Maintaining Archives for the History of Advertising

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- It is inevitable that discussion of advertising will be a necessary part of the history of the twentieth century. The academic treatment of the area is to date quite sparse for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the lack of detailed, organized, and accessible records. A discussion of the types of records deserving retention, their organization, and the terms and conditions of access provides a model for records retention. This model is valuable not only to future historians but also to present-day management.

**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" (1).

It has often been remarked that conventional history pays inordinate tribute to the personalities and actions of politicians and in comparison virtually ignores all but the most infamous of businessmen and their behavior. To some extent this is a failure on the part of historians to adjust their focus of concern to reflect the increasing importance of economic activity in shaping society's evolution. However, the continuation of the traditional attention to politicians and heads of state is not only the result of historical bias. The blame for the inadequate chronicling of business activity lies not so much with the historians as it does with the business sector itself, for good history can be written only to the extent that business firms keep historical records, provide scholars with access to those records, and permit the citation and publishing of results.

The typical business firm is ahistorical in temperament, possessed as it is with a managerial focus on contemporary problems and strategies for the future. They keep relatively skimpy records for only brief periods of time. Suspicious of scholars, firms who manifest any historical interest are more likely to hire a professional journalist to write a vanity history of "struggle and triumph" for publicity purposes—with the result narrow in perspective and of dubious candidness. The result of this behavior is that what little is believed of business behavior is often the result of exposé and is probably greatly distorted compared to what would be known if firms kept and made available systematic records.

It is clear to even a casual observer that the history of the twentieth century must be in large part a history of the growth and development of business from the nineteenth-century model of family-owned, community-based, primitive factories to the interurban, multinational megacorporations of today. There is no part of society, including its problems and
politics, that is not strongly colored by this change. Already many serious scholars are beginning the plunge into the source materials saved by those firms with foresight, but to date few of the firms who are actively maintaining archives, or who have opened them up to scholars, are major advertising agencies or marketing firms. Thus a special responsibility falls on the shoulders of those people entrusted with the libraries of such firms to carefully preserve what historical materials may still exist and to begin the implementation of retention policies.

Custodians of libraries of marketing and advertising information have an even larger responsibility than the average business librarian, for contemporary advertising and marketing is one of the key technologies that permits, and perhaps even creates, the scale of corporations we now experience.

Advertising's Importance in American History

It is inevitable that advertising will be a central focus of the history of the twentieth century. Advertising as we now know it has evolved and matured within the twentieth century, thereby making this century unique. Its size and centrality to the economy make it a significant industry in its own right. Its social visibility, and presumed social influence, are great—that is, advertising is both pervasive and persuasive. Advertising is also an interface between pragmatics and art, between psychology and economics, and 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 history of advertising is, therefore, perhaps one of the keys to the appropriate understanding of the evolution of our complex urban society.

Given the importance of advertising to the history of the twentieth century, the calls to action periodically heard among historians, and their tendency to ignore the writings of practitioners, historians are to be embarrassed by the relative paucity of respectable studies. Daniel Boorstin, a preeminent American historian, author of the trilogy *The Americans,* 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” (2, p. 630) and elsewhere that “Advertising despite its importance in the American economy and in our daily life, [sic] has attracted surprisingly few historians” (3, p. 289).

From the serious 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, one might ask, has not some competent serious scholar leapt into the breach and written a *magnum opus* guaranteed to win fame even if not fortune? Why, indeed, have historians given advertising such short shrift? 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. The prejudice against marketing activity and practitioners is pervasive and often evidenced by historians.

“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” (4, p. 218).

This factor, while significant, is 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 the more suspected liberal arts, history professor. No matter how understandable this “stonewalling” might be, it is none the less unfortunate. With alienation and suspicion flowing both ways between academics and the professional advertising community, both doors and minds get closed and 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 suggestion that "we should be enlisting the support of . . . historians" (I).

