



The Rise of American Advertising

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The Rise of American Advertising

The first advertising specialists in America, eager to distance themselves from patent-medicine vendors and confidence men, strove to write prose that was simple and factual. That approach proved short-lived, as admen, beginning at the turn of the century, started to develop more indirect, "psychological" techniques, using strategies that have since been vastly extended to promote politicians as well as to sell cars, perfume, and low-calorie beer. Historian Jackson Lears here explains this change and how it helped shape not only consumer demand but also the visual environment in America.

by T. J. Jackson Lears

In older downtowns across America, the casual observer may still happen upon spectral presences from the commercial past. Where there is available space on brick or stone, ancient advertising murals preside over parking lots, littered playgrounds, construction projects. Often partly obscured by banks and fast-food franchises, some announce products: Uneda Biscuit, Wilson's Whiskey; others are populated by fading fantastic characters: the Gold Dust Twins, the winsome White Rock Girl. Once part of the landscape of everyday life, these cultural graffiti somehow exert more fascination as they recede from view.

Those advertisements were part of a new visual environment that emerged around the turn of the century, as American corporations be-

gan to advertise "brand-name" products to a national market. Advertisers painted brick walls and billboards, caught the gaze of strap-hangers with subway car cards, and bought acres of space in metropolitan newspapers and the new mass-circulation magazines. And they played a major part in the evolution of a new way of life, in which the acquisition of specific goods was, somehow, associated with psychic self-betterment, fulfillment, and happiness.

The earliest advertising agencies sprang up in the 1870s and 1880s. Two- or three-man operations, they were mostly clustered on Park Row in lower Manhattan, in stuffy backstairs rooms that smelled of printer's ink. As the business historian Daniel Pope observes, early advertising

agents merely procured "a shadowy, uncertain commodity—advertising space" from publishers and provided it to "businesses whose own products were often equally obscure"—magic elixirs, investment opportunities, self-help schemes.

Like jobbers and merchants, advertising agents were middlemen, mistrusted by farmers, manufacturers, laborers, and anyone else who believed himself more engaged with the realities of production. Indeed, the agents' work was even less tangible than that of other middlemen: The only commodity they sold was their own skill as space brokers. For that (sometimes dubious) service, they received a commission from the publisher on the value of the space bought by the advertiser.

Banishing Hokum

During the next 50 years, this method of compensation survived, but the agencies themselves were transformed. The more successful firms grew flush with money, moving from Park Row to more elegant midtown headquarters. Their clients were no longer marginal patent-medicine firms but established corporations selling brand-name products—Camel cigarettes, Dodge automobiles. As the agencies expanded, they became more bureaucratically organized and functionally specialized, providing a widening spectrum of services: advice on the choice of appropriate media, marketing information, and most important, design of the advertisements themselves.

The question of designs, and of the strategies that lay behind them, was of particular concern to the first admen. Throughout the early days of the industry, agency spokesmen sought to establish their dignity as

part of "the great distributing machinery brought into existence by the era of great combines." Yet they never fully banished the taint of hokum, the sense that their profession, like that of circus impresario P. T. Barnum, merely manufactured appearances to bemuse and bilk the public.

No Frills

Fearing that they would be lumped with patent-medicine vendors or even with confidence men, members of the fledgling industry—most of whom were from the Midwest, many of them sons of Protestant ministers—resorted to the rhetoric of sincerity. It was a time-honored Protestant tradition. Throughout the 19th century, the sincere man had been the antidote to the confidence man—a reminder that morality could somehow be preserved amid the amoral ambiguities of the marketplace.

But achieving sincerity in one's copy was no easy matter. Sincerity required that the advertisement be seamless, that its artifice be concealed, that it seem straightforward and honest. For advertising men, as for other "impression managers," truth was insufficient and sometimes irrelevant. The important job was, in the words of the leading trade journal *Printers' Ink*, "making the Truth 'Sound True'." Sincerity had become at once a moral stance and a tactic of persuasion.

Few advertising spokesmen were willing to acknowledge that ambiguity. As advertising images became more fantastic and surreal during the 1910s and 1920s, many admen clung to 19th-century notions of reality, truth, and meaning. Debate over strategies revealed a persistent conflict within the industry.

