

Making Sense of Advertisements

By Daniel Pope

(From the Making Sense of Evidence series on *History Matters: the U.S. Survey on the Web*, located at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>) full text @

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/ads/amadv.html>

Advertisements are all around us today and have been for a long time; advertising-free “good old days” just don’t exist. This guide offers an overview of advertisements as historical sources and how historians use them, a brief history of advertising, questions to ask when interpreting ads as historical evidence, an annotated bibliography, and a guide to finding advertisements online. Author Daniel Pope has taught at the University of Oregon since 1975 and is currently Associate Professor and History Department Head. He teaches courses on American economic and business history and on the history of American radicalism. He is the author of *The Making of Modern Advertising* (1983) and editor of *American Radicalism* (2001); he has written many articles on the history of American advertising, marketing, and consumer culture, and on the history of nuclear power and anti-nuclear activism.

Introduction

Over a century ago, *Harper’s Weekly* commented that advertisements were “a true mirror of life, a sort of fossil history from which the future chronicler, if all other historical monuments were to be lost, might fully and graphically rewrite the history of our time.” Few if any historians today would claim that they could compose a complete history of an era from its advertisements, but in recent years scholars have creatively probed advertisements for clues about the society and the business environment that produced them. The presence of many excellent online collections of advertisements provides learners as well as established scholars the opportunity to examine these sources in new ways. The experience can be tantalizing and frustrating, since advertisements don’t readily proclaim their intent or display the social and cultural context of their creation. Yet studying advertisements as historical sources can also be fascinating and revealing. Most of us—avid consumers though we may be—pride ourselves on being able to “see through” advertisements. We can interpret this phrase in several ways. Most simply, we “see through” ads when we are oblivious to them—when we look right past them, as we do with most ads we encounter daily. Much of what advertising professionals do is aimed at “cutting through the clutter,” overcoming our propensity to ignore most ads. In another sense of “seeing through,” we dismiss ads because we judge them to be misleading or dishonest. As historians, however, we need to

focus on ads and see or hear them. As Yogi Berra put it, “You can observe a lot by watching.”

American Advertising: A Brief History

Despite or because of its ubiquity, advertising is not an easy term to define. Usually advertising attempts to persuade its audience to purchase a good or a service. But “institutional” advertising has for a century sought to build corporate reputations without appealing for sales. Political advertising solicits a vote (or a contribution), not a purchase. Usually, too, authors distinguish advertising from salesmanship by defining it as mediated persuasion aimed at an audience rather than one-to-one communication with a potential customer. The boundaries blur here, too. When you log on to Amazon.com, a screen often addresses you by name and suggests that, based on your past purchases, you might want to buy certain books or CDs, selected just for you. A telephone call with an automated telemarketing message is equally irritating whether we classify it as advertising or sales effort.

In United States history, advertising has responded to changing business demands, media technologies, and cultural contexts, and it is here, not in a fruitless search for the very first advertisement, that we should begin. In the eighteenth century, many American colonists enjoyed imported British consumer products such as porcelain, furniture, and musical instruments, but also worried about dependence on imported manufactured goods.

Advertisements in colonial America were most frequently announcements of goods on hand, but even in this early period, persuasive appeals accompanied dry descriptions. Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* reached out to readers with new devices like headlines, illustrations, and advertising placed next to editorial material. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century advertisements were not only for consumer goods. A particularly disturbing form of early American advertisements were notices of slave sales or appeals for the capture of escaped slaves. (For examples of these ads, visit the Virginia Runaways Project site at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/subjects/runaways/>) Historians have used these advertisements as sources to examine tactics of resistance and escape, to study the health, skills, and other characteristics of enslaved men and women, and to explore slaveholders’ perceptions of the people they held in bondage.

Despite the ongoing “market revolution,” early and mid- nineteenth-century advertisements rarely demonstrate striking changes in advertising appeals. Newspapers almost never printed ads wider than a single column and generally eschewed illustrations and even special typefaces. Magazine ad styles were also restrained, with most publications segregating advertisements on the back pages. Equally significant, until late in the nineteenth century, there were

few companies mass producing branded consumer products. Patent medicine ads proved the main exception to this pattern. In an era when conventional medicine seldom provided cures, manufacturers of potions and pills vied for consumer attention with large, often outrageous, promises and colorful, dramatic advertisements. In the 1880s, industries ranging from soap to canned food to cigarettes introduced new production techniques, created standardized products in unheard-of quantities, and sought to find and persuade buyers. National advertising of branded goods emerged in this period in response to profound changes in the business environment.

