Early Advertising Specialists

It is no longer practicable to have such an accurate or general knowledge of the value of advertising mediums as was possible before they became so very numerous, unless the whole time of several persons is devoted to it, and most advertisers, therefore, are content to leave this matter with an acute and well-informed advertising agent, of whom one or more are to be found in the larger cities.

—George P. Rowell, Men Who Advertise, 1870

The Original Niche

People calling themselves advertising agents operated in the United States by the 1840s, but they did not perform many of the functions we now associate with the advertising profession. Even in 1870, when George Rowell asserted that “most advertisers” turned to agents for assistance, those specialists performed a much narrower set of functions than they came to perform in the 1890s.

The economic developments of the first half of the nineteenth century changed the mechanisms as well as the volume of advertising practices. As long as merchants, both wholesale and retail, conducted their businesses on a local basis, they placed their advertisements directly with the people who operated the media where they wanted their messages seen or heard. Proprietors of merchant houses negotiated with a handful of newspaper publishers, job printers, sign makers, or even street criers, who then produced their advertise-
ments. The messages themselves were generally straightforward, except for whatever flourishes street criers or sign painters took the liberty of adding as means of getting attention. This simple, localized system needed no intermediaries. By the 1840s, however, the first stage of U.S. industrialization was in full swing, with growing cities, developing transportation and communication networks, and increasing numbers of newspapers expanding their reach and size. Advertising, too, grew, facilitating the merchants' distribution of products from industry and world trade, and as it grew it became more complicated. As merchants all along the distribution channels competed more aggressively, their advertising alternatives increased. Job printers offered more options for handbills, almanacs, and posters, and an abundance of local newspapers and trade journals spread across the increased distances over which merchants and producers now competed. All of this increased the numbers and difficulties of transactions for the businesspeople who advertised, and those growing complexities very clearly coincided with the origins in the 1840s of the advertising agent as an intermediary.

Printers relied heavily on advertisers' expenditures during this period of business expansion, as they have ever since, whether they produced job printing to order, sold stock pictures to businesses in large volume, published periodicals, or took part in all of these. Periodical publishers always recognized the need for advertising revenues if they were to be competitive and expand their facilities; the American colonies' first successful newspaper, the Boston News-Letter, solicited advertisements in its first issue in 1704. By the 1840s, the increasing costs of their new printing presses and the rapidly expanding competition exacerbated publishers' long-standing needs for advertising revenues. The first advertising agents recognized the publishers' plight as an opportunity, and they exploited that opportunity by soliciting accounts on behalf of the publishers. By agreement, the agents drew most of their compensation in the form of commissions from the publishers based on the value of the space purchased by advertisers, setting precedents that have yet to be entirely overridden. So, even though Volney B. Palmer, the first such agent known to have operated in the United States, acquired accounts by convincing merchants that they would benefit from advertising and by offering to facilitate the transactions, he had to assure his prospects that they would not have to pay additionally for his services. They had only to pay for their advertisements at rates from the publishers that he assured were the best available. Through the nineteenth century, agents who could afford it sometimes also purchased space at reduced, high-volume rates, then sold that space in smaller units to advertisers at a profit, but still allegedly lower than the advertisers could have purchased on their own.
Operating essentially as independent agents for publishers but claiming to benefit advertisers, agents did not begin to question dividing their allegiances between publishers and advertisers until the 1870s. When this became an issue, the field split into two groups. One group consisted of advertising agents who served the advertisers, recognizing them rather than the publishers as their primary clients. The second group became newspaper and magazine agents who represented the interests of publishers explicitly. Still, the ambiguities of the agents' loyalties remained at issue for decades. Advertising agents thus carved a niche within the expanding marketplace at the point where the needs of advertisers and publishers intersected, and both sets of clients gradually, grudgingly accepted the agents' brokerage functions.\(^1\) By 1869, a New York City business directory listed only forty-two advertising agents; in 1892, another listed 288.\(^2\)

Many of the early advertising agents entered the field from publishing, having observed the publishers' needs first hand. Palmer, for example, solicited merchants' advertisements for his father's newspaper in New Jersey. Francis Wayland Ayer, whose agency, N. W. Ayer & Son, remains one of the world's largest, discovered the field by chance after a family friend hired him in 1868 for a job that included soliciting advertisements in Philadelphia for a weekly religious newspaper. Claude C. Hopkins, who became a leading copywriter in a later generation of advertising professionals, also had his interest first piqued in advertising while working for his father's small-town newspaper, soliciting advertisements from and distributing handbills for local merchants. The merchants' determination to get their messages in the paper, whether by cash payment or barter, made a strong impression on the young Hopkins.\(^3\) George P. Rowell, who became one of the most influential advertising practitioners of the nineteenth century, got his first city job in 1858 collecting bills and accounts for the Boston Post. The newspaper had no advertising solicitor then, so in quiet periods his employer sent Rowell out to inquire of merchants advertising in other papers whether their messages "should not also appear in the Post." Throughout Rowell's memoirs, Forty Years an Advertising Agent, he writes of advertising agents as "advertising solicitors" and "canvassers" whose most reliable alliances in the business world were with "newspaper men." Advertisers, on the other hand, remained uncertain components of the advertising trade, according to Rowell, even in the first decade of the twentieth century, when he produced his memoirs. Some advertisers promoted products that made fortunes for themselves and their agents, he wrote; mostly, however, they did not. Other times they produced trouble, and it was all rather unpredictable: "Sometimes unpromising customers will develop into good ones and again an apparently honest enterprise will turn out to be a trick or a fraud."
Rowell believed that only the newspapers and the agents themselves had clearly defined functions in the business world and could be relied upon to act predictably. Still, he regularly reminded the publishers of their debts to advertisers, including his 1867 parody of the testimonials of proprietary medicine advertisements: “Brandreth’s Pills saved the life of the New York Herald in its infancy. It advertised them, and the sum paid for the work paid the printers.”

Because buying and selling space in newspapers and magazines and obtaining commissions from the publishers worked so readily, they, of all the media, fit best with the agents’ operations. (Advertisements are commissionable if the medium wherein they are placed, usually a mass distribution medium such as a newspaper, magazine, or broadcast, makes available a commission to encourage middlemen to recruit advertisements.) In contrast, advertising agents generally discouraged advertisers from using noncommissionable media—such as posters and trade cards—which they attacked as “misuse” of expenditures. In this way, advertising agents tried to block the use of certain types of advertising forms that had, in some cases at least, proved to advance the progress of business. Rowell and other agents frequently argued that, “if the sign and show-card are successful in attracting patrons, so much the more so would be an attractive notice in the columns of the newspaper. It is then,” he asserted, “not only the passers-by who read, but thousands beside, who never would think of gazing into a shop window for what they desire. The paper reaches a class that can be reached in no other way, and produces results to be arrived at by no other medium.”