During the 1890s, the trade press had generally been suspicious of the ad that was "too pretty." As one ad-man wrote in 1895, "It's the great public you are after and they don't give a continental whether you have been to college or not, what they want is facts; if they are reading your ad for amusement in all probability you don't want their trade." The no-frills, informative approach helped aspiring professionals to distance their methods from the sensational tactics of their patent-medicine predecessors.

At the same time, admen realized that they faced a novel difficulty. As advertisements for brand-name commodities multiplied, the description of a product's qualities, such as one finds in a Sears catalog, proved an inadequate strategy for selling.

Reasons Why

As early as 1903, a writer in *Judicious Advertising* complained that "there is so much that is exceedingly good, it is harder than ever to know how to devise creations that are 'different' enough to attract attention." By the early 20th century, slogans, jingles, and trademarks were familiar sights in the advertising landscape—all designed to catch the eye of a busy and distracted public. Illustrated advertising, containing virtually no information, aimed at "general publicity" for the product by

associating it with attractive girls, healthy children, prosperous family scenes.

Proponents of fact fought back, first by ridiculing the "epidemic of originality," then by invoking the formula that advertising was "salesmanship-in-print." That phrase was coined by the copywriter John E. Kennedy in 1904 and popularized by Albert Lasker and Claude Hopkins as "reason-why" copy.

Flat on the Brush

Each piece of reason-why copy contained a vigorous sales argument, crammed with facts and pock-marked with dashes, italics, and exclamation points. For a time, this approach threatened to sweep all before it. In December 1906, a prominent trade magazine contained an obituary for "advertising ideas," the puns and pretty girls that bore no relation to the product: They "passed with the notion that advertising is literature or art."

The obituary proved premature. Many advertising men continued to define their task not as "salesmanship in print" but as "the persuasive art." As Clowry Chapman, a legal consultant to ad agencies, argued in 1910, "mental images," not rational arguments, move the prospective buyer to buy.

According to this view, the advertiser's task was not merely to con-

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struct product-oriented arguments, but to turn the potential buyer's emotion into money. Fact men fumed. In 1906, one of them wrote an article bewailing the lack of information in American car ads. He noted that one maker claimed "his car is the Car of Destiny. What does that mean? Who could find any meaning in such a fact, even if it were true?"

Troubled by the absence of clear-cut meaning, opponents of "atmosphere" warned that it was time to talk sense to the American people. But automobile advertisers increasingly surrounded their product with emblems of style, status, and personal fulfillment. In 1910, the Chalmers Motor Company revived lagging sales by switching from reason-why to "word painting the auto's seductive joys. . . ." The strategy won praise in the trade press. By 1920, the factual auto advertisement had virtually disappeared.

One reason for the decline of factual auto ads was the increasing difficulty of distinguishing one brand of product from another. The problem was not confined to automobiles. Confronted by standardization born of technological advances, advertisers sought to make a particular beer seem "special" (1907) or to establish "that Bread Isn't Just Bread" (1930). Marketing journals urged manufacturers to devise new specialties, new ingredients, new features.

Colgate dental cream provided a model. In 1911, Palmolive Peet spent a huge sum of money on advertising to demonstrate that their toothpaste lay "flat on the brush like a ribbon." The key, as one adman had observed in 1902, was to recognize "the importance of trifles." The search for trifles led to a proliferation of new, improved features, secret ingredients, and fantastic product claims. As

**Fuel system of the
new Ford has been
designed for reliability
and long service**



THE practical value of Ford simplicity of design is especially apparent in the fuel system.

The gasoline tank is built integral with the steel and is unusually sturdy because it is made of heavy sheet steel, brass plated to prevent rust or corrosion. An additional factor of strength is the fact that it is composed of only two pieces, instead of three or four, and is electrically welded—not soldered.

Because of the location of the tank, the entire flow of gasoline is an even, natural flow—following the natural law of gravity. This is the simplest and most direct way of supplying gasoline to the carburetor without variations in pressure. The gasoline feed pipe of the new Ford is only 18 inches long and is easily accessible all the way.

The gasoline passes from the tank to the carburetor through a filter or sediment bulb mounted on the steel dash which separates the gasoline tank from the engine.

The carburetor is specially designed and has been built to deliver many thousands of miles

of good service. Since all adjustments are fixed except the needle valve and filter, there is practically nothing to get out of order.