Along with the manufacturers, other businesses also turned to advertising. Large department stores in rapidly-growing cities, such as Wanamaker's in Philadelphia and New York, Macy's in New York, and Marshall Field's in Chicago, also pioneered new advertising styles. For rural markets, the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward mail-order catalogues offered everything from buttons to kits with designs and materials for building homes to Americans who lived in the countryside—a majority of the U.S. population until about 1920. By one commonly used measure, total advertising volume in the United States grew from about \$200 million in 1880 to nearly \$3 billion in 1920.

Advertising agencies, formerly in the business of peddling advertising space in local newspapers and a limited range of magazines, became servants of the new national advertisers, designing copy and artwork and placing advertisements in the places most likely to attract buyer attention. Workers in the developing advertising industry sought legitimacy and public approval, attempting to disassociate themselves from the patent medicine hucksters and assorted swindlers in their midst.

While advertising generated modern anxieties about its social and ethical implications, it nevertheless acquired a new centrality in the 1920s. Consumer spending—fueled in part by the increased availability of consumer credit—on automobiles, radios, household appliances, and leisure time activities like spectator sports and movie going paced a generally prosperous 1920s. Advertising promoted these products and services. The rise of mass circulation magazines, radio broadcasting and to a lesser extent motion pictures provided new media for advertisements to reach consumers. President Calvin Coolidge pronounced a benediction on the business of advertising in a 1926 speech: “Advertising ministers to the spiritual side of trade. It is a great power that has been entrusted to your keeping which charges you with the high responsibility of inspiring and ennobling the commercial world. It is all part of the greater work of regeneration and redemption of mankind.” (This address can be found online at a Library of Congress site on “Prosperity and Thrift,” which contains many documents on consumer

culture in the twenties; visit <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>).

Advertisements, as historian Roland Marchand pointed out, sought to adjust Americans to modern life, a life lived in a consumer society. Since the 1920s, American advertising has grown massively, and current advertising expenditures are eighty times greater than in that decade. New media—radio, television, and the Internet—deliver commercial messages in ways almost unimaginable 80 years ago. Beneath the obvious changes, however, lie continuities. The triad of advertiser, agency, and medium remains the foundation of the business relations of advertising.

Advertising men and women still fight an uphill battle to establish their professional status and win ethical respect. Perhaps the most striking development in advertising styles has been the shift from attempting to market mass-produced items to an undifferentiated consuming public to ever more subtle efforts to segment and target particular groups for specific products and brands. In the 1960s, what Madison Avenue liked to call a “Creative Revolution” also represented a revolution in audience segmentation. Advertisements threw a knowing wink to the targeted customer group who could be expected to buy a Volkswagen beetle or a loaf of Jewish rye instead of all-American white bread.

What Is the Ad Trying to Do?

Usually the ad is trying to sell a product, but this is only an initial response to the question. Does it aim to persuade readers to buy something for the first time or to switch brands? The tobacco industry, for example, has consistently maintained that its ads are aimed at maintaining brand loyalty or inducing smokers to switch. (Hence, a prominent campaign a generation ago for a now-forgotten cigarette brand featuring models with bruises and black eyes saying, “I’d rather fight than switch.”) Yet critics have noted the themes of youth, vitality, and pleasure in these ads and have exposed documents in which marketers strategize about attracting new smokers.

What group did the advertisement try to reach?

What publication did it appear in, with what kind of readership? Perhaps the most famous instance of a shift in target audience came in 1955, when the Leo Burnett agency revamped advertising for Marlboro cigarettes, formerly a minor brand marketed for their mildness and aimed at women smokers. Burnett introduced the Marlboro Man, models of rugged cowboys on horseback, smoking “a cigarette designed for men that women like,” in the words of the manufacturer’s ad director. Sales shot up immediately. Marlboro eventually became the world’s best-selling

cigarette brand. And the Marlboro Man became one of the most widely-recognized (and reviled) advertising icons.

What does the ad want the reader to do?