That said, Rowell was pained to admit in his memoirs that he successfully advertised his own business on one occasion with posters. N. W. Ayer & Son flatly refused to assist clients with poster advertisements until the late 1890s. Prior to then, the Ayer agency “regarded [posters] as an unsightly and undignified method of sales promotions.” Ayer deemed posters inappropriate for any firm other than a patent-medicine company because of their content and also because they were put up in public and private places indiscriminately, often without the permission of the owners of those places. Furthermore, it was difficult to ensure that posters for which the agency had paid were displayed according to contract. Billboards therefore did not receive favorable evaluations from Ayer and other major advertising agents until the late 1890s, after bill posters and distributors began to consolidate and formalize their organizations, improving their reliability and making it possible for advertising agents to collect their fees. (In the early twentieth century, advertising organizations and publications likewise widely opposed advertising on radio broadcasts. They even lobbied Congress to block it, until they found ways to earn commissions from that medium, too.) Finally, in 1900, the Ayer agency proclaimed that “thirty years’ experience in advertising has given us
our own ideas about Posters and Posting.” Neglecting to remind potential advertisers that those ideas had been quite negative until a few years before, the notice continued, “If you have an idea your posting can be bettered, we would like to give you our idea as to the ‘how’ of doing it.”

By the 1840s the administrative efforts to place advertisements in newspapers throughout expanding markets had become a burden on many businesses. As early as 1842, Palmer offered his services to “the enterprising business portion of the community” to assist them in the increasingly complex business of advertising outside of their own purview. His agency “afford[ed] an excellent opportunity” to “publish extensively abroad their respective pursuits—to learn the terms of subscription and advertising, and accomplish their object here without the trouble of perplexing and fruitless inquiries, the expense and labour of letter writing, the risk of making enclosures of money &c, &c.” In 1874, Rowell divided “the patrons of advertising agencies” into two groups based on their needs for the services Palmer had outlined thirty-two years earlier. The first group comprised “advertisers in the largest cities” who needed assistance in advertising locally. However, “the principal patrons of the Advertising Agent are those who wish to reach distant points.” The majority of these were patent-medicine sellers and entertainers drumming in advance of their shows, but they also included manufacturers seeking sales agents around the country or who were selling their products directly to consumers through the mails. In 1874, Rowell claimed that “the Advertising Agency is a convenience; it is nothing more.”

Although some business owners, such as Wanamaker and Macy, appreciated early on the value of advertising broadly, others were more reluctant, and some flatly refused to incur the expenses of such an uncertain undertaking. Enough of the intermediate group—those who were simply reticent—responded to the advertising agents’ solicitations to feed the agents’ ambitions. Beginning with Palmer, agents visited and wrote businesses to argue both for the potential of advertising to increase revenues and for their own abilities to facilitate placing the advertisements most effectively and efficiently. By the 1870s, some agents had begun to publish periodicals and brochures, such as Rowell’s Advertising Gazette: A Magazine of Information for Advertisers, to tout the benefits of advertising in general and their authors’ agencies in particular. Advertising agencies also applied their skills on behalf of their own businesses by placing their own advertisements in business publications, in general publications, and even on city walls.
Advertising Agents’ Secondary Functions

Because the first generations of advertising practitioners did not, as a rule, write copy or lay out advertisements, their contributions have been generally demeaned by their successors and others. The epithet space broker has usually been preceded by only or just, then accompanied by the assessment that these were unproductive middlemen who merely kept accounts and ran errands between advertisers and publishers. Yet however we value their efforts, some pre-1890s agents provided four functions secondary to placing advertisements that affected the market’s evolution. They all built up the volume of advertisements in periodicals; some worked to regularize the rates and procedures for placing advertisements in the press; many sought to prevent substitution of unadvertised for advertised products; and most offered free guidance to advertisers about the practice of advertising. Whether or not drawing businesspeople into the advertising process was a social or a business good, these activities certainly did accelerate the growth of the advertising field and those businesses, such as periodical publishing and large-scale consumer product manufacturing, that came to depend on it.

Space brokering’s rewards were directly proportional to the space sold, and the records of the early advertising agents are full of prideful tales of successful forays into the business world to solicit and encourage clients. (In the late twentieth century, other means of compensation have been developed to lessen the correlation between buying time and space in media and agency revenues.) Indeed, early agency work centered on solicitation. Francis Wayland Ayer, who named the Ayer agency after his father, N. W. Ayer, “devoted most of the ordinary working hours to canvassing prospective customers,” then executing the orders in his “spare time.” Once the agency grew large enough to specialize internally, Ayer’s Business-Getting Department remained the core of the agency until the 1920s, promoting “the use of advertising and to urge advertisers to employ the Ayer agency.” Self-proclaimed advertising experts offered plenty of advice about the best ways to solicit. Rowell’s advice to young admen in 1905, for instance, included keeping “your health good, your conscience clean.” Increasing their billings (the dollar volume of advertising placements) was so essential to them that agents felt compelled to deny frequently that they succumbed to the “temptation to urge upon the client a greater expenditure for advertising than his business situation really justifies.” Their own long-term interests were best served, they assured the world, by successful, not extravagant, clients. Rowell told young canvassers that their most important tool was believing that their successes would result from soliciting orders “that you think the advertiser would do well to give you.”

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Practitioners increased their arguments' reach by soliciting potential clients through their own publications and by advertising their services in the press. In 1850, Volney B. Palmer quoted a strongly worded essay by Horace Greeley, himself a newspaperman, who linked advertising with business progress, although less as a cause of change in itself than as a tool for aggressive competitors who cause change. "Extensive advertising of itself," Greeley assessed, "is morally certain to work a revolution in trade, by driving thousands of the easy-going out of it, and concentrating business in the hands of the few who know how to obtain and keep it."12

Greeley's concept became a key notion in the field; in 1886, N. W. Ayer & Son began publicizing its motto, "Keeping Everlastingly At It Brings Success." This phrase summarized the attitudes of many other advertising agents in promoting their field to advertisers. Accordingly, other agency mottos in the 1880s and 1890s included Harlan P. Hubbard's "Judicious Advertising is the Keystone of Success" and T. C. Evans's "Systematic and Persistent Advertising The Sure Road to Success in Business."13 In 1867, Rowell asserted the case even more strongly. "The man who refuses to patronize the newspaper," he declared, "is the man of morbid disposition, of small ideas and no business talent. His light, if he has any, is so completely concealed beneath the bushel that it will never burn to any practical purpose." Two decades later, he borrowed an editorial from Table Talk that declared, "Any individual or firm who is unwilling to keep pace with modern progress and adjust his methods to the wants of his age, does not merit success; neither can he reasonably expect to secure it to any large degree." An illustrated advertisement for Rowell's agency in 1889 again exhorted businesses to display their individual lights by advertising. It showed that the light emanating from "America" was blocked by a bushel, perhaps the same bushel that had plagued unprogressive businessmen in 1867.14 In the same vein, Rowell later advised that although "as a general thing the advertiser cannot tell whether a particular advertisement pays him or does not, . . . the most he knows, as a rule, is that when he advertises most he does most business, and makes most money."15

As space brokers, early advertising agents faced conflicts of interest with no established procedures or standards. Many practitioners did their best to exploit the situation, playing publisher off against advertiser, and vice versa. Still, the advertising professionals whose names have survived for a century worked zealously to establish standards and procedures for their field. F. Wayland Ayer and J. Walter Thompson tried to improve conditions largely through the practices of their own agencies. Their influence as models resulted, in large part, because in the process of reevaluating and reforming their profession, they built two of the most successful agencies in the country.