The float and air dash gets as a primer and also as a regulator of your gasoline mixture. The new hot-spot manifold insures complete vaporization of the gasoline before it enters the combustion chamber of the engine.

As a matter of fact, the fuel system of the new Ford is so simple in design and so carefully made that it requires very little service attention.

The filter or sediment bulb should be cleaned at regular intervals and the carburetor screen removed and washed in gasoline. Occasionally the drain plug at the bottom of the carburetor should be removed and the carburetor drained for a few seconds.

Have your Ford dealer look after these little details for you when you have the car oiled and greased. A periodic check-up runs little, but it has a great deal to do with long life and continuously good performance.


FORD MOTOR COMPANY

A bit dull, a bit stodgy, "reason-why" copy gave the consumer the facts, and almost nothing but.

product differentiation became more difficult, reason-why copy became less reasonable.

Ultimately, reason-why and atmosphere advertising converged. There had always been potential for irrationality in reason-why. It could include not only sober statements of a product's merits, but also strings of superlatives, inflated sales arguments, and an insistence that the product could transform the buyer's life. In 1925, when corset advertising rejected "the Bolshevik figure," promising an "ideal posture" that would "reflect good breeding and class distinction," advertising analysts found it possible to praise the copy because it appealed to intelli-

gence rather than to emotion. "Romance and reason-why" could coexist in the same advertisement or in different campaigns for the same product.

But admen were wrestling with challenges even greater than the debate over romance and reason. The trade press, shifting its orientation from the product to its potential buyer, began to advise "Putting Yourself in the Consumer's Place," puzzling out his or her yearnings and anxieties.

The important change in trade press usage from "customers" to "consumers," which began around 1900, reflected a growing awareness that the audience for national advertisements was remote, impersonal, and difficult to visualize. Customers carried on face-to-face relations with local entrepreneurs; consumers were the target of standardized persuasion sponsored by corporations. The problem for advertisers was how to bring the target into sharper focus. Slowly, admen inched toward the "science" of modern marketing. In the process, they increasingly viewed consumers as a manipulable, irrational mass.

Grown-up Children

Early speculation about consumers combined confident pronouncements about "human nature" with lists of consumer traits. The first composite portrait to emerge was that of a shrewd customer—subject to flattery but suspicious of bombast, capable of cupidity but essentially reasonable.

But as early as the turn of the century, the picture began to change. Some spokesmen, pointing to "the breathless rush and scramble" of 20th-century life, noted that "men and women take their knowledge,

like their lunches, on the run."

This perception called for either brevity or novelty to catch the busy eye. And for some admen, the power of silly or emotional copy stemmed from human nature itself. "You must take [people] as they are," wrote a *Printers' Ink* contributor in 1897, "grown-up children to a great extent . . . tired and bored by too much argument, by diagrams and prosaic common sense." From this perspective, the most effective advertising was aimed at consumers' irrational impulses.

Consumer as Connoisseur

In the emerging conventional wisdom, the typical consumer was especially susceptible to emotional appeals because he was bored much of the time. "His everyday life is pretty dull. Get up—eat—go to work—eat—go to bed," wrote freelance copywriter John Starr Hewitt in 1925. Yet Hewitt also believed that the typical American compensated "for the routine of today by the vision of what his life is to be tomorrow. It is the vision of getting ahead. Everything he buys comes as a partial fulfillment of that vision. . . ."

The notion of consumption as compensation was given a further turn by Paul Nystrom, professor of marketing at Columbia University. In *The Economics of Fashion* (1928), Nystrom noted the importance of boredom, "the desire for a change in personality," and among "not a few people in Western nations . . . something that may be called, for want of a better name, a *philosophy of futility*." With the decline of religious faith, Nystrom believed, the "tendency to challenge the purpose of life itself" grew and made superficial consumer choices seem all the more important. This view of the con-

sumer as anomic "mass man" strengthened advertisers' faith in the manipulability of the public.

There remained a rival faith in the consumer as rational individual, making knowledgeable choices. "In 1911 when the consumer buys," *Printers' Ink* asserted, "he does the *choosing*. He asserts his particular individuality." Advertising made choice possible: "It has *educated* the consumer into being a connoisseur—which apt word means 'one who knows'."

But the image of the consumer as connoisseur did not strictly conform to the rational economic man of liberal lore. The new model man exercised his sense of self not through labor or civic responsibility, but through consumer choices, often quite trivial ones.

