A lack of sufficient evidence makes it difficult to determine who advertised in the nineteenth century and how much. The variety of media through which businesses advertised and the absence of records for them preclude accuracy, except, at most, for specific cities in limited time periods. Before 1880, only the roughest of estimates is possible. According to assessments from the 1870s, most advertisers were small enterprises with small advertising budgets, aside from the relatively few exceptions, primarily patent-medicine sellers and the growing but still limited ranks of nationally advertising manufacturers. According to the best possible calculations, retailers ranked with medicine sellers and entertainers as the major categories of advertisers around 1870, although they advertised only regionally. By the end of the nineteenth century, the major department stores were, individually, among the largest advertisers in the country.¹

As part of his 1874 listing of patrons of advertising agencies, ranked by volume of ad placements in periodicals, George P. Rowell placed first “the patent medicine men.” Then he itemized the following groups: those seeking agents, “which includes dealers in subscription books, sewing machines, patent rights, and the thousand and one articles which may be sold by hawkers or pedlers [sic]”; the only other substantial advertisers he listed were those offering investment possibilities, including bonds, lands, and businesses. Rowell estimated that only ten individual advertisers expended about $100,000 annually in the newspapers; “perhaps fifty or more” expended about $20,000; hundreds spent between $1,000 and $10,000; and ten thousand “send advertisements beyond their immediate neighborhood, rang[ing] from one dollar upward, according as hope, caprice, their desire to experiment, or their means of paying
may dictate.” In Rowell’s 1870 book *The Men Who Advertise*, publishers in a variety of fields accounted for twenty-two of the forty-eight successful examples cited. Most of these did not fit into any of Rowell’s 1874 categories because they were generally newspaper publishers who advertised locally to boost their circulations and therefore functioned without the aid of advertising agents. Sixteen manufacturers, including four piano or organ artisans, made up the next largest group of *Men Who Advertise*; ten patent-medicine manufacturers and/or promoters made their field third; then seven merchants, one entertainer—P. T. Barnum—and five others of miscellaneous occupations completed the count. (Few of the people Rowell wrote of followed a single profession rigorously: many patent-medicine purveyors, publishers, and manufacturers also operated stores or other businesses at some time, in addition to what I have surmised to be their primary activities.) None of these figures include spending on nonperiodical media through job printers, data that are wholly unavailable for this period on a national basis.

In his history of the N. W. Ayer & Son agency, Ralph Hower calculated the percentages of advertising volume placed by Ayer during various years according to categories of commodity groups. He found that Ayer’s early clientele comprised dozens of small accounts, many of them so small that he could not trace the nature of their businesses. Hower’s calculations for 1877 and 1878 roughly corroborate Rowell’s assessments, taking into account that their categories and sources differed. Over these two years, 20.7 percent of Ayer’s billings—that is, dollar volume spent by clients for advertising through the agency—came from “patent medicines and treatments.” The second largest group, “books, tracts, etc.” amounted to 10.7 percent, with “jewelry and silverware” next at 9.45 percent, followed by “dry goods and clothing” (7.45%), “greeting cards and chromos” (7.25%), then “seeds and nursery stock” (6.8%). Together, these various categories of manufactured goods, leaving aside the patent medicines and seeds and nursery stock, add up to 34.85 percent. The several remaining categories of manufactured goods yield another 21.1 percent of Ayer’s billings for 1877 and 1878, totalling 55.95 percent manufactured goods, much more than the patent medicines taken alone. That leaves just under 25 percent for Ayer’s many other clients, including “railroads and transportation” (0.75%) and “insurance and financial” (0.55%). Hower’s tally does not discriminate between retailers and producers of manufactured goods. In both cases, however, the goods being advertised were, indeed, manufactured, and therefore indicate the level of advertising activity based on promoting those types of goods. Even most medicinals were industrially produced and used industrially produced packaging. Hower, because he could not trace the identities or products of all of Ayer’s early clients, therefore calculated these
early percentages using only the total amounts actually identified as his base. The figures cited here average the figures Hower gave for 1877 and 1878, the only years before 1900 for which he published calculations. The overall impression from Rowell and Hower confirms the long-standing observation that patent-medicine sellers did indeed make up the primary single category of advertisers placing advertisements through agencies before 1890. Nonetheless, the manufactured goods promoted through the newspapers during this period, "the thousand and one articles" to which Rowell referred, add up to a substantial proportion of the whole.