Early Advertising Specialists
George Rowell tried to change public and business opinions on a broad scale through his publications. According to him, one of the great sources of corruption and inefficiency in the business world was irregularity in advertising procedures; therefore, through the Advertiser's Gazette and later through Printers' Ink, he urged publishers to state their circulation figures honestly. In 1869 he founded the first newspaper directory in America—the first anywhere that included circulations. Of course, the rates for advertising space that publications could ask of their advertisers depended primarily on their circulations, then as now, so publishers were highly motivated to exaggerate their reports. For decades, Rowell tried to convince publishers that businesses would be more likely to advertise overall, benefiting all publishers, not to mention agents, if they could trust the commodity they were buying; namely, quantities of audience per dollar. Despite his indignation at the dishonest figures of "circulation-swindlers," Rowell was accused by publishers of padding the figures in the Directory on behalf of papers that advertised in it. Whatever the truth of those accusations, many other advertising agencies recognized the advantage of circulation information to their clients and started up their own directories; like Rowell's, these doubled as promotions for themselves. When advertising practitioners began to form professional organizations in the last years of the century, these set high priorities on regularizing placement rates and procedures.

It also concerned agents when retailers and wholesalers substituted unadvertised products for heavily advertised products, thereby profiting while reducing advertisers' incentives and threatening agents' livelihoods. Many agents attacked such practices and promoted action against substitution on behalf of producers. Artemas Ward for instance, a leading member of the third generation of advertising specialists, argued that some manufacturers, including nostrum sellers, could and should claim limited protections from the courts because their products, labels, and often even container shapes were patented, and those who had international sales could claim protection through the existing trademark statutes. So despite the poverty of laws protecting domestic trademarks, he criticized manufacturers for their legal inaction, writing in 1891 that they were "much to blame for this condition of affairs. Very few of them have the courage of their convictions." Ward also reminded manufacturers that their expenditures on newspaper advertisements were enough to expect editorial support of their interests. "The gross [dollar value of] advertising of most proprietary articles is larger than the [manufacturers'] net profits, and therefore the newspapers are the largest stockholders in these enterprises. In defending manufacturers against the evils of substitution, publishers will be
really defending themselves and their own interests.” If manufacturers lost their profits and their ability to advertise nationally, newspapers would thereby lose their primary source of revenues.

Advertising agents served their interests as space brokers and developed the field in yet another indirect way by offering free guidance to clients about the practice of advertising on an informal, ad hoc basis; agents published some advice to advertisers about preparing messages both in agents’ own advertisements and in trade journals. In 1886, for instance, N. W. Ayer & Son placed an advertisement in *Farm Implement News*, a “monthly illustrated newspaper devoted to the manufacture, sale and use of agricultural implements and their kindred interests.” Ayer admonished manufacturers to remember the consumer and to “talk to the man who USES your line of goods. . . . The consumer READS, & in his newspaper you can talk to him THOUGHTFULLY—CONVINCINGLY—PERSISTENTLY—PROFITABLY.” But then, manufacturers should not “expect to master the science of advertising in a few days or even months.” That was what years of experience had taught the Ayer agency.18

In the matter of educating the advertising businessman, George Rowell took a leading position because he broadcast more than isolated tips by which to attract clients. His directory of newspapers made public in 1869 what had been the private domain of advertising agencies—information collected at great expense. By 1874, he also set up the first reading room that made available to advertisers “all newspapers published in the United States or Dominion of Canada.” His house publications spread his reputation and expertise through the business community, beginning with the *Advertiser’s Gazette* in 1866. In its first year, Rowell’s “Writing Advertisements” assured advertisers that there was “no reason, except lack of industry and wit, why advertisements are not intrinsically attractive. Advertising is not simply to tell people who want hats where to find them, but to make them want hats, or think they do.”19 Rowell sought to educate advertisers through *Printers’ Ink* starting in 1888, fondly dubbing it “The Little Schoolmaster in the Art of Advertising.” *Printers’ Ink* remained the leading trade journal of the advertising business through the 1930s, continuing publication through the 1950s. Like his directory, Rowell’s journal was quickly imitated, and advertisers had no end of advice available to them for the cost of a subscription. For example, “Do Your Advertisements Pay?” advised advertisers in 1888 to evaluate feedback by comparing the results of advertisements placed in different periodicals. The article also addressed issues of content, asking advertisers if they were “sure that the advertising itself is properly worded and displayed” and advising against using multiple typefaces in a single advertisement.20
Like other owner-managed businesses, early advertising agencies operated entirely idiosyncratically, and they varied widely in degrees of honesty, inventiveness, and ambition, as well as in the services they offered to the advertisers. Founders' and proprietors' insights, characters, and abilities determined the directions that their individual businesses took. Their origins, experiences, and predilections shaped their agencies and their solutions to the problems of fitting into and generating a profit from the niche between advertisers and publishers. The names of the early agencies, N. W. Ayer & Son, George P. Rowell & Company, and J. Walter Thompson Company, for instance, indicate their entrepreneurial nature. Each founder saw fit to give his business his own name, except for F. Wayland Ayer (who, as noted earlier, named his agency after his father; he did so in part out of filial loyalty and in part to give it the appearance of longevity). The agencies themselves were small, usually consisting of the proprietor, an "estimator" who calculated rates, a checking clerk who certified that advertisements had, in fact, been placed by the newspapers, a bookkeeper, and an office boy. Generally the proprietor solicited new clients, negotiated with publications, and serviced any needs that clients had beyond figuring their advertising rates and keeping their accounts. Rowell's agency was the largest U.S. agency in the 1870s and 1880s, and its staff had about seven persons until late in that period, two more than most agencies, one to correspond and negotiate with the newspapers and another to collect payments.

Small firms with entrepreneurial owner-managers have great flexibility in responding to both opportunities and problems. The unsettled, rapidly expanding business environment that prevailed during the first half-century of the advertising agency combined with the absence of established patterns within the advertising field to foster diverse practices. People experimented within this primordial niche, but although hundreds of agents searched for profitable directions and practices for their firms, only a small number hit upon the combinations of policies that prospered in the early decades, thereby setting the precedents for their profession's course. It would be easy to credit them with genius and exemplary enterprise in accomplishing this, but their often fortuitous adaptations of specialization were largely responsible for their success.

During the formative periods of nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalism, as now, specialization spelled progress because it could reduce a business's transaction and information costs. As a result, a firm could handle, and profit from, more transactions by operating in a systematized, routinized manner than it could if it worked in more traditional, generalized, decision-by-

Specialization as Progress
Accordingly, as the first generations of advertising men experimented within their volatile environment, seeking ways to exploit their new niche, successful agents each pioneered some specialized aspect of the interactions between advertisers and publishers. Significantly, while the specialties of each of the leaders undoubtedly overlapped with other, now largely unknown, competitors, they overlapped relatively little with each other in the first two generations of agents. When overlaps occurred, these owner-managers specialized further to gain differential competitive edges. In a sense, therefore, between them, a few leaders covered the major successful options as they existed before 1890. This complementary relationship was not planned; there was a market opportunity for each of their sets of functions and policies, and admen who, often by chance, took on the various opportunities first and most competitively became the leaders, as did Rowell, Ayer, and Thompson on the East Coast and Lord & Thomas in Chicago. The latter had dominated the Chicago market since 1873 and became prominent nationally by the end of the century. When early advertising agents tried other combinations of functions, including writing copy on a regular basis, no matter how much intelligence and enterprise they exhibited, the market did not reward their inventiveness.

