Wanted: A History of Advertising

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A major social force has yet to be chronicled properly.

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The basic impulse in advertising was one of control, of actively channeling social impulses toward a support of corporation capitalism and its productive and distributive priorities. Such is the judgment of Stuart Ewen (1976), historian and author of a history of advertising. One might optimistically assume that the book, which has a number of serious shortcomings, will be ignored like so much wailing into the wind. But such an assumption would be naïve. It would ignore the fact that since historians find very few studies of advertising's history credible, in this vacuum there is a very real chance that the conclusions of a work like this may echo down through successive generations of historians.

Advertising's Importance in American History

It is inevitable that advertising will be a central focus of the history of the twentieth century. Not only has advertising as we know it evolved and matured within the twentieth century, thereby making the twentieth century unique; not only has its size and centrality to the economy made it a significant industry in its own right; not only has its social visibility and presumed social influence been great (because advertising is both pervasive and persuasive); but advertising has been at the interface between pragmatics and art, between psychology and economics, between the producers and consumers of society, thus making it a key element in our economic history as well as our social, technological, artistic, and cultural histories. The history of advertising is, therefore, perhaps one of the keys to the 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 through which great insight might be obtained has long been recognized. A late nineteenth-century issue of Harper's Weekly (1897) 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—or the camel out of that of the Bedouin tribes." And, most recently, Wood, whose Story of Advertising (1958) is dramatically undervalued by historians, commented in his preface that advertising is the story of the people. In first hand actuality, advertising describes their desires, tastes, habits, weaknesses, hopes and pretensions.
In advertising can be seen the actuality of what people have been like in their day-to-day living through the centuries and what we are like now. 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.

The historical treatment of advertising is inevitable because of its centrality to our economy. It is to be encouraged because advertising is such a faithful mirror to our culture. In addition, "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 generalizations" about the ways in which underdeveloped nations might best adapt to the industrialized world's productivity (Myers and Smalley, 1959).

Insights from the history of advertising would also have the potential of influencing public policy within our own society as well as serving as an example to others. But whether the public policies so formed at home and abroad have any validity depends entirely on the accuracy with which such history is written. So, too, does the pride that members and leaders of the industry enjoy. Unless the history of advertising is exhaustively researched and is accurately documented, the industry and those within it stand too great a chance of being demeaned.

Why Advertisers Can't Write Their Own History

One might think that the history of advertising would most likely be written by members of the advertising profession. After all, they certainly have a high degree of familiarity with the subject from personal experience, are well skilled at wrapping words around ideas, and are hardly adverse to writing for public consumption, as the many quality books written by members of the industry attest. But these books are not history.

The most common style of book is the semiautobiographical book such as My Life in Advertising (Hopkins, 1927), published in the sunset years of a distinguished advertising agent's career. Whether the book is a discussion of Me and Other Advertising Geniuses (Brown, 1974) or The Huckster's Revenge (Manchete, 1959), the content is of limited historical value. While these two works are less self-serving or vengeful than their titles might make them appear, they, like others of this genre, suffer from being idiosyncratic—the experiences of only one individual—and occasionally self-glorifying. In addition, the perspective of the author is almost exclusively a "view from the top." Also, the content of most of these works is typically little more than a compilation of entertaining anecdotal highlights, salted with both wit and wisdom but without compelling conceptual coherence.

Even the best of the lot have limited usefulness as history. For example, Ogilvy's Confessions of an Advertising

Man (1963) is thoughtful, articulate, well organized, and good enough to be required reading of every serious advertising professional. Yet despite these virtues, it is not history, nor is it even grist for the historian's mill. This is because the author has distilled his experience into operational advice for other advertisers rather than described advertising's evolution or its functions in society.

Perhaps because advertising men are inclined to write their own memoirs, there are relatively few formal biographies of advertising leaders. With the exception of the legendary P. T. Barnum, "almost all the other major figures in the history of American advertising lack adequate biographies" (Boorstin, 1964). The best-known recent biography is John Gunther's story of Albert D. Lasker (1960) which Boorstin (1964) found to be "a disappointing, thin and pious account of one of the most interesting figures in modern American social history."

