The History of Advertising Archives: The Confessions of a PAC-Rat

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We are all embedded in an environment dense with advertising that most citizens find intrusive or aversive. Yet many people, including myself, voluntarily seek, acquire and collect additional advertising items and information. Among collectors, dealers and museum personnel, we are known as "pack-rats," "pac" being an acronym for paper and advertising collector.

There are many pack-rats with varied interests. Some collect particular objects, such as postcards, toys, beer trays, paperweights, etc. Some collect items for a particular brand, such as Planters' Peanuts or Coca Cola, or for a product class, such as railroad memorabilia. Some retain items for a specific era. Some collect anything with a particular theme, or using certain characteristics, as in ethnic stereotypes, the Dionne Quintuplets, indians, movie star testimonials, etc. All collectors soon find themselves having to choose a specialization to provide a rationale and a limitation constraint to what they will collect.

While there may be no such thing as a typical collector, for the species is very heterogeneous in demographic dimensions, and perhaps psychographic dimensions as well, this confession and self-description is provided in faith that it might illuminate the behaviors, motives, purchasing behavior of collectors, by providing a case history of one.

Scope

Advertising completely infiltrates my life. It is an intellectual preoccupation dominating most of my teaching, reading, research, and professional writing. It is a hobby of mine, etc. Some collect advertising items of previous eras, "advertisers." It is a dominant decor theme to my office and home, providing decoration for almost every room of the large home I share with tolerant others. For example, the kitchen is filled with food related ads and items, including many tools, dishes, cups, bowls, etc. The hall and front room display 19th Century patent medicine items with an indian theme. An upstairs room contains objects and ads for Acme firms around the world. The staircase contain a gallery of faces, "our satisfied customers," which also includes many ads, such as old trade cards. Like the proverbial iceberg, only a fraction of what I have is displayed, so closets and drawers are full of additional items.

I watch television items related to advertising and marketing topics whenever I can. I read the trade press of advertising. From both TV and print, I copy ads that seem noteworthy, and collect a random sample for future research purposes. I wear advertising of my clothes in patches and pins, or silk-screened shirts. My pockets are often filled with unusual items such as a pen knives, watches, coins and cards of a promotional nature. My photography even as a tourist focuses on signs and advertising, especially the uniquely North American, the ironic self-captioned snaps, and any Acme businesses which I see as the grass roots of American enterprise.

As a collector, I will buy books for libraries, unusual specialty items to show their diversity, patent medicine items (particularly 19th Century), anything for an Acme firm, quality items that can be incorporated as part of my wardrobe, examples of popular adoption of commercial themes, such as brand name needlepoints, and anything that illustrates a juncture of history or might serve as a prop for teaching by relevance to teaching cases or demonstration of basic principles, or the violation thereof.

As specific illustration, I have purchased within the month preceding this writing the following: a seventeenth century letter opener advertising itself as an advertising specialty item; a fruit crate label for "Visitor" brand lemons which I framed and put into the guest room of my Lodge at the Lake, a recreational retreat; a pair of home furnishings for North America, a large promotion of domestic and cosmetic items, richly illustrated with one showing the travelling salesman in a horse drawn carriage and the next year's showing him in a Model A Ford; a group of buttons and pins including one for Davey Crockett Bows, etc. and have been known to spend an entire day scanning shelves of the largest bookstores in North America. I schedule a day into every visit to New York, for example, to do nothing but shop for books.

The Seed Crystal and How It Grew

A behavioral pattern as diverse, and yet coherent, as this has to start somewhere. As a child, I recall a few small collections. While others collected stamps or coins, I, for a while had a small collection of matchbook covers, provided by my parents who both smoked and travelled. Later I collected decals from family trips, that covered a window of my room. But these early efforts were abandoned as I grew and I was indifferent to their disposal.

When near the end of my graduate school days, and recently married, I honeymooned in New England and noticed peculiar patent medicine cardboard poster with the key slogan of "Step right up and get a bottle of (sic) your druggist." This captured my attention, and being newly married and about to start a teaching position in Marketing, I had both off the shelves, or at least to fulfill some interest in graphics. So I bought it. (I neglected to buy the companion ad for the horse elixir, an apparent repackaging of the family elixir, much to my persistent subsequent regret.) I started teaching in the midwest and noticed that anachronistic patent medicines still graced the shelves of many stores, especially the smaller rural or ethnic markets. I bought a few of these off the shelves, only to note that despite diverse labels, many were sold by the same distributor/manufacturer. Writing to them, I received a large variety of items that they still marketed, having bought up licences of old fashioned products to "milk" them in the marginal markets. To identify myself to sellers, I created a business card for "Dr. Pollay's Pharmacy and Potions Parlor -- Palliatives and Panaceas for Palpitations, Petulance and Piety."

