Advertising Progress

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Introduction

While much history has in it nothing in common with our surroundings or purposes, and cannot, therefore, yield us anything of direct value, the history of advertising, being a record of the adaptation of business methods to modern business conditions, is peculiarly rich in helpful information, and a careful study of it in the manner Emerson suggests should greatly benefit the modern business man.

—Francis Wayland Ayer, “Advertising in America,” 1895

In 1977, the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, exhibited a remarkable array of nineteenth-century advertisements with striking images that challenged the limited notions about “old-fashioned” ads most familiar to denizens of late-twentieth-century consumer culture. Amid this bounty, be-whiskered men like the Smith Brothers, who still stare at each other across their cough-drop boxes, and corseted, lace-bedecked women seemed less like clichés than when pasted on today’s gift cards and the walls of “country stores.” The colorfully lithographed show cards, containers, trade cards, and novelty items featured as elements of “An American Dream: The Art of Free Enterprise” did evoke apparent amusement and nostalgia from many viewers. Yet their sheer abundance and variety made these vintage artifacts seem less like quaint and curious anomalies and more like materials that must have some historical import. How could this legacy of marketing tools not hold some historical and cultural significance? Here were factories topped with profligate clouds of smoke; there, cruel caricatures of (non-Anglo-Protestant) ethnic groups. Everywhere flourished images of women: ethereal nudes averted angelic eyes in some advertisements, while in others clothed prostitutes stared
at their audiences audaciously. Other feminine images represented Victorian standards of propriety and prosperity as they portrayed good wives and daughters. Symbols of technological achievement proliferated—electricity, clocks, trains, steamships, mercantile buildings, and a plenitude of factories. The names, and often the faces, of the men (and, rarely, women) who founded and/or operated the firms presided over nearly every advertisement on display.

Westerners of the late twentieth century have mixed feelings about industrialization. Although we attribute to it the benefits of our standards of living, we also have become sensitive to the injustices and hardships of industrialization and urbanization and their consequent social and environmental problems. The advertisements at the DeCordova therefore struck a perplexing chord as emissaries from the more optimistic heyday of industrialization. The images of factories and machines in advertisements directed to consumers especially challenged current notions of how advertisements should look. Why had advertising styles changed since then? Had they simply modernized in some deterministic manner or perhaps because people had tired of these fashions? Did their origins in the enthusiasm of the modern era’s adolescence explain them? Did the decline of industrial imagery from manufacturers’ advertisements reflect other, larger, trends in U.S. cultural and business history? Furthermore, might this transformation shed some light on the evolution of the consumer culture from the production ethos of the nineteenth century?

Seeking out and assembling the pieces of this puzzle promised to help explain the relationships between all advertisements, their creators, and their cultural contexts.

Since the decade before the DeCordova exhibition, skepticism about progress and its nature has begun to darken many Americans’ views of their horizons. Some people have come to challenge the faith that unrestricted economic growth through industrial expansion is possible, fair, or even safe. Others have girded themselves for political and martial battles with self-righteous rhetoric, trying to defend claims to what they see as their “share” of a zero-sum world economy. This loss of optimism, however apt, throws into sharp relief the people who created advertisements in earlier styles, because as a whole they knew no such despair. Instead, they and many of their contemporaries debated—then as now—whose values and activities best served the general progress and thereby earned legitimacy.

Because they realize, or at least sense, that advertisements serve not only as tools for business success but also as factors in competitions for cultural authority, businesspeople often express their notions of progress in their advertisements. Hence, I have labeled advertising, past and present, as the business of progress. The theme of progress runs through advertising history, tying it to the
broader contexts of U.S. business and cultural history, always offering paths to a better world, illuminated by disparate notions of what “better” entails.

