Owner-Manager Control of Advertising

The Humphryes Manufacturing Company is the creature of [John Humphryes Jr.'s] brain, his excellent business ability and his untiring energy. He organized it, fostered it and, as its secretary and general manager, made it the prosperous plant it is—in fact, to his intense application in furthering its business may be traced the impairment of his health.

—Obituary for John Humphryes Jr., Iron Age, 1893

Whose Ads Were They?

All too often, people think of historical advertisements as easily accessible windows onto past attitudes and practices. In part, this questionable assumption follows from the belief that popular culture at any time can be discovered in the plentiful messages advertisers pay to project onto it. However, the relationships between advertising messages, their creators, and their audiences are much too complex and convoluted for any such facile conclusions. Societies do not produce advertisements—specific people within societies produce advertisements. Advertisements present us with messages prepared by advertisers—that is, the businesspeople who advertise and their collaborators, such as printers, publishers, and advertising agents, according to their combined notions about their audiences, how best to communicate to them, and to what purpose. Commercial messages therefore better represent their creators than their audiences, much less the population at large. Advertising messages at most reflect the perceptions that the advertisers and their co-creators have of their audiences' values and lifestyles. More likely, they reflect what marketers
expect will appeal to their audiences as well as the values and lifestyles marketers hope to promote to their audiences. Advertisements share this characteristic with any form of message created to influence people at a distance, such as religious missives and political posters. To the extent that the creators of advertisements share their audiences' perceptions, their messages may communicate common attitudes. To the extent that audiences adopt marketers' messages, the ads influence popular culture. So when we interpret advertisements, do we seek their meanings for their creators or their meanings for intended or unintended audiences—or perhaps their meanings for ourselves? Or, more unsoundly, do we seek their meanings for some abstractly defined, ambient society, as if it were a single entity? Each of these approaches has merit as a distinct direction of analysis requiring contextualization and identification; each is problematic and not to be taken lightly. As in translating any symbols and discourse of any period and culture, each direction should be taken deliberately and explicitly.

Advertisements, both historical and contemporary, do reflect something of their social and cultural environments, but they do so unclearly and with varying degrees of representation, because no single group of people or messages can represent an entire population with all its diversity. Advertisements reflect what their creators thought audiences wanted to see, or what they thought their audiences should see, according to the creators' ideological, social, and business biases. Since the advent of formalized market research and motivation research after World War II, we can surmise that the fit between commercial messages and their audiences has become tighter in some ways, but the pipers still play their patrons' tunes and not the tunes of their audiences.

How, then, and by whom, have advertisements been created? The advertising process, in the nineteenth century as now, comprised five basic steps: deciding to advertise, conceiving the message, producing it, distributing it, and paying for it. Advertisers must always perform the first and last steps, initiating the process and paying for it. What, if any, of the middle three steps they perform has varied over time and according to custom and other factors, especially the size and organization of their firms and the passage of time since their founding.

In the century before 1920, specialists gradually took over the three steps between marketers' deciding to advertise and their paying for it. Conception, production, and distribution of the message devolved to specialists at different rates over the years, according to advertisers' desires for assistance and many other factors. By 1870, most advertisers who were not printers themselves routinely delegated the production of their advertisements to others. Whether or not advertisers delegated distribution depended on the medium used. Distrib-
utiing advertisements through advertising agents to the periodical media, newspapers and magazines, increased rapidly between 1870 and 1890 as the complexities and size of the marketplace grew, especially when advertisers tried to reach national or large metropolitan markets. When, on the other hand, advertisers used nonperiodical media, such as posters and trade cards, they or their sales agents or wholesalers retained for decades, sometimes even to the present, the responsibility for distributing their messages to their publics. The critical and highly individualistic matter of conceiving the advertising messages shifted only gradually, and after 1890, to specialized communication professionals. Nevertheless, advertisers still retain ultimate control of the content of their commercial messages.

Important though small and owner-operated firms are to today's economy and society, they no longer dominate the direction or the popular image of U.S. business or its political economy. In contrast, entrepreneurial capitalism prevailed in American business before the 1890s. In part because the owners, or their extended families, often founded and always managed most nineteenth-century enterprises, they were intimately involved in their functions. Furthermore, these firms operated without corporate stockholders for financing, relying on retained earnings, silent partners, or the growing domestic and foreign banking and institutional investment resources. Then, as now, owner-managers answered to themselves and to their partners and families.

Prior to the merger movement of the 1890s, an owner or small group of partners could oversee the entire operations of most firms, assisted by a single layer of supervisors between themselves and the majority of their employees, and managerial specialization had only begun to set standards for operating the largest U.S. businesses. Although a few leaders in managerial practices, such as some railroads, had passed through the owner-manager, entrepreneurial style by the 1870s, small enterprises remained in the majority and important to operation and innovation in the U.S. business system into the present. Manufacturers' trade journals continually praised and idealized "Men Who Succeed"—to quote the Manufacturers' Gazette of 1890. Such men gain both "reputation and wealth" by having "grown up in the business, becoming familiar with every detail and every branch. They do not have to rely upon any one for the successful operation of their plant." In 1869, James A. Garfield admonished young men aspiring to business success that "whatever you win in life you must conquer by your own efforts, and then it is yours—a part of yourself" (emphasis added). Along with the extended passage from Garfield's speech, Seymour Eaton reiterated the substance of this message in other forms throughout his One Hundred Lessons in Business. For instance, the first lesson consisted of a page of advice from "a Brooklyn man of long experience in busi-
ness life” that instructed young men to learn all aspects of their business, to be “master of [their] own business” in every way. This was, after all, the highly proclaimed managerial style of two of America’s most famous businessmen, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, notwithstanding the sizes of their operations.