Even if access to records were free and unrestricted, the task of processing the information intelligently is formidable. The relevant source materials are scattered in diverse locations; little pockets of valuable information secreted in remote corners and files of multitudinous agencies and clients. Since the industry is both large and lives by its words, the volume of materials one might conceivably 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 which are obscure and virtually unintelligible to the layman. The typical academic historian is surely just that—a layman—with respect to business practice in general or advertising practice in specific.

Yet another factor which inhibits adequate treatment of advertising by historians, and by no means the least, stems from this 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 indeed. 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 a necessary means in "the pursuit of truth." The advertising community has a track record of hypersensitive retaliatory responses to even vaguely implied criticisms, the wailing of so much wounded pride at being described as being less than paragons of virtue, and yet surely an honest, balanced (and interesting to read) history must expose some flaws and foibles. So extensive 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 (5).

The Role of Archives

Thus far the argument has been advanced 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 history's treatment 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 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 the resulting books are of little import.

The first is probably the most critical element 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 observes and what he ignores, and ultimately what he sees. A useful and valid set of concepts provides both coherence and insight by exposing pat-
terms 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 (6) 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, provide no insight into the practice and often end up "rules" with more exceptions than adherences. Worse still, they can be dangerously misleading. While it is not easy to judge at this time, 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 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 now so ingrained in the profession that we overlook its import. The history of advertising, when seen as the shift from the selling concept of flogging what the factory makes to the concept of marketing what the consumer desires, takes on a new clarity, for 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 PhD), 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 careers within the professional advertising community, or among those who have spent their careers 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 men are preoccupied with other research interests, which would prevent the long commitment that a thorough piece of historical research would require.

But of all the necessary components to the successful treatment of advertising by history, none is more essential than the existence of a rich and organized supply of archival information. If by chance today's academicians of learning do not provide us with the appropriate concepts or the needed volume of competent scholars, then patience should bring the reward of a never ending stream of new scholars with new ideas. But no one can create new archival materials. Once the records are lost or destroyed, they are lost forever. While patience may be rewarded with the occasional uncovering of hitherto unknown collections of material, on the whole the passage of time witnesses the decay and destruction of material. It is also obvious that the number or competence of researchers, and the brilliance of their research ideas, all go for naught in the absence of adequate information upon which the historical hypothesis may be tested.

Other Reasons for Maintaining Archives

Thus far the appeal to maintain advertising archives has been based exclusively on the idea that the industry and society will be better served if the history of advertising and the twentieth century is accurate. While the author finds that argument compelling, it is probably the case that it will fail to completely motivate the pragmatic executive who must autho-
rize the creation of an archive. After all, a contribution to the history of advertising is a contribution to the greater good and only indirectly self-serving in that it will inevitably increase the amount of pride that can be justifiably felt as a member of an important industry. But there are other reasons for maintaining an archive.

Some records need to be carefully maintained for purely legal reasons. Papers of incorporation, partnership agreements, licenses, contracts, annual reports, board of directors’ minutes and the like must be kept as a condition of the incorporation laws of most states. Many of these items must be kept for the life of the company.

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Perhaps more importantly, records of an archival nature should be maintained because of their great value to the day-to-day operating management. Records which allow for the easy identification of previous marketing strategies and tactics can serve a number of functions for the account executive or creative teams working on a client’s account. They serve as an excellent source of material to rapidly brief a new member of an account team. They permit a long-term continuity of marketing strategy, as opposed to changes in direction with every change in personnel. They can be a source and stimulus for both copy and art ideas. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, they allow for the accumulation of knowledge about the product, its consumers and its promotion, thereby permitting advertising efforts to become increasingly effective. This accumulated information prevents redundancy of efforts so that researchers need not gather virtually identical information repeatedly, or creative teams need not reinvent the wheel.

These practical uses of material of an archival nature are often overlooked, since many creative teams and account executives feel so compelled to offer the client something totally “new, now and novel” that they are reluctant to admit any similarity or connection between tomorrow’s campaigns and yesterday’s efforts. This ahistorical attitude is especially unfortunate since the potential value of historical case material is underscored by the impact of the relatively high rate of turnover among advertising personnel in both the agency and the client’s offices, and by the fact that client company records are often notoriously poor on advertising matters. Many client firms rely on the agency to keep the records necessary to provide a continuity of promotional strategy. Even firms which in other respects maintain a vigorous retention policy are casual about their advertising records. Unfortunately, their reliance on the advertising agency is all too often misplaced, as the agencies do their clients a disservice by not maintaining and using the kind of records systems that would allow the advertising effort to become increasingly sophisticated.