There is, of course, also the occasional book with a historical theme written by an advertiser or a journalist. Watkins's 100 Greatest Advertisements (1941) and Rowsome's They Laughed When I Sat Down (1959) spring immediately to mind. They were produced and marketed as coffee-table books, of interest primarily because of their illustrations, and are treated as such by scholars despite their well-informed editorial content. Seldin, in The Golden Fleece (1963), uses a historical theme very successfully in describing post-World War II marketing in America, as does Turner (1953) in portraying advertising's earlier history. But these books too are generally ignored by scholars. Seldin's work was mis marketed and did not get the circulation it deserved. It has since become rare and obscure. Turner's work was marketed with the objective of trade sales and not academic impact.

These works as well as other volumes written by advertisers are ignored regardless of their quality because of an academic distrust in their validity or representativeness. While some of this cavalier dismissal may be a manifestation of

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64
a bias against, an alienation from, and basic distrust of advertisers by academics, much of it is justified. The historian must conscientiously dismiss those works that are evangelical or anecdotal. The scholar also requires works that are well annotated and indexed so that they are suitable for validation and reference. Some may argue that the academic’s insistence on a certain formal style is little more than an insistence that the historical product be packaged a certain way. This probably undervalues the legitimacy of historians’ preferences. But be that as it may, there seems to be little reason to resist the product preferences of the consumer. For until the professional historian is the consumer, whatever is written is not really a part of history, since history is what historians read, write, and believe it to be. And as time passes on, history is only what historians write.

The Present Treatment of Advertising by Historians

Given the importance of advertising in the twentieth century, given the calls to action in the field periodically heard among historians, and given the tendency of scholars to ignore the writings of practitioners, historians should be embarrassed by the relative paucity of respectable studies on the subject. While an exhaustive annotated bibliography (Polley, 1976) on the history of marketing in North America includes some 100 titles on advertising history for the last century, many of these are brief articles, repetitive early textbooks, and anecdotal reflections by agents. There are few sources that are comprehensive and authoritative enough to command the attention of historians. The two studies most commonly cited both date from before World War II—Presbrey’s (1929) chronicle of the first half century of modern advertising and Hower’s (1939) more focused history of N. W. Ayer & Son. So great is the void that one still finds frequent references to Sampson’s history published in 1874!

Daniel Boorstin, a pre-eminent American historian, author of the trilogy The Americans (1973) and now librarian of Congress, has commented that “advertising, one of the most characteristic and most vigorous of American institutions, has been less adequately chronicled than almost any other major institution.”

Ralph Hower, one of the few who have been attracted to the subject, surveyed his colleagues at the Harvard Business School in 1935 and found that “the one topic on which information is especially wanted is a history of marketing.” And Ralph Hidy, also from the Harvard Business School, noted in his more recent review of business history (1970) that at Harvard the history of marketing was subject to “considerable discussion but little action.”

Adventurous young historians from time to time produce a dissertation or write an article for a learned journal. The dissertations, no matter what their quality, go largely uncirculated and unread even in academic circles, as Pope’s (1973) pioneer scholarly effort demonstrates. Articles in scholarly presses are of necessity limited in scope, as McMahon’s (1972) study of the adoption of psychological concepts by the advertising industry in the 1920s and 1930s or Curti’s (1967) study over a longer time span of an even smaller focus of concern, the changing notions of human nature as displayed in the pages of Printers’ Ink. Even though these studies meet even the most demanding standards of academic acceptability, their contribution and influence on the thinking of historians is as small as their narrowness of interest. And historians, like the rest of us, frequently will consider a book before they will consider an article, no matter how thoughtful, substantial, and important the latter may be.

Another book worthy of note is by Erik Barnouw, prize-winning Columbia historian of broadcasting. In The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate (1978), he discusses how the broadcasting industry has gradually meshed itself into the needs and wishes of sponsors. Finding the television sponsor almost mythological—an unseen yet eminent present figure—Barnouw presents a view of executive-suite television and shows the current influence of the sponsorship system on most categories of programming. Work is fair, but few in the industry are likely to find it flattering.

Unfortunately, these books are often not that thoughtful. One recent book to be published by a historian on advertising is Stuart Ewen’s Captains of Consciousness (1976). As the title and the opening quote suggest, the book takes a very critical stance with respect to advertising. Employing a Marxist perspective, the author argues that “the formulators of the consumer market and the propagandists who publicized it hoped to instill an authoritarian obedience to the dictates of daily life in the machine age.” He chastises other critical perspectives, like Vance Packard’s (1957), as “inadequate” because it portrays the faults of advertising as eccentric rather than systematic. His central theme is that “while much of the thinking in the American industrial ‘war rooms’ maintained an adherence to traditional ‘democratic’ rhetoric, the basic impulse in advertising was one of control, of actively channeling social impulses,” assuming a “manipulative approach to the problem of popular consciousness,” and undertaking “the imperialization of the psyche.”

