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This sketch was first performed in 1974, prompted by the idea that praising the qualities of something when selling it is a useful context in which to demonstrate the use of superlative adjectives. Since the word *superlative* can itself be used to indicate high praise, it seemed an appropriate brand name for the vacuum cleaner being sold. The script given here is almost exactly the same as the stage version. We have used the context of 'selling' in several other sketches, such as Sketch 11 *The shoe stall* (in Book 1), and Sketch 10 *The travel agency* (in this book).

## Words and expressions

dust (n.), carpet, handbag, salesman/woman, sales technique, on the market, smart, economical, effective, revolutionary, boring, colourful, detest, go on (= continue)

The expression *My goodness me!*, used to express surprise, is rather old-fashioned in tone. Notice the use of *just*, meaning 'only' or 'simply' in *Just £65 to you, madam* and *I'll just go and get some money*.

## Preliminary practice

As this sketch involves praising the qualities of something when selling it, a good introduction would be an activity based on some advertisements from newspapers and magazines.

Show the class some advertisements and ask them to tell you what the 'selling point (or points)' – i.e. the main qualities being praised – are in each case. If possible, choose advertisements which include expressions such as *the fastest*, *the most comfortable*, *the most economical*, etc., as this will provide some useful practice of superlative adjectives.

Then you can lead into the sketch by telling the students that its title is *The Superlative vacuum cleaner*, and asking them to predict which superlative adjectives they think they will hear.

## Follow-up activities

① You could organize some role-playing activities in which the characters change roles as the salesman and the housewife do in the sketch. For example: A police officer stops a motorist for speeding. The police officer is not very competent, so the motorist offers to ask the questions. The dialogue might start with lines similar to those in the sketch, like this:

*Police officer:* You were driving too fast.

*Motorist:* That's right.

*Police officer:* Ah.

*Motorist:* Well, go on, then.

*Police officer:* I've finished.

*Motorist:* Finished? You haven't said very much. What sort of a police officer are you?

*Police officer:* Not a very good one, I'm afraid.

*Motorist:* I can see that. Look, you get into the car, and I'll ask the questions.

Some other possible situations: shop assistant and customer; manager explaining job to new employee; geography teacher and student who knows more about geography than the teacher; journalist and politician.

② The students, individually or in groups, could design an advertisement for the 'Superlative' vacuum cleaner, using information from the sketch, inventing a slogan, and adding a drawing and other details such as where it can be bought.

## Props and costumes

For simple classroom re-enacting, any object can be used to represent the vacuum cleaner (for example, a wastepaper basket, a pile of books, a bag). Some pieces of paper can be used to represent the money.

For a more elaborate performance, a real vacuum cleaner is needed, and costumes for the characters as desired. As always, it is fun – and more practical – for the door to be mimed and for the doorbell sound to be made vocally by the characters.

# The Superlative vacuum cleaner

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**Scene** The hall of a house  
**Characters** A vacuum cleaner salesman  
A housewife

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*The salesman rings the doorbell several times.*

**Housewife** Yes, I'm coming.

*She opens the door.*

**Housewife** Good morning.

**Salesman** Good morning, young lady. Is your mother in?

**Housewife** My mother? I'm the mother in this house. What do you want?

**Salesman** Dust, madam.

**Housewife** Dust?

**Salesman** Yes, madam. Dust.

**Housewife** I haven't got any dust.

**Salesman** Oh yes you have!

*He shakes dust onto the floor from a paper bag.*

**Salesman** All over your carpet!

**Housewife** Hey! I've just cleaned this carpet! Why are you putting dust all over it?

**Salesman** Don't worry, madam. I've got the answer to all your problems *here!* The Superlative vacuum cleaner!

**Housewife** The Superlative vacuum cleaner! Why's it called 'Superlative'?

**Salesman** Because, madam, everything about it *is* superlative. It's the quickest, the cleanest, the cheapest, the smallest, the smartest, the most economical, the most effective, the most beautiful, the most revolutionary vacuum cleaner in the world. And it's only £65.