Agency Management and Specialization—The Leaders

George P. Rowell made an important mark on advertising history with his campaigns for honest circulation figures, his efforts to systematize the field, and his publications to educate both advertisers and other advertising practitioners. Still, it was his "system" to broker newspaper space that made him prosper. Started in 1874 and reported in 1875 by the New York Times, this new system had "succeeded in working down a complex business into so thoroughly a systematic method that no change in the newspaper system of America [such as, changing rates or circulations] can escape notice, while the widest information upon all topics interesting to advertisers is placed readily at the disposal of the public." Rowell's new system included specializing in newspaper advertising "to make ourselves master of it," and taking responsibility for full payment to publishers for advertisements printed; the system attracted clients by guaranteeing them the lowest rates. In turn, Rowell was able to use the size of his clientele to negotiate favorable rates with newspaper publishers. His thinking about the nature of the agents' services led him to assert, when announcing this new system, that while his business represented both the publisher and the advertisers, "advertising agencies succeeded best when studying the inter-
ests of advertisers not newspapers." According to this new system, advertisers who wished Rowell's services would have to accept his statements that his rates were in fact the best available to them and not demand that he bid against other agencies for their business. Nonetheless, despite his insistence that "we will not hereafter be a party to any competition for advertising contracts," Rowell in fact often underbid Ayer for accounts. His system was, therefore, a goal, not an immediately established reality.

The most important aspect of Rowell's system for the long-term development of the advertising field was its nascent orientation toward the advertisers as the agency's clients. Rowell continued to feel more comfortable with the newspaper publishers as business associates, but as early as the 1870s he recognized that the direction of specialization that held the most potential for advertising agents was toward becoming independent advertisers' agents and away from the limitations of newspapers' agents. The ambiguities of the agents' position vis-à-vis the advertisers and the publishers took decades to resolve. In declaring his new system, Rowell began the client-centered perspective in the hectic, volatile, highly competitive business environment between 1870 and 1890. Even so, it was F. Wayland Ayer, not Rowell, who would truly make service to the client his keynote. Ayer took Rowell's statement immediately to heart because he saw Rowell's declaration as a challenge as well as a solution for a personal dilemma. Nonetheless, neither man actually turned their field around yet, and bidding continued. Other business and operating conditions had to change first.

Of all of the early agents, we have the most information about Ayer, and his story perfectly exemplifies the success to be gained from a chance matching of personal characteristics with a potentially lucrative niche. Of those early figures who had any renown at all, Ayer's reputation for a high moral character and religious fervor was unsurpassed. His closest competitor, Rowell, described Ayer as "an indomitable worker; thinks of work all the time, eats little, drinks nothing but water; has no vices, small or large, unless overwork is a vice; is the picture of health; and I sometimes think a good deal such a man as Oliver Cromwell would have been had Oliver been permitted to become an advertising agent." Like many other agents, Ayer had started out his advertising agency as a means to a livelihood that required little capital. Unlike most of the others, however, Ayer considered his career a calling, and he always operated honestly. Like the other leaders, Ayer avoided the short-term gains taken by those who pressured publishers for low rates to supplement commissions while charging advertisers high rates and using the veil of trade secrecy to cover the deception.

Given these inclinations, Ayer experienced a personal crisis in 1874 when
a respected friend of his deceased father accused him of being "nothing but a drummer." This man offered Ayer a position in another business of greater repute so that the young man might redeem himself. This assault on his self-esteem came just about the same time that Ayer learned of Rowell's rethinking of the nature of the advertising business, and the combination of challenges prompted Ayer to revamp his agency's practices and policies. In a sense, he later wrote, that was "really for me the beginning of this business. I said to myself, 'I will not be an order taker any longer. I will . . . not be satisfied just to make money. I will have a business, I will mean something to somebody every time I take any business, and I will have clients rather than people who just give me orders.'" Whether or not his epiphany occurred just as Ayer reported it is not as important as the fact that this principle did come to govern his business behavior. And because of the responsiveness of small firms to their proprietors' inclinations, Ayer was able to move his agency in the direction he wished. It was his good fortune that taking this direction at that time made Ayer wealthy and made N. W. Ayer & Son "the greatest institution of the sort that has thus far come into being in any part of the world," in Rowell's admiring words.

Ayer restructured his agency's practices in such a way as to set the standards for service in the field for decades. As he reiterated the firm's purpose at its fiftieth anniversary celebration, it was "to make advertising pay the advertiser, and at the same time to develop, magnify and dignify advertising as a business." From the time of Ayer's new insights, "we asked our customers to recognize that what they needed was service; that we were in position to supply that service; . . . that we were entitled to payment with a profit, and that a commission added to the net amounts credited to publishers was the fairest basis for our payment and profit." Ayer claimed that his new approach, the "open contract," was ridiculed by other agents—until it began to reduce failures and to gain business. In 1925, when Albert Lasker wrote his reminiscences, he recalled that he "never knew a time when they [N. W. Ayer & Son] didn't have the very finest of business practice. . . . He [F. W. Ayer] gave service." Among the early consequences of Ayer's determination to realign agency functions was the first known concerted market survey, in 1879, taken on in order to lure a valuable client from Rowell. In this case, Henry Nelson McKinney, Ayer's partner since January 1878, took seriously the prospective client's challenge to come up with a more efficient list of newspapers in which to place his advertisements for threshing machines. All agency personnel, including Ayer and McKinney, searched governmental and published sources to build lists of counties producing threshable grains and the rates and circulations of the newspapers most likely to be read by the farmers in those areas.
Such unprecedented information gathering won a lucrative contract from the surprised manufacturer. This was only one of countless instances when doing what Ayer wanted to do—namely, making his agency a respectable, responsible, service business—enhanced his agency's material success at the same time.

Although Ayer liked to claim years later that the new, open-contract system was soon instituted, in fact it took years of patient adjustment on the part of both agent and clientele. It required a level of trust between both parties that was not standard practice in the advertising niche of the 1870s. Indeed, it was almost a year before Ayer signed his first client under the new regime. In order to keep his profits up, Ayer still purchased and sold space through the 1890s, and he still negotiated with publishers in order to obtain profitable rates. Nonetheless, Ayer promoted his agency from the middle 1870s forward as the firm from which advertisers could receive the best and most honest service. By 1880, he encouraged his staff to reject accounts that “were not of a character to do credit to the agency or because the results would be disappointing to the advertiser,” according to a newspaper article of 1887. In 1886, he began to advertise his agency as a professional counselor. He went so far in 1887 as to distribute a circular entitled “Our Creed” to communicate his principles of service first and foremost in the clients’ interests. In his Directory for 1888, Ayer wrote, “Having large experience, unequaled facilities, and abundant capital, we believe we can be of real service to such advertisers as desire intelligent, thoughtful, honest service.” That same year, a Manual for Advertisers, which actually contained promotions for N. W. Ayer & Son rather than instructions for advertisers, included the proposal that advertisers should “Ask N. W. Ayer & Son what they can do for you.”