Many of the major figures and firms of nineteenth-century American business, like Carnegie and Rockefeller, had little impact on consumer-directed advertising practices. For instance, the infrequent but powerful exceptions to the small-business rule that had already, by the 1870s, developed corporate structures and middle managerial practices, such as the large Massachusetts textile mills, railroads, telegraph companies, and insurance companies, mostly sold to other businesses, or their goods were generic products sold through traditional wholesale distribution channels. Railroads, which advertised extensively to the public and to businesses, did so to raise capital, but they advertised comparatively little to nontrade consumers before 1890, except to publicize rates and timetables. Although they purchased substantial newspaper space and ordered multitudes of posters and timetable brochures, their advertising policies rarely deviated from conventions developed by other advertisers, particularly retailers. Rarely did they lead in advertising as they did in the evolution of managerial or financing practices. An early example of a railroad’s experimenting with novel forms came in 1892 with the Santa Fe Railroad’s beginning successful campaigns to attract tourists to the Southwest, using artists’ romantic renditions of the area and its people, under the direction of an advertising specialist. An editorial in Printers’ Ink stated that it was “not poverty that keeps the railways out of the enormous benefits they might reap by a suitable advertising scheme.” The reason was their “conservative tradition,” as it was for the insurance companies, too.

Similarly, despite Carnegie Steel Company’s size, and Andrew Carnegie’s early adaptation to production of the managerial innovations that he had learned in the telegraph and railroad industries, neither he nor other large manufacturers of capital goods advertised to the consumer sufficiently to have any interest in developing that field. Indeed, in The Empire of Business, Carnegie’s 345-page collection of advice on business written in 1902, he included not a word on advertising as a pertinent tool of business success.

The nineteenth-century businesses that determined the course of the century’s advertising practices began as small enterprises and were marketed initially by their founders. Individuals started owner-managed businesses, such as that begun by Dr. C. E. Welch, a Methodist dentist, who in 1869 invented a nonalcoholic grape drink as a substitute for wine in communion. Favorable responses encouraged him to market it, so he began by typesetting, printing, and
distributing advertisements, mostly "circulars and booklets to churches and
members of the medical profession." G. G. Mennen also provided his own
early, and rather more flamboyant, promotions. Around 1880, this pharmacist
concocted a pleasing talcum powder that he first marketed by distributing sam­
pies to local mothers. He then nailed signs on fences and trees in the area, still
selling from his drugstore. After Mennen gave up his store, he sold from the
back of a wagon that carried, in addition to quantities of talcum powder, a
troupe of entertainers. Later he advertised with painted boards, signs on barns
and rocks, painted theater curtains, and circus programs, then distributed nov­
elty giveaways through retailers and the mails and bought magazine and news­
paper space. Not until after 1910 did Mennen seek an ad agent's assistance in
creating his messages.9

Firms operating under this nonbureaucratic style have continued these
practices, regardless of the date or the size of business. In 1910, Otto Leisy, a
partner and the "Sole Manager" of a moderate-sized brewery, reminded his em­
ployees of his monopoly on decision making within the company; he did this
in a document entitled, "Rules to be strictly adhered to in 1910 by every em­
ployee in the I. Leisy Brewing Company."10 On a much larger scale, according
to Ida Tarbell, John D. Rockefeller continued to control his business even af­
ter it reached massive proportions. "To know every detail of the oil trade, to be
able to reach at any moment its remotest point, to control even its weakest
factor, this was [his] ideal of doing business." As Tarbell explained, there "must
be nothing—nothing in his great machine he did not know to be working
right."11 And in the 1920s, Henry Ford still managed the firm he founded as
closely as possible, considering its great size. For fifty years beginning in 1937,
Edwin H. Land, inventor and promoter of the self-developing camera, and the
Polaroid Company operated as "a man and a company who occupied the same
space, and often, but not always, spoke with the same voice."12

Before the advent of the advertising/newspaper agent in the 1840s, adver­
tisers always worked directly with the newspaper or magazine publishers or job
printers who produced their messages. Between the 1840s and 1890s, adver­
tising agents increasingly distributed advertisements to the presses for their
clients, but they provided only minimal, if any, creative services. Thus, almost
always before 1890, but decreasingly thereafter, advertisers initiated the pro­
cess, decided upon the message, and then, with or without an agent as a liai­
on, communicated it and a set of expectations for it to a printer or publisher.
The letters between advertising businesses and printers or agents before 1890
were always written by or addressed to officers of the advertising firm or their
secretaries. Even during the 1890s, on most occasions when Printers' Ink or any
other advertising trade journal praised advertising successes, they credited the
founder or highest officers of the advertising firms for the relevant decisions or innovations. Although printers and publishers often exerted considerable influence on an advertisement's content and style, the final determination on an advertisement always belonged to someone keenly interested in the public image of the firm and its products.

