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REMEMBRANCES | SEPTEMBER 17, 2010

JIM WINNER 1929-2010

Salesman Steered Drivers to the Club

By [STEPHEN MILLER](#)

Jim Winner was a consummate salesman who turned his biggest product, the Club, into an automotive security mainstay.

Mr. Winner died Tuesday in rural Clarion County in western Pennsylvania, when his SUV veered into oncoming traffic, killing two people in another vehicle. Pennsylvania state police said the cause of the accident was under investigation. Mr. Winner was 81 years old.



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Pam Berry

Jim Winner demonstrates how to use his creation, the Club, in 1987.

Once a salesman of pianos, vacuums and chemical products, Mr. Winner began offering the Club through Sears starting in 1986. He soon turned to late-night television ads and sold 10 million of the steering-wheel locks within seven years.

The first ads featured a policeman from Mr. Winner's home base of Sharon, Pa., touting the Club and reminding viewers that "I'm not an actor, I'm a policeman." (The officer later threatened to sue over his acting contract.)

Mr. Winner used his earnings to establish a corporate headquarters in downtown Sharon surmounted by six-foot pink neon letters spelling out WINNER. On the ground floor was a shop, The Winner, which touted itself as "World's Largest

Off-Price Fashion Store." The upper floors housed Winner International, which built on the success of the Club to offer the Door Club for apartments, bike and gun locks, and pepper spray.

A Wall Street Journal reporter who visited the office in 1993 found it populated by salesmen with stickers on their phones reading "Sense of Urgency" and "Stay Focused." Less important than sales goals, it seemed, was the company's concern for its own auto security: The same reporter counted only eight of 150 cars parked at a company function actually using the Club.

More galling to Mr. Winner were charges from law-enforcement agencies and product-testing groups that the Club was easily defeated, either by spraying it with Freon to make it brittle or by taking a hacksaw to the steering wheel.

"Thieves don't carry Freon. Thieves don't carry hacksaws," he told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in 1993.

The son of an impoverished dairy farmer, Mr. Winner left to join the Army at age 17 and served in the Korean War. He often told the story of how padlocking his Jeep whenever he parked got him thinking about automotive security.

After a series of early sales jobs, Mr. Winner began dabbling in the lodging trade. He ran the Old Order Amish Tour Farm, a themed hotel. He later reconditioned an abandoned mansion in Sharon, christened it Tara, and opened it as an upscale B&B.

Mr. Winner insisted that the Club was primarily his own inspiration, but he agreed to a settlement when a Cleveland mechanic he had worked with on the initial designs sued in 1993 for a share of the profits.

The device was hardly novel—a similar gadget had been patented in 1919, and other models were already on the market in 1986. What Mr. Winner brought was energy and the vision to put a Club in every car.

"If it weren't the Club, it would have been something else—it could have been a door knob," he told the Journal in 1993. "The product is not my cause. I like to sell."

—Email remembrances@wsj.com

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