J. Walter Thompson, the third major advertising agent of this period, specialized in magazine advertising. He prospered in part because he claimed this branch of advertising first and in part because he recognized what advertisers have known ever since: that magazines optimize the targeting of many profitable markets. As with the other successful agents, Thompson succeeded in his specialty by a combination of chance and personal inclinations. His first job in advertising came in 1868 as a clerk for W. J. Carlton’s agency in New York City, having been earlier rejected by George Rowell, who misjudged that the young applicant “would be too easily discouraged for an advertising man.” Carlton and his early partner, a Mr. Smith, had chosen to specialize by placing advertisements for clients into religious weeklies and then later branched out into general magazines. In 1864, the religious weeklies were an open field, and Carlton & Smith solicited heavily as special agents for their “list” of these publications. After Smith retired, Carlton’s personal bent inclined him toward literary magazines. He preferred reading them to soliciting for them, however,
and left the advertising field to open a bookstore in 1878. Thompson then pur-
chased the agency, renamed it, and discovered that the firm was at risk unless
he could quickly increase its income. He decided that developing further the
firm's existing specialization held the most promise and focused his energies on
developing the general magazine as an advertising medium.\textsuperscript{38}

Thompson quickly surpassed Carlton's level of business by soliciting addi-
tional accounts for the magazines he already handled. He then began to build
up his reputation and income by acquiring the exclusive rights to place adver-
tisements in many of the best, and previously aloof, literary magazines, most
notably \textit{Harper's Monthly}. He operated, therefore, as a special agent; that is, es-
sentially as a representative for the magazine publishers on his list. This alone
would have assured him a good income. His great success, however, came
when he learned to convince advertisers to place advertisements through his
listings by arguing for the differential identities of the magazines' audiences,
both between each other and as a group that was distinct from newspapers.
According to his successor, Stanley Resor, Thompson's major contribution to
advertising practice was his "realization that the high grade magazines had a
commercial value as a vehicle for reaching a desirable market under desirable
auspices." As late as 1889, when he began to handle newspaper accounts as
well, Thompson handled 80 percent of national magazine advertising as spe-
cial agent for almost all American magazines. Through his contracts with
magazines, he controlled general magazine advertising so tightly that other ad-
vertising agents had to share publishers' commissions with him in order to
place their clients' advertisements.\textsuperscript{39} Furthermore, his influence on the maga-
zines he handled was sufficient to persuade them to carry products they other-
wise had opposed, including some patent medicines. For example, he bragged
in 1883 that he had compelled \textit{Century} to carry Lydia Pinkham advertise-
ments even though "they may not like it."\textsuperscript{40}

By carving his own specialization out of the niche between advertisers and
magazine publishers, Thompson competed directly with no established agen-
cies; he seems, therefore, to have earned the respect of the field without in-
curring resentment. Nonetheless, given how much the magazine industry had
grown prior to Thompson's studied exploitation of it as an advertising me-
dium, it seems unreasonable to credit him, as many observers did, with its con-
tinued expansion after 1878. The growth of urban and rural markets, the con-
tinued development of railroad networks, improved printing technologies, and
the favorable postal rates offer more adequate explanations. And then there
were the newly aggressive publishers, foremost among them, Cyrus K. Curtis,
founder with Louisa Knapp Curtis of the \textit{Ladies' Home Journal}. While not
questioning the value of Thompson's labors in bringing advertisers and maga-
zines together, it seems that there could scarcely have been a more propitious microniche for an ambitious and capable young man to have come across at the time. What was remarkable was his capacity to stake a monopoly claim on this opportunity, leaving us to wonder how the magazine field might have developed had he not controlled it so closely. In any case, there is no question that the field of general magazines expanded with, if not because of, his encouragement.

Between 1880 and 1890, the number of magazines increased 93 percent, average circulation increased 50 percent, and advertising revenues grew twofold or threefold. The growth was so great that Thompson's success worked against him by the turn of the century. Once publishers began to appreciate the competitive edge that income from advertising could bring them, they no longer needed persuasion to open their pages to it. Similarly, once advertisers came to appreciate the benefits of sending their messages to the magazines' select circulations, they no longer needed Thompson's persuasion, and they in turn encouraged the magazines to let their exclusive contracts with Thompson lapse. N. W. Ayer & Son began to place magazine advertisements in 1896, shortly after Thompson's announcement that he would begin newspaper placements. N. W. Ayer & Son shared their commissions with Thompson when they had to, but encouraged magazines to work independently of Thompson's exclusive listing, underbidding Thompson when necessary. The result was that by the time Resor took over J. Walter Thompson Company in 1916, the firm had temporarily lost its preeminence, even though Thompson had moved into newspapers.41

Thompson's reputation as an advertising pioneer also derived from another aspect of his work with magazines. Because magazine audiences are generally defined by interest and social class rather than geography and ethnicity, as are newspaper audiences, Thompson came to a rudimentary appreciation for what is now called target marketing, that is, reaching and appealing to specific market segments. This notion formed when he began to argue the advantages of magazines over newspapers because of their more select audiences. In 1889, the agency's first house advertisement argued that magazines "reach the homes of well-to-do people who have the means to purchase and intelligence to appreciate the desirability of an article brought to their notice." Thompson also realized that magazines were the primary means to reach women in these "well-to-do" homes.42 When he combined that observation with his intuitive conclusion that women made or controlled many types of family purchasing decisions, he both enhanced the value of advertising in "better" magazines and made an important, albeit coarse, step toward segmenting the population into markets defined by characteristics other than geography, ethnicity, or occupation.
In both the limited sense of the word specialist as used by the advertising business and the broader business sense, Thompson as well as the other leading advertising men were all quite notable. In true owner-manager fashion, J. Walter Thompson was still the "Man at the Helm" in 1898, according to a headline in Profitable Advertising, a trade publication out of Boston. He would remain so until he retired in 1916. The article below the headline ended with the assessment that "Mr. Thompson is one of the most notable examples of the development of the specialist in commercial life this country has ever produced." Of course, if one were to consider avenues of specialization outside the advertising field, this evaluation was more than a little hyperbolic. Within the field, however, it was an accurate assessment. Specialization maximized transactions by minimizing costs per transaction. It also provided a way to differentiate one's business, as did each of these leading early advertising agents. As Rowell put it, a "new advertising agency must specially represent something; must be headquarters for something, and depend upon that special representation to gain a hearing. These are days of specialization even more than in the past." Because advertisers were "not looking for people who can do everything, they are more interested in those who can do some one thing well that nobody else can do at all." Each of these agencies—N. W. Ayer & Son, George P. Rowell Advertising Agency, and J. Walter Thompson Company—pioneered in different opportunities available within the niche between advertisers and publishers. Each of them took on different combinations of the possible alternatives as their specialized functions, defining the advertising agency business according to their own experiences and inclinations. Others worked in the niche, but these three happened upon the combinations first that proved most profitable and reasonable to the advertisers, defining the field for those early decades within an increasingly complex business environment.