Notions of progress contributed to many Americans' frames of reference between the Civil War and World War I. Definitions of progress came to them from poets, politicians, scientists, and philosophers. In the context of the vast changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the demands that these changes made on citizens' conduct and values, endorsing a material standard for progress became a dominant, albeit not universal, practice. It helped its advocates to define the rewards of change and to justify its costs. Through remarkable innovations and transformations in both content and media, advertising messages during this period took on an important role in articulating and shaping the available definitions of progress. Since the decisions and values of U.S. industrialists drew attention that exacerbated both their self-consciousness as a new class and their perceived needs for cultural legitimation, their advertisements allowed them to present themselves as the entrepreneurial heroes of progress. Their advertisements provided owner-managers with a communication strategy in competitions for both cultural authority and for business success. When manufacturers, in particular, created their own advertisements, they boasted of their roles in progress through advertising messages that glorified industry and technology as the means to new abundance and cultural advancement.

Changes in business practices, distribution methods, and cultural values had a symbiotic, reciprocal relationship with changes in advertising between 1870 and 1920—the period of its so-called modernization. For example, when the nation's first transcontinental railroad traffic began in 1869, businesspeople still wrote and designed their own advertising messages, commissioning printers and publishers to produce them. But by the 1910s, when the United States had developed a powerful economy, leading advertisers—that is, businessmen who advertised—commissioned advertising professionals—practitioners who included agents, copywriters, and artists—to create and distribute their messages, sometimes using techniques developed for wartime propaganda. Advertisements prior to the Civil War generally heralded the increased availability of traditional goods like spices, shoes, and textiles. By midcentury, however, both merchants and manufacturers began to promote altogether new types of goods like sewing machines and reapers for which no ready demand existed. New printing technologies helped advertisers to spread information and promotions for their products.

What causal links between all these changes made most twentieth-century advertisements differ so much from their nineteenth-century precursors? Modernization in general has not proceeded deterministically or along a single
course; what modernity entailed at any point in time and space was not always clear or desirable to its participants. Innumerable actors made their decisions within a maze of variables, such as those that people considered when making their decisions about marketing strategies. How did they decide about messages, media, and audiences at different points in time? Did their decisions vary by industry or type of business or cultural context? What options did they have? We know that the volume of advertising expanded dramatically after 1870 and that much of it consisted of forms relegated to the status of ephemera and novelties—those show cards and containers that now reside abundantly in museums, private collections, and archives but appear as minor components in the armamentarium of today's advertising. What functions did these serve? What is the significance of their disappearance and this century's domination by advertising through periodicals and, later, broadcasting?

What accounts for the shifts in advertising practices, and how do they relate to the larger changes in American business and culture during this period? How did the move away from owner-managed firms in major industries to bureaucratized corporations affect advertising? What impact did developments in communication technologies and networks have as printed advertisements assumed increasingly important marketing functions as the main components in a consumer-oriented “pull” strategy that reinforced, and sometimes replaced, the middlemen’s “push” of goods toward consumers? How did the growing dominance of periodicals as mass media affect the process and the content of advertising? Did Progressivism have any effect?

I have sought to answer these and other questions by examining the marketing problems that motivated businesspeople to advertise, by studying advertising practitioners’ activities, expectations, and how they responded to changes in the business environment and communication networks, and by studying the advertising messages in that rich context. In doing so, I have sought to explain the evolving processes for creating, producing, and distributing advertisements in terms of business practices and personnel as well as the technologies available to advertisers. My goal has been to construct a dynamic analytic framework that explains the evolution of advertising content and styles along with the professionalization of advertising practices. My research has ranged over a variety of historical materials, including advertising and printing-trade literature, agency archives, and pertinent secondary literature on business and cultural history. I also returned to the advertisements themselves—to newspapers and magazines, and most especially to the lithographed images that first piqued my interest, although this study does not exhaustively analyze images or written messages except for what they say about their creators.
As with any other form of communication, advertisements’ meanings differ for their creators and their audiences. Because advertisements supply useful historiographical resources for studying the values and perceptions of the people who created them, it is important to know who selected advertising messages between 1870 and 1920 and how they made their decisions. As I seek to explain why as well as how advertisements took on their twentieth-century form, I have focused on their creators’ perspectives and goals, leaving others to answer the question of whether or not the advertisements of this or any period also reflect their audiences’ interests and concerns. This study does not interpret advertising messages as much as it explains how and why they took the forms and contents they did.