J. Estey & Company exemplified owner-managers' identification with their firms. In 1849, Jacob Estey became a silent partner in a firm, founded in Brattleboro, Vermont, three years before, that manufactured reed organs. In 1857, he and a Mr. Greene took over the firm and named it after themselves. After Greene retired a few years later, Estey controlled the company and continued to so do for several decades, as partners and relatives came and went. The firm grew, and by 1870 Estey employed at least two hundred people, producing more than three hundred organs each month. Estey's own reputation and that of the firm's were the same to him, even when he had partners, as evinced by the diatribe he wrote into the company's catalog in response to his competitors' price-cutting during the hard times of the 1870s:

The age of humbug is not past, and this is one of the most arrant humbugs of all. Such a policy carried to the end can only result in ruin and disgrace. "My reputation, Iago, my reputation!" cried the repentant Cassio. . . . Messers. Estey & Co. value the reputation of the Estey Organ as they do their own. They have earned an honorable name, and their great success has been achieved by honest, plain, straightforward dealings with patrons, agents, and all concerned.14

Such a defense for a business, invoking personal reputation, reflected, as it still does, owner-managers' identity with their firms.

There is a certain irony in Estey's declaration that the "age of humbug" had not passed. Humbug, as the indignant Estey used the term, referred originally to promotional deception, but it came to be associated also with the bright and extravagant advertisements made possible by advances in printing technologies after the Civil War. In this latter sense, Estey sponsored numerous advertising forms common to nineteenth-century entrepreneurs later called "Barnum & Baileys of the industrial scene."15 For example, one Estey multicolored poster, circa 1890, features an expansive factory complex as the dominant image (plate 1). Vignettes fill the lower corners: on the left, an idealized bourgeois parlor scene features an Estey organ as the focus of genteel attention, all under Jacob Estey's gaze, and on the right, Jacob Estey's portrait appears again, flanked by his two current partners. This print demonstrates the showmanship of the period's colorful advertising outside of periodicals. The factory complex, the founder's portrait, all topped by the oversized and elabo-
rate lettering shouting the company's name, were standard fare for these signs, frequently accompanied by scenes of products in use. Such flourishes had more in common with circus promotions than they did with the dark and staid announcements typical before the Civil War, and that were still prevalent in newspapers and magazines.

"Bill It Like a Circus" and Other Innovations

To "bill it like a circus" became a common expression among aggressive advertisers. And many manufacturing advertisers would not have objected to a label that likened them to the master of humbug, Phineas Taylor Barnum. Indeed, one of the largest shoe industrialists of the period, William L. Douglas, readily acknowledged having been inspired by posters with Barnum's portrait to use his own face for his trademark, and he did so very successfully. Some in the advertising business took the impact of Barnum's humbug, if not its content, so seriously that Printers' Ink, the period's main advertising trade journal, mourned his death. According to the eulogy, Barnum had served, after all, as "one of the shining examples of success attained through judicious advertising." In his Autobiography, Barnum stated with his characteristic bombast that "I thoroughly understand the art of advertising, not merely by means of printer's ink, which I have always used freely, and to which I confess myself much indebted for my success, but by turning every possible circumstance to my account." For fifty-six years, beginning in 1835, Barnum entertained and challenged Americans and Europeans, drawing them into his sideshows, museums, concerts, lectures, and, of course, circuses with flamboyant and extensive promotions. Far from disclaiming humbug, he titled one of his popular lectures, "The Science of Money-Making and the Philosophy of Humbug." With his humbug, he "bought Americans with brass, for gold and silver I had none." Certainly, the tales of Barnum's promotions have astonished generations with his extravagant imagination. He employed the press to his advantage with both paid advertisements and with his skills at obtaining free publicity for his entertainments, and he generated advance publicity with trainloads of brightly colored posters, favoring them over newspapers for the towns along his itinerary.

Neil Harris's analysis of Barnum's talents and accomplishments provides useful insights for understanding other successful advertisers of the nineteenth century. Harris contends that Barnum, like the patent-medicine purveyors, appealed to Americans' "egalitarian self-confidence." They relished the chance to challenge experts and sought to make their own decisions about the verac-
ity of claims and propositions. Consequently, when they paid their nickels to see the "Fejee mermaid" that Barnum promoted as the subject of learned doctors' debates, they were pleased to be able to see clearly for themselves that it was only a monkey's head and torso joined to the tail of a large fish. "Who is to decide," his advertisements asked, "when doctors disagree?" The more controversy Barnum could whip up, the greater his profits, especially if he could engage experts with impressive credentials to challenge him publicly. In explaining Barnum's successes, Harris "reconstruct[s] the language of showmanship that meant so much to nineteenth-century Americans." He argues that, despite the popular conceptions of Barnum, he was not simply a "brash huckster." Barnum was "neither a good-natured deceiver nor an evil-minded philistine, but an intelligent, complex, and well-organized entrepreneur whose business involved the myths and values of a self-proclaimed democracy." Likewise, much of the popular attraction to patent medicines derived from the independence that, users believed, the medicines gained them from doctors.20