Responsibilities for Copywriting

When advertising agents wrote advertisements to publicize their own brokerage services, that was the only regular occasion on which they wrote copy before the changes in business practices of the early 1890s. Exceptions existed, such as Harlan Page Hubbard, who offered to write his clients' copy and often found himself at odds with them about the results. In 1874, Rowell stated the typical policy, writing, "Advertisers desiring to avail themselves of the facilities possessed by our agency, are requested to send a concise statement of what they wish to do, accompanied always with a copy of the advertisement." Two years earlier he even declared that "the man who cannot do this is not fit to
advertise." In his 1906 memoirs, Rowell continued to warn other practitioners that "if an advertiser develops a tendency to trust his advertising plans entirely to you, you should go slow; . . . for if he fails to succeed he will blame you." Many of the most successful agents of the first two generations opposed absorbing copywriting as a regular function, even when it became necessary to compete with others. After all, the advertising agents considered themselves businesspeople, not "literary men," as early copywriters were called. S. M. Pettengill and many other early agents willingly offered "valuable suggestions as to the size, style and position which will make the most effective advertisement for the object to be attained," but they generally expected the advertisers or printers to write the words. As it suited his fancy, Pettengill might write an advertisement, but more for the pleasure of writing than with any sense that he might write more effective copy because of his experience. I. N. Soper saw little need or opportunity for creativity in advertisements in 1874. His Advertisers' Manual did not claim "many original features, for the whole subject of advertising has been so frequently and thoroughly canvassed, that it has become singularly barren of freshness and novelty." It offered simply "many facts and figures, which advertisers, with the exercise of ordinary tact and intelligence, can utilize [in creating their own advertisements] with profit and advantage."

Even in 1892, when N. W. Ayer & Son hired its first full-time copywriter, John J. Geisinger, founder E Wayland Ayer told the new man that advertisers were still the persons best qualified to write their own messages. (Jarvis A. Wood had started writing copy for Ayer part time in 1888, but he had not been specifically hired for that purpose.) Daniel M. Lord, founder of Lord & Thomas, the major Chicago agency, felt likewise after an early client rebuked his advice about how an advertisement might be improved, "Young man, you may know a lot about advertising, but you know very little about the furniture business." By the 1880s, Lord reportedly was "aghast, and rather resented the idea that he should be asked to do the advertiser's work for him," according to contemporary Charles Raymond. Lord & Thomas hired a part-time copywriter in the 1890s. As late as 1916, J. Walter Thompson, another of the field's founding fathers, continued to oppose routinely offering additional creative services to clients, especially those advertising to consumers. In 1931, his successor Stanley Resor explained that "Mr. Thompson had been so successful he found it hard to meet changing conditions. He resented the idea of time devoted to plans, copy and other preparation work, with the result that the business was slipping, and it was not showing a profit." Despite his personal attitudes, Thompson had offered to assist advertisers with preparing advertisements for
trade journals as early as 1889; he charged extra only if clients required assistance preparing illustrations.\textsuperscript{50}

Consequently, if advertising agents wanted to experiment with copywriting and advertising content on a regular basis before the 1890s, they generally did so for their own companies, either their advertising agency or some proprietary (that is, brand-name) product—almost always a patent medicine. For many reasons, ad agencies often came to own patent-medicine firms, and for them they engaged in copywriting. In 1891, George Rowell decided that his twenty-five-year wish “to own a trademark, a proprietary article that might be advertised” could be best satisfied with a medicine. Determining that such a medicine “should be something so clean that no one could object to it on the score of impropriety” and that it should be useful for many ailments, Rowell and a medical friend spent a long time coming up with the formula for Ripans Tabules. They chose the name as a meaningless acronym of the medicine’s components with which the public could associate the attributes Rowell claimed for the compound. He recorded his astonishment at “the great amount of work and thought involved in the preparation of the printed matter that must go with a proprietary article.” After decades as a leading “adman,” placing other people’s advertisements, he found himself needing the advice of a man who had made a career of promoting patent medicines: “Write your advertisements to catch damned fools—not college professors . . . and you’ll catch just as many college professors as you will of any other sort.” After an initial period of massive advertising with no success, the public finally responded and bought Ripans Tabules in large quantities.\textsuperscript{51} George Rowell might not have known how to write copy, but he knew how to get his messages placed to advantage.

Freelance writers often set the copywriting pace in the 1880s and 1890s; some could even make reasonable incomes from copywriting, indicating advertisers’ growing willingness to pay for such assistance. John E. Powers was already an innovative and successful freelance when John Wanamaker set a precedent by hiring him in 1880, setting him up as the first American recorded to have worked full time on salary as a copywriting specialist. After writing copy that generated astounding sales and making an excellent income with Wanamaker—who refused to abdicate enough authority over his copy to suit Powers—the copywriter left to make a notoriously good income freelancing again after 1886. Even so, Powers saw the copywriter’s role as a surrogate for the advertiser, performing only those functions that advertisers themselves could not: “Whatever a manufacturer can do better than anyone else, and has time to do, let him do it himself, or let it be done immediately under his supervision. Whatever parts of his process he cannot do himself, let him get it

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done by the person or concern that can do it honestly, capably and thoroughly." As publisher of the *Nation* for several years, he tried to educate advertisers in his publication about how they might make their advertisements more "distinctive" and, therefore, more effective. Powers led contemporaries toward his motto to "Say the right thing to the right people in an acceptable way," and to give audiences "reasons why" they should make their purchases.52 "Pithy" and honest to a fault have been the usual epithets for Powers's style. He deliberately wrote without the formal, flowery, and effusive language that was standard for the time. He advocated short headlines and large type rather than maximizing the number of words in any given space, as did most advertisers. Powers's "common-place" and honest style came to be a standard for many retailers and other advertisers. In 1890, Wanamaker's management estimated that more than fifty retailers nationwide were imitating the Powers style.53

Despite Powers's success, in 1885 most freelances could do little more than "eke out a slender livelihood by writing advertisements for business houses whose proprietors lack the ability to attract attention by their own printed announcements," according to the *New York Times*.54 Part of the freelances' difficulties resulted from the advertising agencies' gradual adaptation to advertisers' increasing concerns about copywriting. The major advertising agencies had begun to write copy and to assist with design before 1890, but only when their clients asked for help, and then often reluctantly. As the competition and intensity of advertising in periodicals increased after the mid-1880s, more and more advertisers felt the need for more effective copywriting and design. In their turn, whatever the agents' initial reluctance, they risked losing clients to competition if they ignored the growing requests from clients who did not want to incur the expense of freelance writers. As a rule, early assistance amounted to "polish[ing] up an occasional phrase or re-writ[ing] the message to fill a smaller space," according to N. W. Ayer & Son's historian Ralph Hower. Even so, in 1880 that agency announced to the business world that the "Composition, Illustration and Display of Newspaper Advertisements has so long been a study with us that we have become admittedly expert in preparing the best possible effects. Having at our command the services of an Artist, a Wood Engraver, and a number of Printers who have been for years engaged almost exclusively in this work under our direction, we possess entirely unequaled facilities for serving those who desire to entrust their business to our care." Yet, even with this announcement, Ayer and his partner John McKinney did not, according to Hower, truly consider the "actual writing of advertisements as the proper work or responsibility of the agent."55

Ayer and McKinney had accepted the responsibility of assisting their clients only when competition between clients and between agencies had re-
inforced their dawning realization that ineffective advertisements discouraged advertisers from buying space altogether. Therefore, despite their reluctance, in 1888 a new employee began spending much of his time at writing, and a house advertisement in 1889 showed increasing interest in encouraging clients to advertise effectively:

Advertising will not make a permanent sale for a fraudulent thing, nor will it sell a thing that nobody wants. On the other hand, it always pays to wisely advertise a good thing if it meets a popular want, but in order to be profitable the advertisement must attract the attention of those who will become buyers, convince them of its merit and interest them in its purchase.

Therefore, the wording and display of the advertisement, and the proper selection of newspapers are of vital importance. To secure these, experience and good judgment are necessary. We will be glad to assist you in the matter.

