The Importance, and the Problems, of Writing the History of Advertising,

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| The importance, and problems, of writing the History of Advertising. | The Journal of Advertising History is intended to play a significant part in fulfilling two of the main aims of the History of Advertising Trust: |
| Richard W Pollay | — to encourage and sponsor the serious and objective study of the history of advertising as a business activity, related to its social, and economic context; |
| | — to publicise research and findings in every way possible, through meetings, publications, journals and exhibitions. |
| The contribution of the Study of Advertisements to First Year Undergraduate Teaching | Why is the Journal necessary? As Professor Pollay says in the leading article of this issue: ‘... the history of “advertising” is an enormously broad subject, embracing, for instance, the media and their relationships with advertisers and agencies; the advertiser’s approach to the use of advertising; the growth of agencies as important businesses in their own right. These are but a few examples of individual topics which will need thorough investigation in their own right, and which could well be beyond the scope of any one author. Both the climate for research, and the appropriate vehicles for publication, which will ensure recognition and availability of these contributions to the subject must be provided’. |
| Dr. I J E Keil | The Journal of Advertising History will be one such vehicle, and by its very existence will help to provide the climate for research. |
| | We are very glad to have Professor Pollay’s contribution to this Journal, both as author and as member of the Editorial Board, to demonstrate the interest in the subject that already exists in North America, and to show that the Journal has no intention to be parochial about it. If The History of Advertising Trust, in its own sponsored activities and projects, is concerned with the history of advertising in the UK, this is because there is more than enough work in this field alone to keep it busy for years. But the Journal has no intention of being so exclusive in what it publishes; and contributions on the subject will be considered from any country in the world, provided they are relevant and of sufficient standard. |
| Estimates of total advertising expenditures in the UK before 1948 | What is “relevant”? The contents of this first issue range fairly widely: from educational uses of old advertising material, to newspaper archives; from advertising agents in London over 100 years ago, to national advertising expenditures up to 1948; from the Empire Marketing Board to the effects of post-war paper rationing. All of these articles, in some way, make a contribution to increased knowledge and understanding of the growth and development of advertising. |
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The importance, and the problems, of writing the

History of Advertising

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Advertising’s importance in modern history
It is inevitable that advertising will be a central focus of the history of the 20th century. Not only because advertising as we know it has evolved and matured within this century, thereby making it unique. Not only because its size and centrality to the economy make it a significant industry in its own right. Not only because it is both pervasive and persuasive. But also because advertising is at the interfaces between pragmatism and art, between psychology and economics, between the producers and consumers of society, making it a key element in our economic history and in our social, technological, artistic and cultural histories as well. The study of advertising’s growth and development, therefore, is perhaps one of the keys to the appropriate understanding of the evolution of our complex urban society. Advertising is a ‘tremendous institution which deserves study in its own right, and because of its influence on the most vital concerns and powers and values of our society’. (Bogart, 1969).

The potential richness of advertising as a source material has long been recognized. A late 19th century issue of Harper’s Weekly said that advertisements are:

‘a true mirror on life, a sort of fossil history from which the future chronicler, if all other historical monuments were to be lost, might fully and graphically re-write the history of our time.’

A quarter of a century later Salmon (1923), herself a historian, said that a newspaper without advertising ‘would deprive society of the most flawless mirror of itself and the historian of the most unimpeachable evidence at his command’. James Webb Young, (1949), one of the few advertising leaders ever to gain wide respect in the academic community, noted that ‘any anthropologist who attempted to describe our culture with advertising left out, would, I suggest, be as nearsighted as one who left corn out of the story of the Mayas—their crops out of that of the Bedouin tribes’. And most recently Wood, whose Story of Advertising (1958) is undervalued, commented in his preface that:

‘There can be found few more accurate representations of a time and the people in it than the advertising amid which, and willy-nilly by which, they live.’

It is inevitable that the history of advertising and, more broadly, of marketing will be closely studied because of its centrality to the economy and the culture of industrial and societies. Such studies could have other uses: the study of a single advanced marketing culture and the role which marketing has played in its economic development would yield patterns of change in marketing attitudes and techniques which might lead to useful generalisations useful to other, less advanced, economies (Myers and Small, 1959). Insights from the study of advertising’s development would also have, of course, the potential of influencing public (and private) policy within our own societies.

Whether these lessons, insights or policies have any validity depends entirely on the accuracy with which such history is written. So, too, does the amount of pride and satisfaction that those working in the industry will be able to take in it. Unless the history of advertising is exhaustively researched and accurately documented, the industry and those within it stand too great a chance of being demeaned.

The treatment of advertising’s history to date
It might be thought that the history of advertising is most likely to be written by members of the advertising profession. They are closely familiar with the subject from personal experience, they are skilled at wrapping words around ideas, and are rarely averse to writing for public consumption. Many of them have, of course, but those books are not history. This is hardly a criticism, since few are historical in purpose.

The most common writing by members of the advertising business is largely autobiographical. Even the best of this genre (Hopkins, or Ogilvy for instance) are idiosyncratic, the experience of only one individual. The perspective is almost exclusively the view from the top. The purpose is self-glorying, the content anecdotal; witty and entertaining, they lack a conceptual coherence. Even when they have a solid content, it is usually experience distilled, for the use of other advertising people. These books provide little grist to the mill of history.