As I was teaching both Marketing and Social Psychology at the time in a business school, I was interested in the local histories of the patent medicine peddlars whose techniques of persuasion might provide insight. I thought, into contemporary tactics. Thus I began to read casually about pioneering peddlars, medicine shows, and larger carnivals. This continued, largely in parallel, to my reading for scholarly and teaching purposes. I also began, modestly at first, to purchase those items that made good conversation pieces and teaching vehicles. The
reading and collecting continued for nearly a decade with little professional import, being a related hobby but not leading to much publication, display or impact on others in any way.

The first major reinforcement of this activity, aside from the curiosity of colleagues and friends, came from the Vancouver Art Gallery. I was asked to "hang" a show on advertising though the ages to accompany other shows they had scheduled featuring pinball machines and press photography, thus giving over the gallery entirely to popular culture items. This was both a honor and an exciting activity, for I undertook the curatorial effort with enthusiasm and creativity. Rather than just hanging objects on the walls, I created a variety of environments to recreate the sense of proliferated commercial media. I also produced the show as if it were sponsored, a satire on the intrusion of tobacco and alcohol sponsors into sports and the genesis of the fictional Acme Delivery Company. Opening ceremony and collections conducted like a grand opening sale, with students acting as sales force to confront gallery patrons and displayed items bearing catalog numbers.

This experience, an exhilarating change of pace from routines of professing, came at an opportune moment for I was about to embark on my first sabbatical with little certainty if I wanted to dedicate my life to academic activities at all, despite the appearances of success in my first decade at it.

My first sabbatical was therefore a critical moment. As it began I could easily imagine dropping out of academic life and doing something different - anything different. I had the fortunate opportunity to attend Harvard as an International Visiting Scholar where I could study business history and make use of the deep resources of Baker Library. This led to a redefinition of effort, a credibility with historians, as my basis for a reference book annotating the available literature of advertising, Information Sources for the History of Advertising (1978). Returning to my own campus, I created the History of Advertising Archives, as a repository for growing library and collections, and in hopes that it would someday attract donations of corporate advertising records, which are poorly preserved by any other institutions. (Neither agencies, nor clients, nor trade associations, keep historical records of any quality on advertising.) The creation of this institutional form provided a legitimization for a renewed effort at collecting, especially of those items of interest to scholars and researchers.

Purchasing

Initially I would acquire many items quite readily at local garage sales, flea markets, estate sales, second hand stores, and antique dealers. By the initial indiscriminate collecting soon became infeasible. Collecting of advertising related items became quite popular in the early 70s and drove prices upwards. My own inventory became bulky. I recognized that some of what I had bought no longer interested me, and that my collection had no focus. All collectors discover the need to specialize as their collections grow, and I did too.

Thus over time, my purchasing became far more selective. To avoid outrageous prices, I started to avoid the obvious, such as Coca-Cola or Disney items which had become rapidly inflated in price. I buy with an eye toward the most memorable, particularly the typography and printing quality. I am willing to produce multiples to begin with, although I am demanding as to quality or printing and manufacture and avoid shoddy goods. I seek items that are good conversation pieces, permitting me to tell a story from advertising's history. (Interestingly, many collectors are very ignorant of this history and don't recognize these items for what they are.) I buy items which are easily stored, or durable. I buy unusual items for their very uniqueness. I buy items that can be put to good use, such as a Campbell Soup instant lunch appliance which heats my coffee. I like items whose branding or slogans is self-explanatory, ironic or particularly appropriate, such as my coffee cup shaped like a battery labelled "Energizer." I also like items that are cheap. I am willing to pay fair value, but must watch my cash flow. In general I only buy whatch of these criteria are met. Recent acquired illustrations include a "Bite-size" pin; a "Takoma Biscuit" pin, a early 20th Century competitor to Uneeda Biscuit, the cornerstone to Nabisco; and a WW II playing card featuring a Coke ad and silhouettes of airplanes to train air raid wardens.

I still buy largely from the informal markets: garage sales, church rummages, second hand stores, etc. Lately, as another example, I have been buying T-shirts and caps from these places.