My arguments revolve around the well-documented change in the personnel who performed advertising functions for U.S. firms in this period. Prior to the 1890s, the vast majority of advertisements were created by merchants and manufacturers, aided by printers but not by specialized advertising professionals. This is still the case for the legions of small advertisers in all media. Furthermore, until managerial operations became widely specialized, owners or their close associates managed most companies, taking a personal interest in the advertisements that represented their firms to the public. Once managerial specialists dominated any given firm’s operations, a different sort of professional with different ambitions and interests designed and wrote and placed its advertisements. Owner-managers and advertising specialists held different positions vis-à-vis the firms they advertised as well as different attitudes toward the functions of advertising. Under both types of managements, advertisements served as components of the discourse of cultural politics, as products of their creators’ interests that necessarily changed as their creators changed. Reconstructing these two groups’ frames of reference and interests regarding advertising practices and content makes it possible to explicate their different modes of advertising.

Two related themes explain why consumer advertising shifted from producer-oriented styles, emphasizing a production ethos and notions of progress that were tied to production and producers, to consumer-oriented styles, which gave greater importance to consumption as the driving force of progress. One theme comprises an institutional, business history that focuses on the changing marketing problems to which actors in the advertising process both contributed and responded. The companion theme forms a cultural history concerning marketers’ perceptions of their roles in progress.

During the decades when industrialists used their advertisements to promote both their products and their contributions to material progress, adver-
tising agents played but minor roles in publicity efforts. Agents placed advertisements in newspapers and magazines, for manufacturers as well as for other pre-1890 clientele, like retailers, patent-medicine vendors, and entertainers; they rarely created copy. Despite the proliferation of progress discourse in the nineteenth century, advocates and advisers for the advertising profession in these years made no claim that their field contributed to progress. Before 1900, practitioners seldom saw their functions in any context broader than the business successes of their clientele. Their claims to professional esteem they limited to how efficiently and effectively they placed messages that their clients had already created. Yet by the 1910s, advertising professionals had for a decade acted and written as purposeful innovators and agents of modernity. Their remarkable shift from narrow to broad statements of professional purpose and self-promotion by advertising practitioners between 1895 and 1905 coincided with changing conditions both external and internal to the field. The accelerating concentration of businesses during this period and the decline of the owner-manager in favor of specialized, professional management working on behalf of stockholders, for example, affected many industries producing nationally distributed consumer goods. During the same years, large-circulation magazines expanded into national markets with the help of nationwide rail networks, and reformers challenged the credibility and desirability of unregulated advertising. Pressures within the advertising field also encouraged professionalization, growing competition among agencies, and changes in the nature of clientele. This study examines how these and other developments combined to inspire the expanded functions and revised statements of professional purpose that first appeared in the middle 1890s.

Beginning at the very end of the old century, advocates of the advertising profession frequently and ardently adopted the prevailing progress discourse on behalf of themselves and their work. Manufacturers and advertising professionals increasingly differed about whose contributions to progress deserved priority. Advertising's advocates asserted its legitimacy by itemizing its contributions to national progress, both material and cultural. As marketing professionals transformed their field, they appropriated progress rhetoric and purposefully denied it to producers, thereby refashioning the visions of progress and its sources presented to the public through advertisements. Fewer and fewer ads featured manufacturers as the heroes of progress; indeed, advertising professionals frequently argued with their clients against using industrial imagery in their promotions. Newly empowered professionals designed messages that separated material and cultural progress from the processes of production. They emphasized neither the heroics of producing abundance nor even the
celebration of abundance but, instead, the challenges of selecting between and using properly an assumed abundance. Advertisements portrayed individual, cultural, and national progress as the end results of consumers’ decisions—decisions informed and guided by the new prophets of modernity, the specialists who created the advertisements. In doing so, advertising practitioners helped both to fuel and to direct the maturing consumer culture. Advertising’s advocates still proclaim that it “builds growth,” that it is a “Unifying Force for the 21st Century,” and that, above all else, “it pays to advertise.” A special issue of Advertising Age in 1988, “The Power of Advertising,” once again promoted its field as “a remarkably accessible universal service” that builds markets and reduces prices, paving the way for progress through consumption.1