In 1884, Ayer's agency had produced its first complete campaign for a client, as a solitary experiment, but it hired its first full-time copywriter only in 1892. Rowell brought copywriting and graphics specialists aboard his agency in 1891.56

An article in the first issue of Profitable Advertising: A Monthly Journal Devoted Exclusively to Advertisers in 1891 analyzed the state of the practice. It praised those established "general advertisers who have attained that degree of financial success, through newspaper and magazine advertising, . . . [and who] are a species of authority and objects of veneration." With them, the advertising agent will "act only as a middle man . . . [who] simply follows definite instructions. He does not originate schemes, does not write advertisements, but simply does as he is told." In these cases, "the agent does not, even morally, become responsible for the success of the advertising." He is not an "architect but a mechanic." On the other hand, for the "weaker advertiser, the advertiser that is new to the business," the responsible agent is obligated to explain the business, including the necessity for "an experienced and high-priced brain to write the advertisements" and, "probably, a first-class artist to furnish the illustrations."57 In a postscript to a long article on the importance of professional assistance in placing advertisements that appeared in J. Walter Thompson's 1887 catalog, he noted that, "special attention [is] given to the preparation of business announcements for new enterprises." Two years later, Thompson did not distinguish between experienced and new advertisers when he offered to prepare advertisements at no extra charge for advertisers who desired this service.58
Early Specialization in Copywriting

If owner-managers in either manufacturing or retail felt inadequate to write and design their own advertisements in the increasingly competitive markets of the 1880s, they could, and some did, acquire the services of a copywriter or artist by putting a specialist on salary, contracting a freelance, or soliciting assistance from an advertising agency. To judge by the reputations of the campaigns produced, only the first of these three options, hiring a specialist, offered advertisers substantial benefits toward improving their campaigns' impacts in the 1880s. All of the major innovations in advertising styles and content before the 1890s came either from owner-managers themselves, officers, or from their employees. This reinforced the widely held belief that advertisers knew their products best and were therefore the best-equipped to write their own copy. Advertising agencies increasingly made their assistance available, but no one could, or was, expected to try to do more than improve on expressing the clients' own ideas. Neither freelance writers nor advertising agents yet recognized the importance of understanding their clients' products and markets sufficiently to know how products might specifically benefit consumers or how those benefits might best be communicated to consumers. Powers wrote his best and most effective advertisements while working exclusively for a client or employer and taking the responsibility and time to know the firm and its products or services. Therefore, before the 1890s, as a rule, only persons directly involved with a firm became sufficiently interested in its products and activities to develop consumer-oriented advertising messages unique to that firm.

On a strictly practical level, advertising agencies were also limited in the creative services they could offer their customers because of their own lack of personnel and internal specialization. Among the few advertising agents who did accept copywriting as a routine responsibility through the 1880s, Harlan P. Hubbard of New Haven was one of the most successful; he was the only agent whom Rowell named in his memoirs as a success despite working outside of a major metropolitan hub. Even so, his agency was no more specialized internally than the others of the 1880s; Hubbard simply took on copywriting as part of his own overall activities. Although Hubbard never became one of the nation's major agents, his billings were substantial during the years the Lydia Pinkham family, from neighboring Massachusetts, favored him with their patronage.

The evolution of advertising practices for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and the Pinkham family's interactions with Harlan P. Hubbard and his successor illustrate how a patent-medicine firm could prosper for decades by fitting its copywriting practices to the market environment. In 1875, Lydia
Pinkham and her four children began selling her already-popular herbal remedy for “female ailments.” She had generally given bottles of it away before, but times were hard, and Isaac Pinkham, husband and father, had not only lost the family’s financial reserves, once again, in the Panic of 1873, but had become enfeebled as well. Together, the family developed the nostrum’s name, production, and promotions. The two older sons acted as drummers, while their mother kept the books, directed the other children in producing the tonic, answered letters, and wrote the advertising copy for pamphlets and, later, newspapers. After a couple of years of struggling to sell by using only the pamphlets to supplement personal salesmanship, one of the sons spent most of a large profit on a single newspaper advertisement, much to the dismay of the rest of the family. However, his notion of reaching a broad circulation with a single large insertion paid off with substantial orders. Convinced then of the benefits of newspaper advertising, the family contracted first with a Boston agent, soon turned to Hubbard for more aggressive placements, and then mortgaged their home to buy newspaper space. The family also wrestled with their product’s need for a visual trademark. They decided, in 1879, to use Mrs. Pinkham’s image as its trademark, and the product’s sales “boomed,” to use Hubbard’s term. The image itself became a popular icon, the subject of songs and jokes—all of which contributed to brand recognition and sales. By 1881, the Vegetable Compound was selling at the rate of two hundred thousand bottles annually. The copy that had achieved this success was largely the product of Mrs. Pinkham’s pen, with advice from her family. Her technical phrases came from her home copy of John King’s American Dispensary and other popular reading material, including other patent-medicine labels. Mrs. Pinkham’s genuine sense of her role as a female reformer, as the “Savior of Her Sex,” gave her a unique appeal. She blamed overwork, worry, and the bearing of unnatural burdens and lifestyles for women’s physical ailments, offering them her tonic as their only source of relief in a difficult world.60

In 1881, Lydia Pinkham’s two eldest sons died and her own health broke. To continue the business, her last son, Charles, took over management. Harlan Hubbard’s influence on newspaper copy increased gradually from offering an occasional suggestion and rewrite to regularly revising the existing sales pitches, although keeping their basic messages consistent with those Mrs. Pinkham had developed. Nonetheless, because of Hubbard’s practices of exploiting the account to his benefit, leaving the Pinkhams with small profits despite large sales, he fell out of favor with the family. Charles decided to do without newspaper advertising altogether in 1889 in order to solidify the firm’s finances, advertising only through trade cards that pictured his young daughters, who were identified simply as “Lydia E. Pinkham’s Grandchildren.”61
Hubbard had apparently only served the Pinkhams' needs for copywriting assistance in order to induce greater space buying on their part, not because of a sense of client-centered service. In 1889, Charles Pinkham ceased all business connection with Hubbard, and the agent went into bankruptcy, a casualty of the era's typically short-sighted notions about the nature of advertising service. Later that year, a young Bostonian, James J. Wetherald, offered Charles Pinkham a range of services that promised the shape of trends to come. The Pinkhams' past successes and their rejection of Hubbard's limited range of services had piqued Wetherald's ambitions, and he solicited their account on behalf of the Pettingill Agency. When Wetherald asked if Pinkham wanted to advertise, Lydia's son responded positively, "If I ever find an honest agent who can write the kind of copy I want." It was not, therefore, just Hubbard's double-dealing that had driven Pinkham out of newspaper advertising but also this owner-manager's concerns about copy. In working with Hubbard, Pinkham had stayed within his mother's copy strategies, and he reentered the potentially lucrative but risky arena of extensive newspaper advertising only when he found professional assistance that addressed his needs for development and reliability, along with an attentiveness to his firm's needs that the traditional agent could not provide. Wetherald immediately operated very much like a company man, and eventually he did become a Pinkham employee. He first placed an advertisement for them in January 1890—an appropriate marker in the move to new agency practices—and provided extensive services for the Pinkhams over the course of almost four decades, reassuring and enriching the family in the process.  