There are even fewer formal biographies of significant advertising figures; Barnum, Lasker and Crawford are among the few, but even these lack substance, and while describing the people fail to say anything significant about advertising.

If advertising people are not writing their own history, then one would expect historians to be doing it. Given the importance of advertising and marketing to the history of the 20th century, the call to action periodically heard among historians, and the tendency of academics to ignore the writings of practitioners, historians of all kinds ought to be embarrassed by the relative paucity of respectable studies. While an exhaustive annotated bibliography (Pollay, 1976) on the history of marketing in North America, for instance, includes some hundred titles on advertising history, most of them are brief articles, repetitive textbooks, and anecdotal reflections. There are very, very few sources comprehensive and authorita-
tive enough to command the attention of the serious student. The studies most frequently cited in the USA are Prebrey's (1929) detailed chronicle of the first half century of modern American advertising (preceded by a much briefer survey of earlier European developments), and Hower's (1939) more focussed history of W. Ayer & Son, both pre-World War II. In Britain, beside Prebrey, there is Blanche Elliott's history of English advertising, which virtually stops a century ago, and the Hindley's rather anecdotic treatment of Victorian advertising. In France, there are two works only: Philippe Schuster's (which exists in an English translation), and the little-known work of Marcel Galliot. Apart from these few works, the void is so great that one still finds frequent references to Sampson's history published in 1875! (There are, of course, a number of really poor books on the subject).

There are adventurous young historians who occasionally produce a dissertation, thesis, or article in a learned journal. The dissertations, of necessity, no matter what their quality, remain largely unread and even unknown. The articles, too, are few in number, narrow in interest, and do not begin to link together in their field. A few histories of companies stand out because of their understanding of the place of marketing in the development of a business; most make no more than a ritual obeisance towards the existence of such activities. Ralph Hidy of the Harvard Business School, in his 1970 review of business history, remarks that there the history of marketing was subject to 'considerable discussion but little action'.

Economic historians are, possibly, the best of the breed at ignoring completely the subject of advertising and marketing in their work. (Of course, economists as a whole find great difficulties in knowing how to approach advertising, and their work as a result shows the same biases and the same lack of practical understanding of the subject as that of most other academic writers).

Why inadequate treatment of advertising may persist

From the serious student's point of view, therefore, almost all the literature available on the growth and development of advertising and marketing, with the few honourable exceptions mentioned, is anecdotal, trivial, or rhetorical. Why has the subject received such poor treatment, despite its importance? The question is a difficult one, and the answer is complex.

Part of the answer lies in the cultural bias against advertising and selling that pervades our societies and even our economic concepts; this, combined with an equal bias against any elements of popular culture, makes it difficult for any serious writer or researcher to take the subject on its merits. There is an insistent tendency among sociological scientists to think of any institution which features rhymed and singing commercials, intense and lachrymose voices urging highly improbable enjoyments, caricatures of the human oesophagus in normal or impaired operation, and which hints implausibly at opportunities for antisepsic seduction, as inherently trivial" (Galbraith, The New Industrial State).

Undoubtedly, this is the most significant reason why most serious writers on the subject are others, which influence even those who might generally be disposed towards it. Academics, of any kind, are rarely given access to the inner workings of advertisers or agencies; with alienation and suspicion flowing both ways, both doors and minds get closed. The validity of the way that history or culture treat advertising is probably what suffers most; also lost is the opportunity to improve advertising by learning from valid histories.

Even if access to companies were free and unrestricted, the task of processing the information intelligently is formidable. The source material will be scattered, voluminous, unorganised; the most relevant data may be secreted, or non-existent. And the increasing sophistication of advertising is reflected in the growth of specialised methods, language, and concepts, that are taken for granted by their practitioners but are obscure and even unimpeachable to the layman.

One final inhibiting factor, and by no means the least, stems from the very fact that there is such a lack of good, published literature on the growth and development of marketing and advertising. First, this means that there is no general, accepted, existing background against which specialised or sectoral studies can be placed; to study one aspect of the subject means virtually writing, or at least researching, the whole history as well. Secondly, because of the void in the existing literature, any new work that is published will be the focus of much attention. But the limelight may be harsh. Both the academic and professional communities are noted for their quickness to criticism. Academics are critical by force of intellectual habit, and justify the sine qua non of the pursuit of truth. The advertising community has a track record of hypersensitive response to even vaguely implied criticism. Yet, surely an honest, balanced (and readable) study must expose errors and foibles. So extensive criticism of any published work seems inescapable.

Requirements for a remedy

Not all these problems have easy solutions. The cultural bias may have no remedy; academic bias can only be removed over a long period of time. But there are certainly some things that can be done to encourage the serious study of the growth and development of advertising. It would seem to depend on three basic elements: (1) an appropriate set of concepts, or theoretical framework, for discussion of the activity and role of advertising; (2) a commitment to serious work, to academically acceptable standards; and (3) a broad base of source data to draw on. None of this exists at the moment.