Earlier practices and beliefs never disappeared, but the proportions changed. Many factors sped the rate of change, among them World War I, the increasing amounts of consumer goods manufactured by corporations using continuous process machinery, and the increasing costs of national advertising with broadcasting as a new option. But, as with many processes, a century has not been enough to drive all firms away from owner-manager control over advertising. And there is no reason to think that another century will bring much change in the current ratios: small-business owners retain their intimate links with their operations; founders of innovative businesses often want a hand in presenting their products or services to the public. What was rare in the nineteenth century is now common, but not universal; what was common in the nineteenth century still occurs in the late twentieth, especially when owners operate their own firms.

The pre-nineteenth-century sense of an advertisement as an announcement that might or might not be commercial has almost entirely passed into obscurity in the English language. Today most people in the United States think of manufacturers’ commercial messages for trademarked products when they think of advertising. In recent decades, any other use of “advertising” has to be qualified by a modifying adjective, such as “classified” or “retail,” to avoid confusion. While I have analyzed transformations within the advertising field overall, I have focused on “brand name” advertising because manufacturers have dominated national marketing innovations and public awareness since the 1890s. Although retail advertising has always exceeded the expenditures of all other categories of advertisements, it fell behind others in innovations after the 1880s. Therefore, unless specified otherwise, this study focuses on manufacturers’ advertising practices and products. Although I have tried to avoid teleological statements and perspectives—other choices could certainly have driven this past to a different present—the dominance of national

**Introduction**
(rather than retail) brand-name advertising in our century's commercial and popular culture is a reality that calls for explanation, especially when compared with very different nineteenth-century conditions and styles.

This analysis attributes much of the development of business and advertising procedures to business and advertising peoples' responses to competition because that is what falls out of the evidence. Whether or not this dynamic proceeded in an ideal or humane fashion or yielded an ideal or humane system, competition did prevail during these primordial stages, although opportunities to compete were almost always restricted to male members of the hegemonic classes. By recognizing that successful competitors directed advertising's course, I do not intend to lend legitimacy to the system that resulted.

In preparing this study, I have tried to avoid gendered language as much as possible. However, using businesspeople in place of businessmen does not change the reality that the vast majority of individuals operating businesses other than retail and artisan shops—and writing about them—were men. Nonetheless, by the end of the century, women such as Kate Griswold, publisher of Profitable Advertising, did figure in the advertising field as well, and there were enough women in business who advertised that comparing advertisements according to the advertisers' gender would be well worth the effort.² Given this book's focus on the mainstream, I have only scratched the surface of many questions about gender and ethnicity and the advertising processes during these decades. This study also leaves unexplored possible influences on U.S. advertising from abroad, with the exceptions of a few advertisers who operated extensively in the United States. As a study primarily of how actors in this field presented themselves to the public and of the internal dynamics between the actors, issues of international influence rarely appeared in the evidence before the 1890s, and then largely concerned the impact of European design. Pertinent questions remain regarding international sharing and mutual influences.

Advertisements are the most public, and in many ways the most evocative, components of today's Western marketing process. They are important elements of our material culture as well as messages commissioned for marketing purposes. Because advertising has been a major conduit between businesses and the general population, its history can help us look at the interrelations between business and the larger culture. In order to use advertisements as material history, we must appreciate how complex and convoluted the relationships between advertising messages, their creators, and their audiences have been and remain. And although advertisements do not provide totally reliable materials for reconstructing their creators' business and cultural attitudes and
intentions, they are richly resonant products of those attitudes, beliefs, and intentions. My goal has been to examine advertisements as elements of material history in the context of the business and cultural dynamics in which they were produced. That method has provided an explanation for—rather than simply the traditional observations about—the modernization of advertising.