As the advantages of specialized copywriting became more appreciated, freelance writers provided an option for an advertiser who wanted to turn to a specialist for assistance. Yet until after 1890, freelances rarely contributed to the development of advertising content and styles. Typically they wrote individual bits of copy for fixed fees, such as $25 for a poem or $10 for a "funny little dialogue." The work was sporadic, highly competitive, and clients expected their copy within a day or two. These conditions discouraged the kind of long-term relationships between client and copywriter that might have fostered deeper understandings of the clients' products and marketing problems. Most freelances' work might just have well been prepared for any number of different advertisers as for any one of them. Even freelances who did make excellent reputations for themselves did their best work while focusing their attention on single products, either as employees or as single-client agents or freelances.

The careers of prominent copywriters Nathaniel C. Fowler Jr. and John E. Powers demonstrated the importance of specialization within the advertising
process and the value of a strong client-centered relationship for successful and innovative copy. Fowler had written copy in several capacities before selling his Boston advertising agency in 1891 to specialize in writing copy. He wanted his own business and would not work within another agency, but he did not want to be distracted by the complications of space brokering; he had come to believe that one person could not do a competent job of both tasks. Having already built his reputation from writing successful advertisements for Columbia Bicycles beginning in 1883, Fowler had no difficulty in attracting new clients. Once he began to specialize, Fowler greatly influenced his field through several important and imaginative campaigns and through his prolific writing on advertising procedures and principles. Powers, both as a young freelance and as a specializing employee for Wanamaker, took the time to research his patrons' customers to find out what they wanted. He studied his patrons' products and tried to figure out how to write copy that would match customers' desires with the products. After his years with Wanamaker, as a freelance working for many different campaigns, Powers gave people good reasons to buy Murphy Varnish or Carter's Little Liver Pills and other products, keeping him busy, affluent, and in the public eye for decades. However, his failure in this stage of his career to tailor his work to specific clients lost at least one valuable account to a young innovator who did just that.

Claude C. Hopkins may well have been the first advertising professional to develop a deliberate, conscious notion of the marketing problem, that is, the relationships between product and market that need to be altered for improved sales. Most other innovators in advertising strategy and copywriting until then had worked intuitively, striking effective chords in their audiences more or less as P. T. Barnum had—by "instinct." Powers had made his contribution differently by deliberately developing a style that met higher intellectual and ethical standards than did most newspaper advertisements of the time; but then Powers, and soon others, applied that style unwaveringly to all sorts of advertising situations. Hopkins, on the other hand, came to believe that each product's marketing required a unique solution, and that that solution could only be discovered by studying the product, the people in its market, and how people reacted to the product and its competition. In other words, he gradually developed an inchoate sense of both the marketing problem, soon central to advertisers' strategies, and market research, the modern key to addressing marketing problems.

When Hopkins first entered advertising, he had not yet formed the sophisticated notions that he eventually espoused; still, in 1887 or 1888 he had enough of the idea to take the account for Bissell carpet sweepers from Powers, even though Hopkins was merely the Bissell bookkeeper at the time and...
Powers was at his reputation's peak. According to Hopkins's telling, Powers had prepared a promotional brochure for Bissell that the ambitious young man read and offered to improve upon. Although Hopkins admired Powers's style, he convinced his manager that Powers "knew nothing about carpet sweepers. He had given no study to our trade situation. He knew none of our problems. He never gave one moment to studying a woman's possible wish for a carpet sweeper." Hopkins then prepared a pamphlet "based on knowledge of our problems" that persuaded the firm to cancel Powers's contract. When Powers sued for his fees, Bissell prevailed by arguing that the professional's pamphlet was incompetent by comparison with that prepared by Hopkins. From this beginning, Hopkins went on to develop his formula for "Reason Why" advertisements, always starting with the importance of examining each "trade situation" for its specific problems and working out unique solutions accordingly.66

Three men who eventually came to some measure of fame or fortune at copywriting worked full time in that capacity for others before 1890. Of the three, only John E. Powers reached his professional prime by the end of the 1880s; Claude Hopkins had just gotten his start by then, and both he and the third one of the trio, Artemas Ward, achieved their greatest reputations during the decades after 1890, setting precedents and standards for the field. Ward produced all of his early advertising material for Enoch Morgan's Sons, a company that had manufactured soaps in New York since 1809. The Morgan family decided in 1869 to advertise one of their products nationally and selected the scouring soap for which their family doctor had devised a Latin-sounding name, Sapolio. Throughout the 1870s the firm built a national market for Sapolio with advertisements that were lively and amusing, featuring cartoons and jingles from the start, and hiring professional artists and writers, including Bret Harte, to attract and please audiences. Spending grew apace: $15,000 for 1871, $30,000 for 1884, $70,000 for 1885, and $400,000 for 1896. The bulk of the 1885 media spending went out for bill posting and streetcar signs; the next largest category was novelties, stunts, and miscellaneous expenses; magazines and newspapers came in third. The posters included six-foot-tall chromolithographs, to be hung in the windows of wholesalers as samples of the smaller lithographs available to retailers and consumers. Trade cards were distributed by the many hundreds of thousands. In 1884, the firm decided to double its advertising budget and to move into the national marketplace more aggressively, so it hired Artemas Ward to guide and to write the new campaigns. Ward was a city-bred man and he believed that people traveling on streetcars provided an excellent market for this inexpensive cleansing product. He wrote copy that equated cleanliness with patriotism and happiness and that assidu-
ously equated Sapolio with cleanliness for those who had to do their own or other people's cleaning. Reportedly, passengers enjoyed the jingles and read them aloud to each other. For instance:

A clean nation has ever been a strong nation
Fortify with Sapolio.

Another ran:

A Bright Home makes a Merry Heart
Joy travels with Sapolio.

And another:

Two servants in two neighboring houses dwelt
But differently their daily labor felt
Jaded and weary of her life was one
Always at work and yet 'twas never done
The other walked out nightly with her beau—
But then she cleaned with Sapolio.

Ward developed other lines and campaign themes over the years, playing on the Spanish-American War, the Western frontier, even devising a fantasy community, Spotless Town, where everyone's lives revolved around satisfying their needs for cleanliness.\(^{67}\) His concentration on a single product served that product well and built Ward's reputation as a leading specialist and innovator in advertising. In the early years of the next century, Ward and the Morgans even had to reassess their strategies because it seemed that the messages for Sapolio often attracted more attention for themselves than the product, a complication that continues to arise with overly clever copy.

In sum, the best of the three options for acquiring specialized copywriting before 1890 entailed hiring a writer who learned about the employer's products and markets and become engaged in resolving that firm's specific marketing problems. However, most advertisers believed then, and still do, that they could not afford such a specialized employee, or they preferred the flexibility of moving between creative specialists. As a result, advertisers hesitant about creating their own advertising messages most frequently turned to freelance writers and advertising agents for assistance. Before the 1890s, however, neither of these types of professionals was set up or inclined to focus attention and

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effort exclusively on individual clients and their marketing problems. Neither group understood yet the importance of that focused attention; so the majority of the most-focused, most-innovative copywriters were owner-managers and company officers with an inclination for doing that kind of work themselves. Only after further and deeper changes in the structures and personnel and needs of national advertisers, and ad agencies’ competition for their patronage, did advertising agencies take the lead in innovating style and content.