Enter Psychology

Notions of "consumer individuality" ended up promoting the strategy of "personal appeal" rather than genuine respect for the diversity of the mass market. By seeming to single out the individual ("Imagine *your* picture here"), the personal appeal sought to create a sense of uniqueness in the consuming self, to make the buyer forget he was part of a mass market, to convince him that he was a conscious, choosing person.

Psychological theory underwrote that indirect approach and reinforced notions of consumer irrationality. Beginning in 1903, when Walter Dill Scott published the *Psychology of Advertising*, admen flocked to psychological lectures, hired psychological consultants, and wondered "Can You Sell Goods to the Unconscious Mind?" The long flirtation between psychology and advertising was consummated in 1925, when John B. Watson dedi-

cated *Behaviorism* to his employer, Stanley Resor of J. Walter Thompson. The vogue of psychology provoked grumblings among non-nonsense business types, but to many advertising men, it held the key to the mysterious mind of the consumer.

The most alluring use of psychology lay in the area of suggestion. Marketing professor Arthur Holmes summarized the conventional view of the process in 1925: "People unacquainted with psychology," he wrote, "assume that men have the power to say 'Yes' or 'No' to an advertisement. The assumption is only partly correct. A man has the power to decide in the first stage of the game, not in the last . . . if the printed word can seize his attention, hold him chained, drive from his mind all other thoughts except the one 'Buy this!,' standing at the head of an organized sentiment from which every opposing idea, perception, feeling, instinct, and disposition have been driven out or smothered to death, HE CANNOT SAY 'NO!' His will is dead."

Golf, Maids, Tuxedos

Few admen would have uncritically embraced Holmes's inflated view of the power of suggestion, and some, such as Claude Hopkins, lamented "the fearful cost of changing people's habits." But growing numbers of advertising men were confident they could do almost anything with a consumer through unconscious manipulation, and psychological theory bolstered their confidence.

Besides psychology, the other major effort to understand consumer behavior was the infant "science" of market research. By the 1910s, a number of advertisers were trying to



THE FORD TOWN SEDAN

VALUE far above the PRICE

IN REVIEWING the many advantages of the Ford car, it is particularly interesting to note the relation between value and price.

The low first cost is a point to keep in mind at all times because it means a considerable saving to you in the purchase of a car.

Of even greater importance, however, is the reason for this low price and the manner in which it has been achieved without sacrifice of quality or performance.

Every purchaser shares the benefits of the Ford policy of saving the source of many raw materials—of making thousands of cars a day—of selling at a small margin of profit—of constantly giving greater and greater value through the vast industrial organization that has been built up for the making of this car.

A new degree of excellence has been brought within reach of all the people through the development of new manufacturing machines

and the discovery and working out of new manufacturing methods.

Evidence of this is found in the extremely close limits of measurement maintained in the manufacture of vital parts. Some of these are held true to within a maximum variation of three ten-thousandths of an inch (0.0003), reducing friction and wear and resulting in greater reliability, longer life and better performance.

As the quality of workmanship has been increased through the accuracy of the machines, so has the quality of materials been increased. The savings resulting from new manufacturing economies have been put back into the car. Through typical Ford methods, materials once thought too expensive for a low price car have been made available for use in the Ford.

Today, more than ever, it is an outstanding example of high quality at low cost. Were it made in any other way,

under any other policy, it would unquestionably cost you much more than the present price.

The use of the Triplex shatter-proof glass for the windshield is a definite indication of the quality that has been built into the Ford car. So are the four Handalle hydraulic shock absorbers. The five steel-spoke wheels. The silent, fully enclosed six brake system. The aluminum pistons. The chrome silicon alloy valves. The simplicity and efficiency of the lubrication, cooling, ignition and fuel systems. The large number of ball and roller bearings. The extensive use of fine steel forgings instead of castings or stampings. The many other mechanical features that count so much in reliability, economy and long life.

All of these are important considerations to every man and woman who is contemplating the purchase of a motor car. All are important reasons why the Ford delivers a value far above the price.