Barnum did not train in any formal sense as an advertiser, promoter, or showman. Beginning in rural New England and then moving to New York City, he tried shopkeeping, newspaper editing, boarding-house managing, and lottery selling. The only one of these ventures that fared well was Barnum's lottery enterprise, but most states outlawed that activity before he could make his fortune. Barnum found his calling at last when the opportunity to promote a provocative entertainment piqued his fancy. Despite accusations that he fabricated a hoax in 1835 by purchasing and exhibiting a very old slave as George Washington's nurse, Barnum's genius lay not, in Harris's words, so much "in the invention or manufacture of curiosities as in their discovery, purchase, and advertisement." Barnum succeeded because of what he called "my monomania to make the Museum [and other projects] the town wonder and town talk... I often seized upon an opportunity by instinct, even before I had a very definite conception as to how it should be used, and it seemed, somehow, to mature itself and serve my purpose." This statement made good on Barnum's claim of "thoroughly" understanding the advertising of his time, for it contains the key to other nineteenth-century advertisers' successes in appealing to consumers. None were trained to promote; they all grew up without the communication technologies they employed as adults. Those who had a flair for promotion, those who shared Barnum's intuition and passion for it, succeeded at that portion of their business efforts. As Barnum put it, "I fell in with the world's way, and... my 'puffing' was more persistent, my posters more glaring, my pictures more brilliant."21 Instance after instance, Barnum, like Singer and McCormick, turned marketing problems, including obscurity at some times and controversy at others, into profitable opportunities. Advertisers other
than Barnum faced different marketing problems, of course, and generally had more in the way of tangible, functional products for their customers to judge. But their promotional efforts achieved marketing advantages for them if, by their intuition and personal inclinations, they too “fell in with the world’s way.”

During the Civil War, the Union government experienced a unique marketing problem—that of selling massive numbers of war bonds to a cautious population not accustomed to such matters. The promotional campaign that lay Cooke devised, the likes of which the country had never seen and would see again only rarely until after 1890, resulted in a hybrid of standard contemporary techniques and a harbinger of future ones. The unique marketing problem combined with the size of the sponsoring institution, the required geographical and social reach of the campaign, and the impact of the single entrepreneur in charge and resulted in a remarkable campaign. Although Cooke operated as an agent of the federal government, his independence, personal investments, and payment by commission from the bonds he sold gave his activities the character of an innovative, owner-managed enterprise.

Jay Cooke was a self-made man in the best of the nineteenth-century tradition. By 1860, he headed a Philadelphia banking firm. He had had experience with advertising throughout his business career: as a teenager, his duties for the Washington Packet & Transportation Company included writing its advertisements. One of his biographers, Henrietta M. Larson, claims that his messages distinguished themselves from the competition’s by acting as “sales talks” rather than “merely trite announcements.” Cooke’s enterprise in that position drew the attention of financier E. W. Clark, who gave the young man his start in banking in 1839. With E. W. Clark & Company, Cooke learned to sell railroad securities, municipal and state bonds, and real estate, and his experience included generating advertisements for the firm’s offerings. At the beginning of the Civil War, Cooke established his reputation as a promoter of bonds by a precedent-setting campaign to sell bonds for the State of Pennsylvania. Even conservative institutional investors were persuaded to purchase these bonds by Cooke’s appeals to their “patriotism and State pride of Pennsylvania in this hour of trial,” as well as to their financial “self-interest.” Furthermore, Cooke successfully advertised to ordinary citizens to buy bonds in denominations as low as $50. By reaching many levels of wealth, Cooke succeeded in oversubscribing the bond sales.22

On the basis of Jay Cooke’s Pennsylvania bond campaign, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase appointed him to sell Union bonds with the intention that Cooke would direct his efforts not only to the banking and finance community but, more importantly, to the general public. Cooke combined
both traditional and innovative practices for the campaign. He created a massive organization with 2,500 selling agents traveling around the country, but he controlled it out of his own home in true entrepreneurial fashion, calling in assistance only as he needed it. For instance, Cooke's ambitions for the universal reach of newspaper, poster, handbill, and mailer advertisements required working through advertising agencies. His purpose was less to use the agents in the manner of most contemporary businesses—namely, to achieve the most favorable rates—than to ensure complete coverage with the greatest efficiency. Using the agents' placement capacities, Cooke distributed not only advertisements—for which he made a point of paying generously—but also "reading notices"; that is, prepared "editorials" and information that he expected the newspapers to run without additional compensation.

Besides the remarkable size of this operation, Cooke innovated in copywriting, combining rational with emotional, patriotic, appeals to draw out citizens' savings. Cooke credited his inspiration in part to the impressions made on him by the evocative advertisements of Dr. Jayne, an early and extraordinarily successful patent-medicine promoter, and John Wanamaker, already the consummate retailer. Cooke also used professional writers to help him get his ideas into print. Journalists Samuel Wilkerson and John Russell Young worked under Cooke's direction, supplementing his own writing, to turn out the massive volume of copy that the campaign required. Working as an entrepreneur, essentially as an agent for the Union government, Cooke paid for all the advertising expenses out of his own commissions on the bond sales. In a sense, therefore, Cooke operated in this campaign very much as does an account executive in advertising today, defining the campaign's character and writing and directing copywriting and media placement with other, more specialized professionals, except that he was paid by a commission on sales.

