up a retail store. Like many, I haven't been into the office since March so I'm sure ULINE hasn't sold much toilet paper or coffee creamer to offices. But I don't know how their warehouse business is faring. Has that too declined? Or is it busier than ever now that parcel services are a vital link to the outside world, for people like me who don't casually venture beyond the front lawn?

The catalog seems ignorant of all of that. After eight two-page spreads of gloves, two for safety goggles, and one for hearing protection, there's a spread of surgical and N95 masks. The sparse texts brags about protection from dirt and dust. Most of them have valves that make them ineffective against preventing Covid-19 transmission. If they're on backorder, the catalog doesn't say.

In this edition, at least, materials that have been granted new usefulness by the pandemic seem bizarrely separated. The protective coveralls are ten pages after the masks, on the other side of fall protection harnesses. The hand sanitizer dispensers and bleach wipes are hundreds of pages earlier. Scattered elsewhere you'll find plastic beakers, sharps containers, and laboratory-grade wipes.

Readers will have to piece together their Covid-19 shopping lists. The coveralls, hand sanitizers, and probably another dozen other ULINE products will be essential to combatting Covid-19. Careful browsers will find them even though the catalog writers did not anticipate these uses at the time they compiled the catalog ... early in 2020.

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