Ultimately, of course, commercial advertising aims to win sales, but some advertisements seek primarily to gain the reader's attention or stimulate interest in hopes that purchases will follow. On the other hand, repetitive ads for familiar products often aim to short-circuit the conscious consideration of purchase decisions. They try to stimulate the consumer to pick up the soft drink, the toothpaste, or the detergent as she moves down the shopping aisles.

Who Is the Intended Audience?

In the first half of the twentieth century, most national advertising portrayed and promoted a world of mass produced, standardized products. Advertising and mass consumption would erase social differences. "We are making a homogeneous" people out of a nation of immigrants, proclaimed agency executive Albert Lasker in the 1920s. In more recent decades, however, marketing's emphasis has been on segmentation—fitting a product and its marketing strategy to the interests and needs of a distinct subgroup. The historian Robert Wiebe has even suggested that the divisions—by economic, social, cultural and even psychological characteristics—now mark the United States as a "segmented society." [Robert Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).]

Few advertisers try to sell the same thing to everybody today; too often that has meant selling to nobody. If segmentation is the norm in advertising, then it is crucial to ask for whom an advertisement or a campaign is intended. In the 1950s, the automobile industry was a stronghold of mass production and "follow the crowd conformist marketing. The Doyle Dane Bernbach agency's campaigns for the Volkswagen, introduced in 1959, broke out of the mold. Most frequently applauded for their visual and verbal wit and dramatic, uncluttered layout, the Volkswagen ads also stand as a triumph of segmentation marketing. (Visit the "Volkswagen Gallery" of ads at Center for Interactive Advertising at

http://www.ciadvertising.org/student_account/spring_01/ad_v382j/ifsg336/vwgallery.htm

To sell the VW in the late 1950s was a challenge. Volkswagen was a brand that Adolf Hitler had touted only two decades before as the German "people's car." It was small and spartan as American cars grew, sprouted tail fins and ornamentation, and added comfort features. Rather than reach for a broad market, the ads emphasized Volkswagen's difference from the then-reigning "low-priced three" of

Chevrolet, Ford, and Plymouth. Bold headlines proclaimed it ugly and small and boasted that its design had barely changed in years. The campaign depended on a devoted minority to make Volkswagen a marketing triumph. The Volkswagen buyer, in the eyes of marketers, shunned ostentation and took pride in practicality. One famous ad invited buyers to "Live Below our Means," presenting a car for people who could afford to spend more but chose restraint. Selected by *Advertising Age* magazine as the greatest advertising of the twentieth century, the Volkswagen campaign accelerated a trend toward segmentation marketing.

It is worth noting that the advertising did not exist in a marketing vacuum. Sociologist Michael Schudson pointed out that Volkswagen registrations in the United States grew more rapidly the year before the campaign began than in its initial year. [Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 35-36.] To some extent, the vehicle, not its promotion, appealed to a certain class of auto shoppers. Nevertheless, advertising both aims at market segments and helps to shape those segments. A recent example of what can happen when a manufacturer attempts to redraw the boundaries of those communities can be seen in the anger of some Porsche owners at the sports car maker's introduction of an SUV. In what must be one of the most vehement reactions, Mike Dini told the *New York Times*, "Every S.U.V. I've seen is driven by some soccer mom on her cell phone. I hate those people, and that Porsche would throw me into that category made me speechless. Just speechless." [Mr. Dini's comment appeared on 13 December 2002, p. A1.]

What Strategies Are Used to Sell the Product?

After we have a sense of what the advertiser is trying to accomplish, we can ask how they go about achieving their marketing goals. Does the advertisement offer a "reason why" to buy the product? Or is it oriented more to emotional appeals? Does the ad feature the product or does it focus on the people using it? Does it address the reader directly with suggestions or commands? Does the ad offer a reduced price or a premium? Does a celebrity provide an endorsement? Does it play on fear or anxiety or make positive appeals? Most of the ads you examine will contain both illustrations and text. Advertising researchers devote large sums to testing consumers' responses to different colors, shapes, and layouts. Especially in recent decades, advertisements often have been composed with minute attention to detail and extensive pre-testing, so even the smallest facet of an ad may reflect a marketing strategy. But deliberate or unintentional, details of an advertisement may reveal something about the assumptions and perceptions of those who created it. A hairstyle, a print font, a border design all may have something to teach us. How does the ad attract the reader's attention? What route do your eyes follow through the ad? How do styles fit with cultural trends? What are the implications, for