Without any formal, studied set of conventions to follow, and without professional guidance, except from printers, advertisers experimented with the many fast-developing alternatives available to them for communication and transportation in a changing environment. Conventional practices grew out of these experiments.

The major marketing problems besetting most advertisers are competition for consumers' attention and competition for consumers' expenditures. The lack of easy access to homes and businesses through attractive, national mass media compounded these challenges in most of the nineteenth century. Different marketing problems fostered and rewarded different advertising policies, and not all restrained businesspeople deserved George P. Rowell's stern admo-
nition, "The man who refuses to patronize the newspaper is the man of morbid disposition, of small ideas and no business talent." Needless to say, advertisers' resemblance to P. T. Barnum in their practices ranged from the near likenesses of the patent-medicine sellers to the contrasts of stolid industrialists who advertised quietly and sold only through their trade presses and forums. For patent-medicine purveyors and entertainers, extravagant advertising and other methods of self-promotion became so much a part of their business that any reticence in style doomed their sales. Macy and Wanamaker dominated the retail markets in their respective cities through personally devised, distinctive, and extensively distributed advertisements; Singer, McCormick, and Fairbanks likewise set precedents for manufacturers nationally. Despite exceptions to the stereotypes within each category, businesspeople made their marks when they matched their promotional efforts to their fields' marketing needs; those matches, collectively, created the conventions.

**Patent-Medicine Purveyors and the Power of Printers' Ink**

The promotional styles of patent-medicine seller Dr. David Jayne inspired many other campaigns, including Jay Cooke's bond-selling strategies. Jayne had begun his career practicing medicine in New Jersey in the 1840s, which made him one of the few nineteenth-century patent-medicine sellers with a certified medical education. He moved to Philadelphia to sell his nostrums, and once there, according to George P. Rowell, a major figure in advertising for fifty years after the Civil War, "he had the good sense to see that no matter how much merit his medicines possessed it was necessary to make them known. In the matter of advertising, Dr. Jayne led all competitors in the race for fame and fortune." Rowell admiringly recounted that Jayne's "fortune was counted by millions, and his income itself was so large that he had to conjure up ways and means to dispose of it." In addition to extensive newspaper advertising, by 1850 Jayne expanded on the custom of taking out advertisements in someone else's almanac by designing and commissioning an entire almanac as his own medium, setting an example that patent-medicine sellers followed for almost a century. His intuitive notion of how best to attract attention to his *Medical Almanac and Guide to Health* and to win sales for his vermifuge and other potions resulted in picturing a large, bug-eyed worm on the cover. Jayne and his successor seemed satisfied with this imagery, keeping it on their almanacs' covers in one form or another until 1911.

James C. Ayer followed Jayne's lead in distributing almanacs and other nonperiodical printed advertisements to become one of the world's most
prominent patent-medicine men. No immediate kin to advertising agent F. Wayland Ayer, James Ayer began in the medicine business around 1855 as a pharmacist who claimed the title of “Dr.,” as did many of his contemporary peers. After a decade of heavy promotion, his sales supported a large industrial complex in Lowell, Massachusetts. By 1871, this complex included his own lithograph and letterpress printing departments, from which he oversaw the production of eight million almanacs annually. In 1889, Ayer’s facilities produced one hundred thousand almanacs daily, published, over the course of the year, in twenty different languages. In addition to the almanacs that Ayer produced out of his own shops, he also ordered advertisements in other formats from job printers, sending posters, trade cards, paper fans, and countless other novelties into the marketplace. For instance, a single country store in Mattawaumkeag, Maine, had on hand at least twenty-five Ayer posters, some of them never unwrapped, when it closed sometime after 1890. In addition to directing these multitudes of lithographed advertisements, Ayer enhanced his reputation as a competent businessman with his close control over newspaper advertisements. He required that newspapers place his messages exactly according to specifications and trained his staff to watch for “shortcomings,” for which he would personally demand compensation. He also trained what Rowell called “the best corps of advertising men that ever traveled in the interest of a patent medicine.” Rowell’s earliest memory of an advertisement was the label on his family’s ever-handly bottle of Ayer’s Cherry Pectoral, one of many tributes by which Rowell and others acknowledged Ayer’s successes. In 1900, the journal Advertising Success declared that the “evolution of the science of American advertising can be traced by a review of Ayer announcements.”