Blue Ribbon Chevrolet
DeSoto Buick

This ad is on the road to Xanadu. Facts are still packed into the copy, but it's clear that the buyer of the Ford will be getting much more than a reliable means of transportation.

base their strategies on information derived from questionnaires; by the 1920s, at least a few were convinced that “the research basis of copy” had been established. The rise of market research offered new possibilities for admen such as J. George Frederick to assert their superiority over “the mere ‘word-slingers’.”

By 1925, Frederick asserted, copy had become “the apex of a solid base of merchandising plan” that included data questions for advertisers as well as research into consumer types and preferences. The marketing approach was compatible with psychology. In the final stage of Frederick’s merchandising plan, an analyst used proofs of varied copy to “conduct a carefully guarded test

upon consumers (so planned that their unconscious judgment and not their conscious judgment would be obtained).”

The spread of a marketing orientation, by revealing the diversity of the audience and its predilections, might have made more advertising men question their tactics. Every few years, a writer in the trade press remarked that most Americans did not employ maids, play golf, or wear evening clothes to dinner; perhaps the working class majority could be represented in national advertisements. But these early calls for “market segmentation” were largely ignored, as advertisements continued to present a homogeneous portrait of the American people.

Justifying this homogeneity, advertising spokesmen revealed some fundamental assumptions about their craft. To critics who charged that "art directors snootify homely products," an agency art director replied that the homely scene had been "touched by the wizardry of the clever artist." He went on to argue that modish clothes and fine furnishings were "the kind our wives yearn for but seldom have enough pin money to buy." One industry magazine reasoned that this sort of "idealism" was "understood by consumers who do not take life too literally" as an inducement to strive for an ever higher standard of living. From this, it was only a short step to the admission that advertisements were primarily marketing fantastic visions rather than products.

Like Ezra Pound

Many advertising spokesmen had already taken that step. As early as 1912, a writer in *Judicious Advertising* had proposed that it was "possible through advertising to create mental attitudes toward anything and invest it with a value over and above its intrinsic worth." By the 1920s, mention of a product's "intrinsic worth" had virtually disappeared, as advertising spokesmen argued that consumers could "buy" all sorts of ethereal qualities. James Wallen, who started his own agency after working with the flamboyant Elbert Hubbard, agreed that "you do not sell a man the tea, but the magic spell which is brewed nowhere else but in a teapot." What made an effective advertisement, in this view, was not the product but the symbolic context that surrounded it.

This was a long way from the older, business-oriented approach to advertising, but many admen em-

braced the newer perspective. One herald of the new strategy, James Collins, argued in 1901 that advertising had created an "economy of symbolism," in which symbols, not commodities, were exchanged. Within 20 years, it was a common view that the product could be subordinated to its symbolic attributes. Face powder, for example, could be sold to both flappers and antiflappers—depending on whether the copy appealed to restless sexual energy or self-conscious sophistication.

The most commonly used symbolic attributes were meant to animate the inanimate commodity with "richer, fuller life." Like many of their contemporaries, advertising strategists were preoccupied by the pursuit of "life" amid a culture that seemed increasingly to deny it. Restless men, they moved from job to job, eager for variety and stimulation. In their preoccupation with escaping ossified forms and capturing movement in design, they resembled artists such as Braque and Picasso. In their reverence for what one copywriter called "the divinity of common things," they resembled Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, who sought to reconnect words with things and rescue poetry from the vapors of Victorian abstraction.

The Breath of Life

But for admen, the problem of animating the inanimate was specifically commercial: how to make inert commodities resonant with vitality. The trick lay in the imagining.

One avenue to animation involved the imaginative use of language. In the early years, though most admen preached the gospel of simple and direct, there were many calls for "ginger" in copy; ad writers were advised to "pick out the vital words and form

them into sentences that possess the breath of life."

By the 1920s, a more overtly literary viewpoint emerged, as writers discussed ways of using the "magical powers" of words. One such writer, Richard Surrey, argued that literary metaphor soothed people by assimilating human travails to larger natural processes. Advertising metaphor moved in a different direction: "Machine-made products, turned out by the millions, must be assimilated to the destiny of things not machinelike; must be translated . . . into human terms."

A Pat of Butter

A number of rhetorical devices served that purpose, but perhaps the most striking was the "'I am' vogue," which lasted throughout the early 1920s, personifying commodities, ideas, and technical processes. Progress, electricity, and light joined adding machines, radios, and locomotives in adopting personae and speaking directly to the audience, often with what was thought to be Biblical eloquence. ("Verily I shrink the world. . . . But never am I my own master," intoned one modest radio.)