**Housewife** Are you trying to sell me a vacuum cleaner?

**Salesman** Yes, madam.

**Housewife** Well, go on, then.

**Salesman** I've finished, madam.

**Housewife** Finished? You haven't said very much. What sort of a vacuum cleaner salesman are you?

**Salesman** Not a very good one, I'm afraid.

**Housewife** I can see that.

**Salesman** No, I'm a very *bad* vacuum cleaner salesman. In fact, I'm the worst salesman in our company.

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- Housewife** The worst?
- Salesman** The worst. I sometimes think I'm the worst vacuum cleaner salesman in the world.
- Housewife** Oh, dear. Do you...like your job?
- Salesman** Like my job? No, madam. I detest my job. It's the most boring job in the world. Every day it's the same: 'Good morning, young lady. Is your mother in?...The Superlative vacuum cleaner...The quickest, the cleanest, the cheapest, the smallest...'
- Housewife** Well, is it the quickest?
- Salesman** No, it's probably the slowest.
- Housewife** Is it the cleanest?
- Salesman** Cleanest? Don't make me laugh! I don't think there's a dirtier vacuum cleaner on the market. And it certainly isn't the cheapest either.
- Housewife** No, no, no. This is no good at all.
- Salesman** Pardon?
- Housewife** Look, do you want to sell this vacuum cleaner or don't you?
- Salesman** I suppose so.
- Housewife** Well, your sales technique is all wrong.
- Salesman** Is it?
- Housewife** Yes. I could sell vacuum cleaners better than you.
- Salesman** No, you couldn't.
- Housewife** Yes, I could. I'll show you. You come into the house, and I'll ring the bell and sell the vacuum cleaner to you.
- Salesman** You'll sell the vacuum cleaner to me?
- Housewife** Yes.
- Salesman** OK. But it isn't as easy as you think.
- Housewife** We'll see. Go inside and shut the door.
- Salesman** All right.
- The salesman goes into the house and closes the door. The housewife rings the bell. The salesman opens the door.***
- Salesman** Not today, thank you.
- He closes the door. The housewife rings the bell again. The salesman opens the door again, and speaks in a high voice.***
- Salesman** Yes?
- Housewife** Hello!
- Salesman** Hello.
- Housewife** My goodness me, what a beautiful house you've got!
- Salesman** Ooh, do you like it?
- Housewife** Like it? It's the most beautiful house I've seen for a long time.
- Salesman** Thank you very much.

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- Housewife** May I come in?
- Salesman** Er...
- Housewife** Thank you. Oh, what a colourful carpet!
- Salesman** Yes, it's lovely, isn't it?
- Housewife** It's the most colourful carpet I've seen for ages. I should think it was very expensive.
- Salesman** The most expensive one in the shop.
- Housewife** And I suppose you've got a very good vacuum cleaner to look after it.
- Salesman** A vacuum cleaner? No, I haven't.
- Housewife** You haven't got a vacuum cleaner?
- Salesman** No.
- Housewife** Well, madam, this is your lucky day, because I have *here* the best vacuum cleaner that money can buy: the Superlative vacuum cleaner.
- Salesman** Is it really good?
- Housewife** Good? Good? It's the...the...
- Salesman** (*In his own voice*) Quickest.
- Housewife** ...the quickest, the...
- Salesman** Cleanest.
- Housewife** ...the cleanest, the cheapest, the smallest, the smartest, the most economical, the most effective, the most beautiful, the most revolutionary vacuum cleaner in the world.
- Salesman** (*In a high voice again*) Ooh! How much is it?
- Housewife** Just £65 to you, madam.
- Salesman** I'll buy one.
- Housewife** Good.
- Salesman** (*In his own voice*) Er...where's the money?
- Housewife** It's in my handbag on the kitchen table.
- Salesman** Oh, right. (*In the high voice*) I'll just go and get some money.
- He goes to the kitchen to get the money.**
- Housewife** Good idea, madam. You've made the right decision.
- The salesman comes back, speaking in his own voice.**
- Salesman** Do you know, you're a fantastic saleswoman.
- Housewife** Ooh!
- Salesman** You've got a fantastic sales technique.
- Housewife** Do you think so?
- Salesman** Yes, you've got the best sales technique I've seen all day.
- Housewife** Thank you!
- Salesman** Thank *you*, madam.

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**He leaves and closes the door.**

**Salesman** (**Speaking to himself, counting the money**) Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, sixty-five. Now *that's* the way to sell a vacuum cleaner.