It is small consolation that his rhetoric is clearly just that, that his Marxist perspective is intellectually unequal to the task of describing advertising’s historical role, and that the book offers no striking insights. Nor is it consoling to note that at least one academic book reviewer found the work “hampered, indeed crippled, by severe conceptual and methodological shortcomings” (Tedlow, 1976). It would be more consoling were it not for the fact that the intellectual vacuum is great and that works like this fill some of the void. No matter how inadequately or inaccurately they do so, these works will be read and quoted, and what they say may long be noted.

From the historian’s point of view,
virtually all of the literature available on the history of advertising is either anecdotal, evangelical, trivial, or rhetorical. So why, you might ask, hasn’t some competent, serious scholar leaped into the breach and written a *magnus opus* guaranteed to win fame, if not fortune? The question is a difficult one, and the answer complex.

Part of the answer lies in the cultural bias against marketing that pervades even the most fundamental of our economic concepts (Steiner, 1976). There is also a bias among most historians against all elements of popular culture (Galbraith, 1967):

> There is an insistent tendency among solemn social scientists to think of any institution which features rhymed and singing commercials, intense and lachrymose voices urging highly improbable enjoyments, caricatures of the human esophagus in normal or impaired operation, and which hints implausibly at opportunities for antiseptic seduction, as inherently trivial.

These factors, while significant, are probably of small influence compared to two others. Academics of any kind are rarely given access to the inner workings of advertisers and agencies. This is certainly true even for business-school professors much less liberal-arts history professors. No matter how understandable this “stonewalling” might be, it is nonetheless unfortunate. With alienation and suspicion flowing both ways between academics and the advertising community, doors and minds get closed. The validity of the way history will treat advertising is probably what suffers most. Perhaps also lost is an opportunity to improve advertising by learning from valid histories. Instead of stonewalling, it would be preferable to follow Bogart’s (1969) suggestion: “we should be enlisting the support of . . . historians.”

Even if access to records were free and unrestricted, the task of processing the information intelligently is formidable. The relevant source materials are secreted in remote corners and files of many agencies and clients. Since the industry is both large and lives by its words, the volume of materials one might be called upon to consult is immense. Worse still, the increasing sophistication of advertising is reflected in the growth of specialized methods, technical language, and strategic concepts that may be taken for granted by those immersed in the industry but that are obscure and virtually unintelligible to the layman. And the typical academic historian is surely just that—a layman—with respect to business practice in general or advertising practice in specific.

Another factor that inhibits adequate treatment of advertising by historians stems from the fact that there is such a void in the literature. Whatever is written about advertising is sure to be the focus of much attention. Business, economic, and social historians will all seize upon the work with critical eagerness. The advertising community is sure to discuss and publicize the work. Like any book on advertising it would even stand a chance of catching the popular interest and becoming widely read. But the limelight can be harsh and is perhaps likely to be so. Both the academic and professional communities are notable for their quickness to criticize. Academics are critical by force of intellectual habit and justify this as necessary in “the pursuit of truth.” The advertising community has a track record of hypersensitive retaliatory responses to even vaguely implied criticisms. Yet surely an honest, balanced (and interesting to read) history must expose some flaws and foibles. So criticism seems inescapable, especially when one considers the nearly impossible task of impressing both audiences simultaneously. Small wonder there are few fools to rush in where angels fear to tread.

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**Requirements for a Remedy**

Thus far I have argued that it is inevitable that advertising be discussed at length as the history of the twentieth century gets written; that the treatment of advertising by conventional historians to date has been less than adequate; that the biographical or anecdotal writings of advertising agents will not greatly influence historical treatments of advertising no matter how voluminous, witty, or wise those writings might be; and that there are many serious problems inhibiting competent scholarly treatment.

Not all of those problems are easily solved. But there are certainly some things that can be done to encourage future researchers. The successful treatment of advertising seems to depend on three basic elements: (1) an appropriate set of concepts or a theoretical framework with which to select, organize, and discuss advertising; (2) a competent, credible author-scholar; and (3) a broad base of information to draw upon. Few of the works to date have had any of these elements much less all three, so it is small wonder that the resulting books are of little import.