I occasionally attend the larger "shows" or "conventions" of dealers or collectors. The mere existence of these shows the size of the collectors marketplace, and any one show has so much material that a high degree of activity and a trained searching eye is essential to get through the available inventory. I trade at these places in an anonymous manner, but even if I identified myself and the institutional reason for my interest, this would mean very little to the sellers. It would convey no status as of import to them, for there are many private collectors with far greater reputations and collections. (A local man in Vancouver has over ten thousand Coke items, such as boxes of promotional records, rooms of toys, etc.) The show on the West coast are relatively modest compared to those on the East coast where there is both more original inventory and a greater number of collectors. There is an annual trade gathering in Maryland, for example, which is open to the public but is primarily a wholesale market where antique buyers buy in bulk from one another. Imagine, hundreds of exhibitors and buyers all dealing in volume transactions involving old paper and advertising ephemera which they then filter out to their regional markets. This is where a find such as 200 posters from the 1920s can be marketed.

Motivations

Why engage in this behavior? The behavior seems bizarre to many, a relatively unique monomania. To some the behavior is sufficiently unusual that they are shy to ask what motivations and satisfactions precipitated and perpetuated the collecting and display, for they perhaps presume irrationality. But in fact there are many motivational factors that are shared with commonplace behavior of others.

Initially, the acquiring was a casual, off-hand activity of no particular import, little more than an impulse purchase of items of curiosity value because of my professional involvement in marketing. This became something of a hobby/research project because local sources permitted the acquisition of rare items and knowledge about patent medicine selling, a cornerstone to the history of marketing and advertising. The effort to learn about this topic taught me just how poorly advertising materials were retained by anyone, and how valuable they were as documents for social and economic history. This was evidently even more acute for advertising on radio and television, for no one was preserving these ephemeral electronic events. So a need and opportunity was recognized, and with it came a sense of responsibility. I was in a unique position to do something about this story and its social import, being better trained in managerial and behavioral fields than conventional historians. Thus I began to be more serious about collecting some things, while continuing to acquire other items just for my own amusement.

The process of searching and shopping has its own rewards. Since many items are rarely seen, and are typically amassed with diverse assortments of other objects, there can
be delight in discovery, finding the treasure amidst the trash. This is a pleasure when it is the reward for search effort, or when its just a serendipity when least expected. The item may be a bargain for being underpriced, compared to one's own assessment of its rarity and interest value, but it need not be a "steal" to satisfying. Finding unusual types of items, or items that complement existing holdings is also rewarding. The purchasing process is typically a social one, with bargaining and banter common between buyers and sellers. While this marketplace socializing is common around the world, it has become rare in America, making it all the more to be valued.

There is rarely the satisfaction of closure that stamp or coin collectors typically seek and experience. There is not a finite universe of items such that one might complete full sets, nor is there a well established sense of rarity and value. Some precipitate collectors try to approximate this and assemble and publish catalogs listing the universe of items they know to exist. I have seen these for advertising postcards, beer trays and cans, country store displays and dispensers, Coca-Cola ephemera, etc. These are valuable primarily to hobbyists, to get a sense of prices. This can be spurious, however, for at least one of these catalogs published greatly inflated price estimates in order to increase the apparent value of the inventory held by the author and offered for sale through the catalog.

The owning and having can be satisfying in several ways. Some collectors take great delight in polishing, packaging, organizing and assembling their inventories, literally fondling their finds. I personally find this a chore done out of necessity and responsibility, cannot seem to find the time to organize the collection in a way that it deserves, despite my retrieval needs as a curator of the History of Advertising Archives. The fact of ownership does provide a strong sense of identity to one's self and to others. Even the oddity has the virtue of provoking conversation and interest, among professional colleagues and personal friends. For some part of my life, between marriages, it proved a means of meeting and capturing the interest of friends and lovers. Now it serves as a means of establishing in a concrete way my interests and expertise, and permitting publicity for the History of Advertising Archives in visual as well as verbal ways.

The sharing of the collection, such as in this paper and presentation, provides many rewards. It aids my teaching by giving me props to provoke student attention and thought. Visitors can be shown displays, each of which may be worth more than a thousand words. Artifacts and advertizes prove valuable to set designers, museum curators and art directors. All of this sharing is in keeping with the intention of the primary donor to the archives, the Acme Delivery Company, a transport of delight.

Assessment

Just how bizarre is this collecting compulsion, this materialistic monomaniac? The identified motives range from curiosity, delight in discovery, satisfactions of ownership, pride of ownership, creation of identity, social interactions, generosity and sharings, publicity and a sense of responsibility. In and of themselves these are certainly not unique.