Any number of others made their fortunes at selling patent medicines in the nineteenth century. As late as 1894, the New York Times declared, in a full-page article subtitled, “Vast Fortunes Made by the Patent-Medicine Kings,” that “In Printer’s Ink [is] the Secret” (printer’s ink was a popular expression for periodical advertising). Reporting on a dinner at Delmonico’s sponsored by the Association of Manufacturers and Wholesale Dealers in Proprietary Articles of the United States, the Times told the stories of some of those men “who had advertised themselves into fame and fortune,” who were “better known than Cabinet members,” and “whose business ventures extend to all quarters of the world.” The article concluded hyperbolically that these successes demonstrated that “a pot of printer’s ink is better than the greatest gold mine.” Not surprisingly, this tribute neglected to mention the regular criticisms made in that very paper and other public forums against many of the medicine sellers’ practices, such as covering rocks, trees, and barns along public thoroughfares and railroads with painted reminders of their brands.
thermore, by 1894, many critics had begun to assail these same “patent-medicine kings” for the alcohol and narcotic contents of their nostrums and for their problematic copy techniques, which included unverified testimonials and frightening descriptions of illnesses and the horrible consequences of doing without their medications. Because of the dubious, often times harmful, nature of their products, few of the early patent medicines survived as household remedies past the 1920s. A few of the more benign products, such as Lydia Pinkham’s Female Remedy, did survive well into the twentieth century, but with a much diminished popularity; corporate rather than individual names have come to control the trade. To this day, old-time patent-medicine sellers remain more noted for their advertising strategies and techniques than for their nostrums. Leaders among them set the pace for lavish spending, and, like Barnum, they exploited their idiosyncratic flairs for self-promotion. Their successes demonstrated the value of competitive exposure, and gaining audiences through volume advertising and attention-getting devices became the standards for aggressive advertising.

**Selling Nationally**

Manufacturers and retailers offering consumers products with more objective and tangible qualities than the nostrums often chose to pursue some of the same promotional tactics. Even before Richard W. Sears began to compete with Montgomery Ward’s general-lines mail-order business, he advertised aggressively, primarily in newspapers. He began in 1886 selling watches through catalogs, writing his first newspaper copy at the end of that year. After moving from Minneapolis to Chicago in 1887 to have better access to the nation’s transportation and communication networks, Sears advertised his watches heavily, putting copywriting high on the list of activities to which he personally attended. He brought watchmaker and tinker Alvah Curtis Roebuck into the firm to supervise the more mechanical aspects of the business so that he could devote his time to marketing. Despite heavy competition, Sears’s promotions, which included complete guarantees, garnered more than enough business to foster rapid growth. Sears added other products to his offerings, and by 1894 his catalog had 322 pages with a wide variety of items, by then competing directly with Ward’s catalog. Sears’s sales eventually overtook his competitors because, according to Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, his “spellbinding advertisements exerted a telling effect on farm readers. His compelling messages pulled the reader into his copy and kept that reader’s attention to the
end." Historian of marketing Richard Tedlow has agreed with this assessment, concluding that Sears’s “panache” was the determining factor. He quotes Louis E. Asher, a turn-of-the-century Sears executive who declared: “The ‘Send No Money’ advertisements violated every rule of good advertising except one—the advertisements pulled! As Sears once said, ‘They almost pulled the ink off the paper.’ They were unattractive to the eye, set in crowded five-point type that was hard to read. There was no white space. But every ad carried the magic three-word message in heavy black type: ‘Send No Money,’ followed by the simple direction: ‘Cut out and return this ad.’ The cluttered copy and those “magic” words were all part of Sears’s personal style of advertising; they were more like the traditional merchants’ style than circus posters, to be sure, but quite in step with the standards of voluminous advertising set by the patent-medicine purveyors and entertainers. Although Sears’s firm went through several forms during those years, none of those changes affected his control over advertising output.

After the Civil War, Cyrus Hall McCormick, manufacturer of harvester equipment, continued expanding his marketing nationally, although his brothers still did not allow their agents to place large newspaper advertisements in local newspapers; they encouraged, instead, small newspaper advertisements, personal selling, “puffery” (i.e., paid-for editorial statements), and limited use of other media. By 1870, however, Cyrus developed more extensive advertising practices, having overcome his brothers’ fears that production could not keep up with orders. After first using lithographed posters, or show cards, in 1867, he increased expenditures, using more color and flourish as the years went on. In spring 1871, he distributed eighteen thousand copies of a chromolithographed show card to agents whose names and towns were overprinted by letterpress in red in spaces left blank for that purpose. In 1871, McCormick imitated a competitor’s methods by publishing a trade newspaper full of praise for his machines alongside nonpromotional information and advice. His agents freely distributed this paper, which quickly replaced the McCormick pamphlet as a major, long-term selling tool. In the early years, McCormick had no agents to assist him in selling and he wrote his own advertising pamphlets of necessity, but even though the firm grew substantially during his lifetime, he always maintained personalized control over marketing. According to his grandson, the elder McCormick believed that “the heads and frequently the originators of their businesses, knew more than other men” about their machines, and therefore there was no need for a “specialized science” of advertising. So McCormick spent his last thirty years (he died in 1884) attending entirely to marketing and patent legalities. His grandson
credited McCormick’s successes in great measure to—in addition to his “undying service to humanity” in inventing modern agriculture as well as modern industry—his advertising virtuosity.36