The first is probably the most important element in determining the character of the final product, for it is through the use of a conceptual structure that the researcher selects, organises, discusses and generally gives meaning to otherwise diverse, chaotic observations. A useful and valid set of concepts provides both coherence and clarity, by expounding both a structure of development and by permitting inference and the perception of implications.

One of the major disappointments of the work to date has been the lack of a convincing conceptual structure. Some books have no framework at all. Others have a set of conceptual tools inappropriate to the task. As in Ewen's use of concepts evolved from nineteenth century Marxist thought in Captains of Consciousness, the result is that the tools do not provide a satisfactory 'explanation' of the reality, provide no insight into the practice, often end up in 'rules' with more exceptions than adherences. It is clear that there are concepts more likely to be appropriate than these. To give the simplest and most obvious example, much could be made of 'the marketing concept'. The history of advertising, when seen as the shift from flogging what the factory produces to marketing what the consumer desires, takes on a new clarity. For it allows the understanding of the functions of consumer research and market strategies, activities often painted as manipulative which might well be increasing the efficiency of marketing.

Our second requirement was for a corpus of published work. Clearly, one or two thoroughly researched, up-to-date overall histories of the subject would be most desirable, for the reasons outlined previously. But the history of advertising is an impossibly vast and variously broad subject, embracing, for instance, the media and their relationships with advertisers and agencies; the advertiser's approach to the use of advertising; the growth of agencies as important businesses in their own right. These are but a few examples of individual topics which will need
through investigation in their own right, and which could well be beyond the grasp of any one particular author. Both the climate for research, and the appropriate vehicles for publication, which will ensure recognition and availability of these contributions to the subject, must be provided.

All the components necessary to the successful treatment of advertising by history, however, none is more essential than the existence of rich and organised supplies of archival information. New concepts and new authors can be found, but no one can create archival material. Once records are lost or destroyed, they are gone forever.

The importance of maintaining archives of advertising material is not exclusively based on the idea that the industry and society will be better served if the history of advertising and of the 20th century is accurate. While some will find the argument completely compelling, it may not convince those in business who must authorise the creation of an archive (involving company money), or those who must do the work (taking time away from current priorities). A contribution to the history of advertising is for the greater good, and only partly self-serving. But there are other reasons for maintaining archives.

Some records must be kept for purely legal reasons. Many more records should be kept for their value to day-to-day operating management; briefing new staff members; ensuring continuity of policies and strategies; providing source and stimuli for ideas; accumulating knowledge about product, consumers and promotion; providing case material for the company’s own publicity. These practical uses of an archival collection are more often than not overlooked.

A suggested retention policy

But what do you keep? Keeping everything is nearly as valueless as throwing everything away. Some business historians have suggested that only about five per cent of records created by business are worth preserving. But which five per cent? The law and commonsense are quite reliable guides in deciding what to retain. All that is required is the time to think about the potential value of material, and the courage and space to follow the archivist’s rule of thumb: ‘if in doubt—retain’.

The following listing is by no means exhaustive, and commonsense will play a large part in its application.

Legal and formal records. Some are required to be kept for up to seven years only; a sampling of older records should be retained, particularly relating to the size, composition and remuneration of the work force.

Documents showing relations with other companies, particularly between advertisers, agencies, media and suppliers. Generally, all documents which show joystones in a relationship: initiation, changes of course, termination, should be saved.

Campaign development and execution. Perhaps most important of all is the great wealth of material which shows the behind-the-scenes activities, the processes by which advertisements are conceived and created and researched. While a highly detailed level of information probably cannot be kept for all accounts, it should be maintained on a sample basis, and for large, or unusual, accounts.

Items showing changing technology. The history of business and of the 20th century will inevitably focus on the adoption/diffusion of changing technologies, and advertising will be no exception. Items which document turning points in technology should be saved. To give a few examples: computers in media selection; increasingly complex research methods and data analysis; copy testing; brainstorming; motivational research.

Publicity, correspondence and ephemera, or those items the firm uses to communicate with the outside world and with its own employees. They can be of importance in identifying the role played by the firm in the community, in the industry, and in civic affairs. In general, librarians and historians alike need frequent reminders that not all important information gets written on paper. Television and radio commercials, recordings of executives whose personalities are manifest in speech, photographs showing physical environments or people at work, all these have much value.

Summary

Advertising plays, and has played, a vital role in our society, and the evolution of that society has been strongly influenced by its existence and nature. The men and the firms in the advertising business deserve and will inevitably obtain some eventual recognition for the exercise of their functions. Whether or not that recognition is a valid one, and a source of pride for those within the business, depends almost entirely on the extent to which marketing and advertising firms have the foresight to save materials of historical value. The apathetic or short-sighted firms may cavalierly discard important materials in order to make room for little-used current material. On the other hand, firms with their own long-term interests at heart will conscientiously institute a retentions policy to guarantee a place for themselves in history as it goes on. It may take some argument to get management to see the value of archival retentions, but the value far exceeds the associated costs, and the firm will be doing itself, the marketing business, and society, a great service.

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