In visual strategies, the movement toward magic and fantasy was even more apparent, but it developed alongside a powerful countercurrent of realism. One approach incorporated the techniques of cartoonists and avant-garde artists; the other sought increasing proficiency in illustration and photography. In either case, the aim was to avoid the wooden and "unreal."

But real life remained an elusive quarry. Even photographs could be full of "'rubber-stamp' faces and expressions," the advertising art critic W. Livingston Larned complained in 1930. Unless the faces seemed to

project spontaneous emotion, the "advertising language" remained unpersuasive.

"What do the faces in your advertising illustrations say?" asked Larned. "Are they animate with action?" There were realistic ways to escape still life—placing a pat of melting butter on a stack of pancakes, for example—but ultimately the quest for "sparkle" led realists to the borders of fantasy.

While realism persisted, surreal images proliferated. In 1922, the same issue of *Printers' Ink* that contained a commercial art manager's plea for "Real People, Doing Real Things" also presented an ad for Poster Advertising, Inc., with an example of their work: a billboard showing the earth afloat in space, encircled by a gigantic Goodyear Tire, with the slogan "Goodyear means Good Wear." This technique, according to the ad, had "Strength Beauty Dignity."

Sunny Jim

Surreal attention-getting devices stretched back several decades, but by the 1920s, an infusion of "foreign art ideas" had generated a wider array of nonrepresentational modes. In 1925, the trade press noted that "Futuristic Monstrosities are all the Rage"—distorted figures, vaguely cubist designs in backgrounds and borders. Technical advances also accelerated the movement toward the bizarre. Airbrushing, double exposures, fadeaways, and various means of "doctoring" photographs could all help the advertiser "write a sales message across the human face"—as Pompeian Massage Cream did when it showed a man's face in a hairnet with the caption "your face is a net . . . it traps the dirt." Like Barnum's hoaxes, these tactics called as much

attention to the techniques of illusion as to the article for sale.

The more common means of visual animation were cartoons and allegorical figures. Since the turn of the century, advertisers had enlisted cartoon figures as trademarks—Sunny Jim for Force Food, the Campbell Soup twins. But as cartoonists began to realize that anything could be animated—not merely human figures but trees, butter, buildings, automobiles—advertisers embraced the more advanced forms of cartoon art.

By the 1920s, trade journal writers were praising a host of animated characters: the oat who “experienced the thrill of a lifetime” when

he was judged plump enough to be ground into three-minute Oat Flakes, the fairy characters who embodied the vitamins in Comet Rice.

Strategists seeking animation had one other option: to approach the ad as a drama in which the consumer could participate. “Even a casual examination of a few magazines proves that many of the national advertisers are borrowing dramatic appeal from the motion picture,” a writer in *Judicious Advertising* noted in 1925. Static compositions could be vitalized by small details: an open box of bonbons in a living room set piece advertising radios; a lighted candelabrum atop a piano in a candle ad.

By 1936, the consumer was clearly not being sold cigarettes but a way of life—full of leisure, surrounded by friends. A winner's life, if there ever was one.

When the runners are bunched on the track—and suddenly Chuck, your own superman half-miler, spurts ahead on the finish and wins—have a Camel!



WHEN the swiftest of the lithe half-milers are fighting for the lead. And suddenly your own dauntless champion fairly soars ahead and smashes the tape for a record and for victory—have a Camel!

For you'll never find another friend so attuned to your triumphs as Camel. Camel makes every memorable instant brighter, adds of its own effulgent goodness to supreme days. Camels are made of the choicest tobacco grown—they never disappoint your taste. Camels are the master blend that annihilated cigarette after-taste. Regardless of the price you pay, you'll never buy better tobacco, or blending, or flavor than you get in Camels.

So this year when the old school's men go through for victory after victory—then, jauntily taste the smoke that's the choice of the world's victorious.

Have a Camel!

Into the making of this one cigarette goes all of the ability of the world's largest organization of expert tobacco men. Nothing is too good for Camels. The choicest Turkish and domestic tobaccos. The most skillful blending. The most scientific package. No other cigarette made is like Camels. No better cigarette can be made. Camels are the overwhelming choice of experienced smokers.