After 1880, Cyrus H. McCormick Jr. gradually took over his father’s promotional work, writing most of the advertisements as well as the puffery pieces sent to newspapers and journals. In the 1880s, the son came to supervise the annual production of 350,000 copies of the house advertising organ, the Farmers’ Advance, 800,000 pamphlets, and 7,000 to 8,000 chromolithographed show cards. As a nonspecialist working within the fast-changing field of advertising, McCormick Jr. continued his father’s extensive advertising practices, continuing also the family’s debate upon the merits of those practices. In 1886, McCormick Jr. wrote a revealing commentary on the “fashions in methods of advertising,” calling them “capricious.” He argued, “Trying to do business without advertising is like winking at a pretty girl through a pair of green goggles. You may know what you are doing, but no one else does. Quitting advertising in dull times is like tearing out a dam because the water is low. Either plan will prevent good times from coming. . . . People who advertise only once in three months forget that most folks can not remember anything longer than about seven days.” McCormick Jr.’s defense of his own advertising policies showed his determination to pursue his deceased father’s high-profile policies despite continuing family opposition.37

Publishers as Advertisers

George P. Rowell’s listing of major advertisers of the 1870s pointed out the importance of publishers as advertisers.38 Years later, Cyrus K. Curtis set new standards for publishers as advertisers and also came to wield enormous power within the advertising business overall, building what became, before broadcasting, two of the most important national advertising media, the Ladies’ Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post. Curtis had early developed a belief in the importance of advertising by first working in a store and then selling newspaper space to Boston merchants. He started up his first magazine in the burgeoning national marketplace of the 1870s and 1880s, a context that inspired hundreds of people to start up magazines. After that first try failed, Curtis started again in 1879, this time in Philadelphia. For this new farmers’ weekly, Tribune and Farmer, his wife, Louisa Knapp Curtis, wrote a column addressed to women. Her feature became so popular that she expanded it first to a full section then, in December 1883, to a monthly supplement entitled the Ladies’ Journal. The immediate success of this publication, which came to be
known as the *Ladies' Home Journal* by a common misreading of its masthead by which readers mistakenly incorporated the *Home* under a cottage scene as part of the title, convinced the Curtises to focus all of their energies on building it.\textsuperscript{39}

Curtis fully appreciated publishing's money-making potential that lay in attracting advertising revenues rather than subscription revenues or partisan patronage. He spent unprecedented amounts of money developing the *Ladies' Home Journal* as an attractive, well-written publication, successfully targeted to the prosperous classes. He raised circulations by advertising these merits extensively in other publications, both magazines and newspapers. The *Journal's* circulations, in turn, lured more advertising revenues than any previous publication. As part of this process, in 1885 Curtis sought out the agency of N. W. Ayer & Son in order to place the messages he had written more efficiently. Then, after several years of building the *Journal* slowly, Curtis decided to accelerate the process; in 1888 he went to Francis Wayland Ayer with a request for $400 in advertising credit. Curtis reported years later, in eulogizing Ayer, that he received the credit with the single stipulation that the agency could “spend it where we think it will do you the most good.” The advertisements achieved such remarkable results that Curtis continued expanding his advertising until he challenged Ayer with a second request a year later, this time for $200,000 in advertising credit. Ayer granted this request as well, collecting payment for the loan by placing advertisements from his other clients into the *Journal* without paying Curtis for the space. With these campaigns behind him, Curtis continued aggressive advertising through the Ayer agency, building his circulations to the largest of the century. Also in 1889, Curtis hired Edward Bok to edit the *Journal* so that he and his wife could devote their efforts to what they considered more appropriate activities—she to her home and he entirely to advertising and promotion.\textsuperscript{40}

**Advertising Soaps**

Competition for consumers' expenditures increased during the nineteenth century as markets grew, productivity rose, local markets became regional, and some regional markets became national. Not only did similar products and services compete with each other, but new products competed with older alternatives and different types of products and services competed with each other. At the same time, the competition for consumers' attention increased as the intensity of promotional efforts grew in a self-fueling spiral, each advertiser attempting to wrest attention from other promoters. Entrepreneurs devised new advertising practices and exploited existing ones, building up a range of con-
ventional practices and attitudes that valued broad, frequent, and often intense exposure. The cumulative consequences of this spiral, of course, added to each advertiser's perceived need for ever-increasing promotion. As the decades after the Civil War passed, businesspeople who were determined to compete through innovative advertising began to divide according to whether they became more expert by specializing in marketing themselves, secured the services of advertising specialists, or combined both approaches. As yet, a pattern had not crystallized; in this period of flux, when advertisers experimented with form and content and media, advertisements reflected their notions of what served their interests best, whatever their effectiveness as selling tools.

Selling soap during this period, for example, presented acute marketing problems; it was a field that especially rewarded innovative advertising. The market was extremely competitive because of rapid increases in manufacturing productivity and the relative ease of transporting the finished goods; indeed, the geographic range of competition was so large that several British soaps competed effectively in the American market during this period. An additional factor that exacerbated competition between soap makers resulted from their decisions to market their products in small, consumer-sized units packaged with identifying wrappers. The soap manufacturers then faced several marketing challenges that involved generating both generic demand all around as well as specific demand for their own brands. First, they had to convince buyers to consume more soap to absorb their collective productivity. Second, they had to convince buyers to cast off long-standing traditions of either making their own soap or buying it in blocks from their storekeepers' generic cakes. Third, they sought to foster brand loyalty—that is, specific demand—for products with only minor differentials. As early as 1851, B. T. Babbitt began a promotional program offering premiums in exchange for quantities of soap wrappers, and all of the major soap companies developed variations on this practice at one time or another.