instance, of the stark black-and-white photographs in many Depression-era ads that mimicked the tabloid newspapers of the day? Does the rise of “psychedelic” graphic styles in the late 1960s and 70s support Thomas Frank’s contention that “countercultural” values of personal fulfillment and immediate gratification fit post-industrial corporate marketing needs? Do earth tones in recent advertising support “green” marketing strategies of companies hoping to appeal to environmentally-conscious buyers? Virtually every advertisement provides opportunities for this kind of analysis. Following Roland Marchand’s masterful interpretation of a 1933 gasoline ad, we can examine the poses of father and son. (See the advertisement in the Roland Marchand Collection at A History Teacher’s Bag of Tricks, Area 3 History and Cultures Project at <http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/imageapp.php?Major=AD&Minor=G&SlideNum=24.00>)

The father looks fearful, fatigued, and aged. Marchand sees the boy’s clenched fist as a symbol of advertisers’ implicit claim that will, determination—and consumption—could overcome the Depression, but his face also shows worry and shame. The relation of the two images—the son fore grounded, the father behind him and set against a darker-colored background—suggests that the father is not only behind in life’s race but is also failing to provide patriarchal leadership and control. The advertisement’s words complement the image. The boy’s alarm—“Gee, Pop—They’re all passing you”—sits in a cartoon “balloon.” Depression advertising, stripped of the subtleties of more prosperous times, often adopted the blunt, lurid style of comic strips. The text below directly addresses those who “must make your old car do a little longer” in “these days when we have to do without so many things.” Taken as a whole, the language, design, and image of this advertisement evince the fear and humiliation of hard times and try to convert these worries into motives to buy.

What Do Ads Reveal or Conceal about an Era?

In examining ads as historical documents, we also should look at what the ad seems to take for granted. Inferring social conditions from advertisements is not straightforward. Ads are highly selective in their depiction of the world. Notably, historical and contemporary studies abound showing that advertising’s depiction of American society has been highly skewed in its portrayal of race, class, and gender. Until a generation ago, African Americans and other people of color were virtually invisible in mainstream advertising, except when they were portrayed as servants or as exemplifying racially stereotyped behavior. Note, for example, the frequent portrayal of African Americans as children, or, tellingly, as childlike adults. (See some examples and follow the successive pages at an online exhibit by the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Library at <http://door.library.uiuc.edu/adexhibit/racism.htm>)

and at the Authentic History Center site at http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/diversity_african_images01.html

Images of women in advertising have hardly been uniform, but several themes recur: the housewife ecstatic over a new cleaning product; the anxious woman fearing the loss of youthful attractiveness; the subservient spouse dependent on her assertive husband; the object of men’s sexual gaze and desire. (See a 1951 cosmetics ad on the Ad*Access site featuring one of these themes at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/cgi-bin/nph-dweb/dynaweb/adaccess/beauty/cosmetics1950s/@GenericBookTextView/260%20>)

Advertising also gives false testimony about the actual class structure of American society. Advertising images consistently show scenes of prosperity, material comfort, even luxury well beyond the conditions of life of most Americans. The advertising industry prefers to picture the world that consumers aspire to, not the one they actually inhabit. David Ogilvy, one of the icons of mid-century American advertising, perhaps knew better than anyone how to use snob appeal for mass audiences. His campaigns for Hathaway Shirts, for example, presented a sophisticated White Russian aristocrat mysteriously wearing a patch over one eye. For Schweppes Tonic Water, Ogilvy not only coined the term “Schweppescence,” but linked the product to a dignified British naval officer, Commander Whitehead, who extolled the mixer at elegant soirees and descended from jets onto a red carpet to associate the beverage with the heights of cosmopolitan sophistication. (Visit <http://www.ogilvy.com/memorial/html/center.htm>)

for a memorial Web site featuring some of Ogilvy’s most famous print and television advertisements.)