Nor, I assert, is the monomaniac. Many people live lives dominated by a central interest or motif. Some personalities are totally identified with a recreational activity or sports team. Some are totally committed to a job, career or firm. Some lives revolve around drugs, like alcohol. Some are centered around pet ownership, maintenance, grooming, etc. More abstractly, some lives display consistency in repeated displays of fear of failure, insecure assertions of masculinity, compulsive cuteness or clowning, etc. Of all occupations, I would guess that academics have the highest frequency and degree of monomaniac. We all know colleagues whose minds are on their fields of interest for virtually every waking hour, and often these are among the most successful as academicians.

What makes the behavior unique is its obvious manifestation in material forms. But we know materialism to be a very strong trait in American culture. It is not unusual for people to own or display knick-knacks, souvenirs, items, memorabilia, or treasured possessions. Nor it unusual for people to buy well beyond their obvious needs, as evidenced by the numerous inventories of goods sold every year to people with crowded closets, attics, basements, garages, storage sheds, bookshelves, desk drawers, cupboards, etc.

Although I cannot be the final arbiter, it seems that what makes my behavior most unique is the valuing of objects that others take for granted or treat with disdain for being advertising. I'd like to think that uniqueness is also the result of creative inventiveness. There is always something new being bought or created, or the use of old props in new ways. My willingness to make my life different with advertising is not as intolerable to others as it would seem. Many varieties of personalities find themselves comfortable with me and in my environments: even those like my wife who are averse to advertising in both principle and practice.

Plans

I continue to purchase items, although less frequently and with more exacting criteria. The collection of books and research files of ads already serves as a resource for other scholars interested in historical dimensions of advertising. Some fine scholars access these and the data bases derived therefrom at cost and with the help of the libraries. This library is destined for donation to a library, archives or museum. The collection of artifacts and advertizes has a more uncertain future. It is used occasionally as a source of props or creative stimulus for art directors. Many displays are possible, so material is lent to museums. Currently, material is on loan to the new Portland Museum of Advertising and to the Canadian Medical Association for displays. A permanent display is possible either self-standing, or at the University, or at home. My home is already so rife with artifacts on the walls that conversion to a museum would be relatively straight forward.

Those interested in seeing the existing displays, accessing the data or the library, or borrowing items are encouraged to inquire in Vancouver, B.C. The History of Advertising Archives is fully cooperative with all reasonable requests, and can do so thanks to a grant from the Acme Delivery Company.

The Acme Delivery Company: "a transport of delight"

This highly diversified but integrated company is unusual as it has no lawyers or accountants, pays no taxes, and indeed has no cash income. Its most active department is marketing and advertising. Business cards, stationary, rubber stamps, decals, stickers for packages and signage all work to make concrete among affiliates, an international community of colleagues and neighbors, the concept of "Acme Deliveries."

"Acme Deliveries" include chance encounters, serendipity, synchronicity, courtesies, insights, generosity and lenderness in the midst of confusion. Originally created as a fictional firm for sponsoring events in an art gallery show, the acknowledgement of all the volunteered assistance and emotional support was a "thank you for the Acme Delivery. From that time, this community of friends, family, artists and colleagues had a new phrase in their vocabulary, and I created the advertising materials to keep the concept reinforced, believing it beneficial to society to promote as many events and ideas as possible that are either graced, blessed or inspired.
The result is the advertising of the abstract. What seems banal is in fact subtle. It is also like a sheep in wolves clothing. What appears to be predation is typically play. At its best it is the sacred masked as the secular. It is this admixture that makes it so unusual, for it blends what normally stands in antithesis – the "new goods" message of advertising and a "good news" philosophy of Christian charity and compassion. This dialectic reflects my personal ambivalence, being both an admirer and a critic of advertising. I admire the art and creativity, but wonder about the adverse consequences of heavily commercialized culture.

Since my reflections on the cultural character of advertising, "The Distorted Mirror," seem to some to be a curse on the profession and its academics, let me correct any misunderstanding and leave you with my blessing: "May you experience many Acme Deliveries and may these be well appreciated by you and those with whom you share." When you are next in Vancouver, I look forward to providing you with a small Acme Delivery – a guided tour of the collections of the History of Advertising Archives and my personal hospitality.

Richard Pollay, curator of the History of Advertising Archives at the University of British Columbia, wears this shirt, because in many of his talks here at the college he represented the middle ground between the critics of advertising and the staunch defenders—tempering both sides with reality.