Suggestions for a Retentions Policy

Once convinced of the need for retaining some records, it becomes clear that some operating guidelines have to be developed in order to decide what to keep. Keeping everything is nearly as valueless as throwing everything away, for a few years’ accumulation of paper becomes overwhelming, unmanageable and unusable by management, clients or outside researchers. Some business historians and archivists have suggested that only about 5% of records created by business are worth preserving. Fortunately the law and common sense are quite reliable guides in deciding what to retain. All that is required is the time to be thoughtful and reflective about the potential value of material, and the courage and space to follow the archivists rule of thumb—“If in doubt, retain.”

The author’s reflection on this question has produced the following listing of materials that seem to be of particular value. It should be made clear at the outset, however, that this list is far from exhaustive and that there may well be other important material deserving retention that
the author has not thought of, or that is peculiar to your firm. It should also be made clear that not every scrap of paper bearing on a topic listed deserves retention. All retentions policies need to eliminate redundancy, pruning out drafts, working papers, memos, and revisions relevant to most major documents. Yet at the same time, not all such miscellany and ephemera should be discarded, for it is often valuable to save as full a set of such material as is possible for at least a representative decision or document. In no other way is it possible to trace the processes by which these documents and decisions are created and modified. Again, common sense should be the guide to retention.

Legal and Other Formal Records

At the top of any retentions list are the materials that must be kept. These include incorporation charters, partnership agreements, and other documents specifying the firm's legal identity, rights and obligations. Top level management records including minutes of board directors' meetings, agenda for shareholders' meetings, and all policy statements should be kept, as should all major financial records: stock and bond issuances, annual reports, ledgers, budgets and associated operating expenses, and tax returns. Keep property records like land and building purchases, leases and sales, and records associated with the intangible properties of patents, copyrights and licenses. Personnel records are required to be kept by most states for a statutory period of 5-7 years following termination of employment. For older records a sampling is valuable to identify backgrounds and typical career paths of employees. Statistics need to be kept on the size and composition of the work force, and the direct and indirect remunerations, covering items like pension plans and insurance programs.

Documents Showing Client Relations

The principal operating documents of an advertising agency can be broken into two major categories: those that are concerned with the agency client relation-ship and those internal documents concerned with the conception and execution of work on behalf of the client. In the former category are all of those documents concerning the establishment of the business relationship with the client, including correspondence, negotiation documents, and presentations. These should also be kept for at least some of the "almost" clients—the presentations that did not win business. Thereafter, all documents which herald changes in the relationship should be kept, including correspondence from clients expressing reservations, agency explanations of deviations in execution from plans, all changes in strategy like changes in target markets and copy premise, and annual budget requests and approvals. Generally, all documents which show junctures in the relationship should be saved. Also keep correspondence with clients which are rich in detail of information, like an annual media plan.

Campaign Development and Execution

Perhaps even more important than the material listed above is the great wealth of material which shows the behind-the-scenes activities. The communications with clients may well be saved by client archivists, and many of the ads themselves are published and therefore saved by libraries. Yet only the advertising agency, the market research firm and other special function firms have records which detail the processes by which advertisements are conceived and created and researched. Documents should be saved which show the personnel involved in a campaign and their organization. For at least some representative campaigns, detailed documentation should be kept which shows the development of copy premise, from the initial problem statement to the final selection decision, including any consumer research done to generate alternatives or help in the selection. Keep information on the organization of the execution; the instructions to the creative department; samples of the variety of creative output showing campaign integration, copies or facsimiles of billboards, magazine layouts, point of purchase displays, story-
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boards, etc.; documents showing terms of subcontracts of production or research; samples of copy testing procedures and other checks the prototype ads go through before final release; and media buying procedures.