Even in the striving, materialistic climate of the post-World War II boom, consumers no doubt saw the Ogilvy campaigns as something other than hard-nosed realism. Middle-class Americans would not see a shirt or a soda brand as their ticket to high society. The advertisements were not dishonest in any direct sense. But David Ogilvy’s ads presented a distorted image of society and did so in the service of selling his clients’ products. Advertising, in Michael Schudson’s phrase, is “capitalist realism,” an art form that abstracts from and reconfigures the world as it is to fit the marketing needs of the business system. He concludes, “Advertising is capitalism’s way of saying’s love you’ to itself.” [Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, 232.]

What Else Do You Need to Know to Analyze an Ad?

As we see the ads, we may also be able to “see through” them to broader social and cultural realities. We can note three contexts for these documents. First of all, they are

selling tools and reflect the business needs of the corporations that pay for them. Posing the questions about purposes and methods will give us insights into the role of advertising in business. Second, advertisements are cultural indicators, though distorted ones. Finally, bear in mind that ads emerge from a professional culture of the advertising industry and suggest the aspirations and anxieties of the men (and sometimes women) who create them. To see through ads, we should also look at these creators. For about a century, major national advertisers of brand-named goods and services have employed advertising agencies to plan out their campaigns, write and design the ads, and follow media strategy to reach targeted buyers with their sales messages.

Although advertising men (and women—from early in the 1900s, the industry employed a small but significant number of women in copywriting and art design positions) have long been the butt of cynical jokes about their subservience to advertising clients, advertising took on the trappings of professionalism quickly. As Roland Marchand and others have pointed out, those who created advertisements designed them with the “secondary audience” of their peers in mind. Especially before the 1960s, when agencies diversified ethnically and opened more doors to women, the industry was socially distant from its audiences.

Viewing consumers as irrational, ill-informed, and uncultured, advertising agencies often created ads that reflected their own surroundings rather than those of the buyers they wanted to attract. The subculture of the advertising industry is an intense one. In part this follows from the enormous difficulty of judging the effectiveness of advertising. Without clear-cut measures, advertising workers turn to their peers for validation. The fact that agencies can lose accounts (and workers lose jobs) overnight also makes Madison Avenue an anxious place where fads and gurus may shape campaigns. If you are using the web for a comprehensive historical analysis of advertising, you will likely face a significant problem. Ads on the web are usually separated from the editorial matter and the other advertisements that surrounded them. For example, in the Model Interpretation that follows, a researcher examining a print ad in an issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* could compare its themes with the short stories in the same magazine, could judge whether its style differed from other soap and beauty ads in the issue, and could evaluate its impact by considering its size and location in the magazine. Some sites (such as the online collections of Duke University's John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History) provide information about the placement and production of the images they feature, but others present ads without captions about the media they appeared in, their size, the date of their appearance. This seemingly technical problem emphasizes a broader reality that you should bear in mind. While we can glean a lot from the visual and verbal elements in advertisements, advertisements are almost

always designed to be part of a media context. The placement of a print ad in a newspaper or magazine, the station, time of day, and program where a commercial appears, the traffic flow past a billboard are all intimately related to the message in the advertisement itself. Understanding advertising thus entails more than just studying advertisements, illuminating as the ads themselves can be. The web is not—at least not yet—an ideal way to put ads in their marketing and media context. In a few cases, however, we can find Web sites that provide background information for our advertising analysis. The Library of Congress's *American Memory* site, “Fifty Years of Coca-Cola Television Advertisements,”

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmphtml/colahome.html>

offers not only a selection of the commercials in streaming video but an essay on the agencies, advertising strategies, and technologies that Coke has used since the 1950s. The site also gives detailed attention to the making of one of the most famous television commercials ever made, 1971's “Hilltop,” where young people congregated to sing, “I'd like to buy the world a Coke.” One truth that emerges from the “Hilltop” material is that producing a television commercial for major campaign is a complex undertaking indeed. An ad agency creative director's vision that an invitation to share a Coke “was actually a subtle way of saying, ‘Let's keep each other company for a little while,’” led to a song, “I'd like to buy the world a Coke” and then to grandiose plans for a massive chorus of youth from around the world performing the song on a dramatic hillside. The travails of casting, locating, and filming reveal that commercial production is hardly an exact science. (For example, the female lead was discovered pushing a baby carriage down a street in Rome.) They also indicate the lengths to which major advertisers and their agencies will go to “get it right.”