Our highest wish, if you do not yet know Camel quality, is that you try them. We invite you to compare Camels with any cigarette made at any price.

R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO COMPANY

© 1936

All sought to create the impression that the scene had just been vacated and was about to be occupied by the consumer.

The advertising man thus became a stage manager, charged, as one copywriter put it, with "introducing the thing advertised in a natural, unaffected, casual manner, with no outward signs of the commercial."

Moving to TV

By the late 1920s, American advertising had acquired the characteristics it would retain for at least six decades—and perhaps will retain for as long as there is a competitive market economy. This "highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions," as social critic Raymond Williams described it, has continued to have as its goal the selling of a panoply of goods among which there are frequently few salient differences. Working from the premise of the irrationality of the consumer, this vast fantasy machine employs every conceivable visual gimmick and rhetorical device to turn the public's attention from the product to its symbolic attributes.

In retrospect, perhaps the two most remarkable aspects of the advertising business are, first, how quickly after the emergence of mass media it assumed its shape, and, second, how durable that shape has proven to be. Its perdurability is all the more remarkable when one considers that advertising is the business of manufacturing evanescent appearances.

Not that things have remained unchanged on Madison Avenue since 1930. The rise of color magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Vogue* allowed advertising artists and photographers to hone their skills, creat-

ing scenes of such voluptuousness and sensual ease that readers might almost overlook the item being sold.

And, of course, the electronic media—radio and particularly television—have greatly extended advertising's magisterial sway, further complicating and obscuring elusive "reality." Indeed, television seems almost tailor-made for the advertiser's art: Its speed, its shallow but alluring slickness, and its combination of the visual and aural make it the perfect medium for serving up 30-second segments of idealized life.

Television also makes it possible for the advertiser to use the most powerful device of suggestion—repetition. Thanks to endless, hypnotic repetitions, even the most sophisticated consumers find themselves in the thrall of the jingle of the hour, whether they are reaching out, with the help of Ma Bell, to touch someone, or receiving, from a generous Gino's, the precious freedom of choice. Whether it convinces all of the people some of the time or just some of the people some of the time, TV advertising *does* sell goods.

On to Politics

Riding on an extensive media network, advertising began to move beyond the world of commerce and into such areas as government and politics, particularly during the 1960s. Today, of course, the packaging and selling of politicians has become so widespread and professionalized as to seem commonplace. It is now almost inconceivable for a candidate for high office to undertake a campaign without the help of media consultants, acting coaches, and the usual speech (and joke) writers. And, though it is perhaps too easy to say so, one wonders if the outcomes of elections in America will

not soon be determined even more strongly by the candidate's image and appearance—his "fatherly reassuring aura" or his "youthful confidence"—than by his current policies or his political record.

Advertising, then, has conquered important new terrain since 1930, and done so with new forms and appeals. But despite outward changes, it remains, at bottom, what it was sixty or more years ago: the business of manufacturing illusions.

To some degree, it remains so because the admen of today, like those of the past, have experienced the same confusions felt by other members of 20th-century American society. These confusions stem from a contradiction between our democratic ideology, with its emphasis upon individual choice and freedom of expression, and an economic arrangement which encourages, and indeed depends upon, conformity and predictability among both producers (employers as well as employees) and consumers.

Ours is also a society that has traditionally valued spontaneity, risk, and adventure; largely for that reason we cherish the myth of the frontier, where those qualities, we believe, once flourished. Yet most

Americans today inhabit an urban or suburban world that is overly regulated, hemmed in by routine, and presided over by scores of specialists and experts. "Adventure" itself has become a commodity, a packaged trip down the Colorado, an organized trek across the Himalayas, a fortnight on a dude ranch. Room for real adventure is limited, if it exists at all.

Advertising men have not been immune to these and other contradictions. Many have been, after all, creative and original thinkers, some outstanding artists (René Magritte), photographers (Richard Avedon), and poets (James Dickey and Allen Ginsberg). Yet even the least talented advertising people have recognized that their skills were harnessed to large, impersonal organizations and that the end of their efforts was to convince millions of consumers that they would be happier, even better, human beings if they used Whiz instead of Duz. Given the conditions of their work and of ordinary life, it is not really surprising that generations of advertising men have aimed to transform a prosaic world of commodities into a magical place of escape, illusion, and fantasy—an ephemeral empire of images.