The first element is probably the most critical one in determining the character of the final product, for it is through use of a conceptual structure that the researcher selects, organizes, discusses, and generally gives meaning to otherwise diverse, chaotic observations. It is the concepts that bring order out of the chaos by highlighting the communalities of events happening simultaneously and the continuity of events happening across time. It is the concepts employed that determine what questions the researcher asks, what “data” he or she observes or ignores, and ultimately what he or she sees. A useful and valid set of concepts provides both coherence and insight by exposing patterns 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 little structure at all, being content to be anecdotal and journalistic. Others, have an unambiguous set of conceptual tools, but tools inappropriate to the task. Like Ewen’s (1976) use of concepts evolving from nineteenth-century Marxist thought, the result is that no matter how hard the author tries, the tools do not provide a satisfactory “explanation” of the reality or insight.
into the practice. These tools often end up by being "rules" with more exceptions than adherences. Worse still, they can be dangerously misleading. While it is not easy to judge before the research is done what concepts will be most helpful in making sense out of the history of advertising, it is clear there are concepts that are more likely to be appropriate than those used by authors like Ewen. To give the simplest and most obvious example, much could be made of "the marketing concept," an idea so ingrained in the profession that we overlook its import. The history of advertising, when seen as the shift from the selling concept of pushing whatever the factory made to the concept of marketing what the consumer desires, takes on a new clarity. The marketing concept allows the understanding of the functions of consumer research and market-segmentation strategies, activities which although often painted as manipulative in intent might well be increasing the efficiency and service of marketing.

Finding an author-researcher who possesses the necessary credibility may not be easy, for the individual needs credibility with two disparate groups—the professional advertising community and the community of academic historians. For the latter, credibility would depend on having the necessary union card (a Ph.D.), a university appointment (preferably current), and a track record of quality scholarly publications, especially on historical topics. The advertising community would want reassurance that the individual knows about advertising through more than just the consumer's viewpoint and is generally well informed about trade practices. This combination of requirements suggests that the man for the job is more likely to be found among scholars who have made most of their career within the professional advertising community or among those who have spent their career studying and teaching marketing and advertising in a university business school. If one also requires a demonstration of interest in matters historical, the number of candidates who come to mind shrinks to a tiny handful; and several of these are preoccupied with other research interests, which would prevent the long commitment that a thorough piece of historical research would require.

But assuming that, if the opportunity exists, the right person will appear, the remaining problem is one of giving that person access to authoritative sources. The writing of a comprehensive history will require access to a broad base of materials and information sources, both people and paper. Individuals and firms should carefully save documents of historical interest within their files and libraries, perhaps even to the extent of creating an archive especially for this purpose (see Pollay, 1977). Ideally, all of the major agencies could pool their archival records in a central repository, like the Roper Center collection of public opinion research data now housed at Williams College.

Of course, the mere existence of records and reminiscences is not sufficient, for the researcher must be given both access to them and permission to quote from them as necessary. This means that individuals within the industry should consider themselves a part of its history and should take the time and thought to share personal experiences with a researcher. The editorial freedom required to maintain both objectivity and credibility means that the grantee of access must lay aside fears of personal or competitive exposure and trust in the judgment of the researcher. Where special exposure problems exist, clearly specified conditions of access should be negotiated.

What Can Be Done Now?

If you are convinced of the need for members of the profession to take an active role in fostering an accurate, influential history, there are several things you can do. You can now

1. ask the librarian of your firm to draft a retention-policy guidelines statement and a scholarly-access policy statement;
2. dispose of nothing until these poli-

ies are clarified;
3. contact the author and display your interest and encouragement.

In the near future, you can

1. talk to friends and associates within the industry to encourage them to make a contribution toward the history of advertising;
2. explore the possibilities of granting research funds or endowing a university chair specifically for research into the history of advertising and marketing;
3. explore with associates of other firms the possibility of establishing a central historical repository for records no longer needed for immediate reference within individual firms.

In the long run you can be prepared to welcome and cooperate with a historical researcher whenever that person arrives. Be proud enough of your accomplishments, and those of your firm, to take the time to tell your story. You are, in fact, part of the history of advertising. But you will not be part of the written history of advertising unless you take the time and thought to share your experience, first with a researcher and ultimately with the world. The history of advertising that is ultimately written will only be valid if you act to make it so.

References