In 1865, Thomas A. Barratt, a Briton who became one of the best-known late-nineteenth-century advertising innovators, bought a partnership in a prosperous London soap company founded seventy-five years earlier by Anthony Pears and operated until then entirely by the Pears family. Barratt had been admitted into this firm earlier to be joint proprietor, bookkeeper, salesman, and traveling salesman. Prior to his partnership, the firm had advertised very little, and the Pears family became quite distressed when Barratt expanded advertising expenditures not only beyond limits acceptable to them but beyond those of any previous nonmedicinal manufacturer in England. His lavish use of posters and newspaper advertisements containing testimonials from doctors, chemists, and even British-born Lillie Langtry, the renowned ac-
tress and beauty, drove the Pears family out of the business in dismay at how their family name appeared so ubiquitously and indiscreetly—although not before they had become quite wealthy. In 1883, Barratt began promoting his soaps in the United States, following the same extravagant practices and achieving the same successes; for example, in 1888 he made a $35,000 appropriation for advertising in the United States alone.

Barratt's innovations in advertising strategies had great impact in America as well as in England. One of his many famous contributions to advertising practice came in 1886, when he purchased a painting by Sir John Millais to be published on both sides of the Atlantic as an advertisement for his soap. The great success of this novel tactic in gaining widespread attention and publicity, not to mention sales, began a fashion of using fine art in advertisements that many, including Millais's son, credited for "rais[ing] the character of our illustrated advertisements."

In the late 1880s, Barratt worked at developing questions as popular slogans in order to identify cleanliness with the use of Pears' Soap. Slogans had been used before, but most of them were dull and prosaic and did not pique the fancy the way that Barratt's questions did. For example, he asked "How do you spell soap?" to which his advertisements responded, "Why, P-E-A-R-s', of course." His most famous question became a fad: "Good Morning! Have you used Pears' Soap?" Children, adults, even political cartoonists and writers of the caliber of Mark Twain, reportedly teased their acquaintances and foes with the question for years.

Although Barratt owned and directed his firm, he cared nothing for its history or manufacturing operations; he had no personal connection with either of these. He presaged twentieth-century marketers' attitudes toward manufacturing and selling with the remark that "Any fool can make soap. It takes a clever man to sell it." Barratt, like George P. Rowell, an advertising agent who started up a patent-medicine manufactory in order to devise its advertising, at that time had to own a company to control its advertising campaign. He operated, therefore, as a transitional innovator, less like a traditional owner-manager and more like a twentieth-century advertising specialist. His talents and interests lay more with advertising than with any other aspect of managing his firm.

Elbert Hubbard, another innovative contributor to advertising history, held several other claims to fame, including authorship of "A Message to Garcia" in 1899 and the founding of an American center for the Arts and Crafts movement, the Roycroft Shop. Before literary and artistic accomplishments of this stature occupied him, however, Hubbard had pursued several trades, most notably a partnership in the Larkin Soap Company of Buffalo, New York. Begin-
ning as a salesman, Hubbard soon became a partner and directed advertising and promotions for Larkin from 1882 until 1893. In this position, he took the strategy of offering premiums for soap wrappers well past its modest origins. In 1889, for instance, he offered unusually substantial attractions, such as lamps and furniture for wrappers plus a small amount of cash, a combination that today is called a self-liquidating premium. When Hubbard decided that he had achieved fortune enough, at the age of thirty-five, he sold his interests in the company to his partner, John D. Larkin, for $75,000.44

According to all reports, Elbert Hubbard truly enjoyed selling; he eagerly began each day as a salesman and advertising director for Larkin Soap. In his career after leaving Larkin, he epitomized the transitional advertising entrepreneur, but differently from Barratt. Although he claimed to leave the soap business in order to free himself from commercial activities, he continued, as a freelance, to write copy with a rather unusual flourish—one of the few copywriters who ever signed his works; and he did so with pride. He so relished copywriting that he wrote many essays promoting and guiding the profession, including “The Adman’s Philosophy,” “The Science of Advertising,” and “A Message to Ad-Men.”45 Hubbard lived later than Thomas Barratt, surviving until a time when an advertising specialist could pursue the trade without owning a company. In that sense, Hubbard not only was a transitional figure, but he lived the transition himself.

In the 1880s, beginning gradually, more and more advertisers consulted with advertising specialists about conceiving, producing, and distributing their commercial messages. By the 1920s, only a few major advertisers did not use specialists, either as in-house employees or outside agencies. Despite this historical correlation, however, we cannot equate specialization in advertising with modernity. Since World War I, several of the United States’ most notable technological and marketing innovators have had strong and even controlling influences on their firms’ public images. Prominent examples have included Henry Ford; Tim Gill of Quark, Inc.; and Steve Jobs, when he was first with Apple, Inc. Less prominent, but well known in every locale, are the retailers whose broadcast voices and gesticulations promote their wares—cars, jewelry, electronics—with a vigor only the dedicated can generate. The strongest predictor of owner-manager control of advertising is neither date nor size of firm, but whether or not an enterprise is operated by its founder.