The above materials are extremely important for both their historical value and for their usefulness as briefing materials for people just joining an account team. While a highly detailed level of information probably cannot be kept for all accounts, it clearly should be maintained for the large, unusual and high potential accounts. It is also helpful to keep some records of the financial relationships between the agency and its subcontractors, research firms, media and clients, including information on problems of collection, delays in billing, credit extensions, and other financial matters.

**Items Showing Changing Technology**

The history of business and the twentieth century will inevitably focus on the adoption-diffusion of changing technology, and the history of advertising will be no exception. Items which display turning points in technological employment should be saved, including both those items that relate to the decision to change technologies and documents which evidence both the old and the new technology. Specific examples from advertising would include: the employment of computers and other complex decision heuristics in the making of media mix decisions; the use of increasingly complex consumer research instruments and procedures and methods of data analysis; and changing methods of copy testing.

To the extent possible, these technologies should be linked to the clients on whose account they are employed. To give another example, material should be kept now which shows the use in the 1950s and 60s of brainstorming and motivation research as idea generators for copy premises. The best information would show the frequency and conditions of use, the problems encountered and the evaluation of these “technologies” by the agency and clients.

**Publicity, Correspondence, and Ephemera.**

No archival system would be complete without the retention of those items the firm uses to communicate with the outside world. In this regard all executive correspondence often including nonbusiness letters can be of importance in identifying the role played by the firm in the community, the industry and in civic, charitable and political affairs. All executive speeches and company publications should be kept, including those like house organs designed for distribution internal to the firm. Samples of all advertisements for the agency and newspaper and magazine clippings giving the agency publicity should be kept. All testimony before legislative and judicial bodies and correspondence regarding legislative and judicial matters deserve retention.

Ephemera are those miscellaneous items designed for short-term use which may be of antiquarian or, less commonly, historical interest at a later date. An example might be the menu and invitation or head table list for an anniversary banquet. In point of fact, much of what is produced by an agency is ephemeral in nature, including the very ads that are its reason for being. It has been said that television and radio advertising is the most ephemeral of “products” in that so little of it is kept for future historians to examine. In contrast to print media, whose advertisements are inadvertently kept by libraries saving editorial content, there is little or no systematic retention of tapes of TV and radio advertisements except for outstanding prize winners. At the least, the archives should keep the kind of sample reels used by the agency in making presentations. Records for a specific client ought to also include samples of the ads produced for electronic media.

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In general, librarians and historians alike need frequent reminder that not all important information gets written on paper, and that much of value can be found in other forms. Sometimes these alternative forms are obvious, like sample ads from the electronic media, and at other times less so, like the value in having a dictation record of an executive whose personality is manifest in his speech mannerisms. Photographs often have a richness of information no written documents can duplicate in showing the nature of physical facilities, or people at work, or the character of events and celebrations. A word of caution is appropriate here. Annotate as carefully as possible the content of non-print media. There is little more frustrating than finding old photographs and not being able to identify the contents. Remember that non-print materials do not automatically include identification of the author, date, and subject as do most written documents.

Conditions of Access

One of the frequently sensitive areas of archives management is the matter of who will get access to the records accumulated, under what conditions and with what kind of freedom to quote. This sensitivity usually springs from fears of both competitive and personal exposure. While the fear of criticism is certainly understandable, and the desire to protect the client firm’s interests is honorable, the associated fears and reservations are typically greatly overstated. While there is validity in the felt need for discretion and propriety, a couple of observations ought to reduce the anxieties of management. The first observation is that the world of marketing and advertising is a rapidly changing one, with names, faces and ideas all in rapid transition. What might have been competitive intelligence yesterday would only be misleading today. In a rapidly changing world materials become rapidly dated and the risks of competitive exposure decline quickly with the passage of time. The fears of personal exposure are less easily put aside for the experience of business historians, and the author’s experience with executives in the advertising industry is that business leaders seem intent on portraying themselves as flawless paragons of virtue despite the obvious fact that such a self-portrait is as inhuman as it is incredible. Fragile indeed is the ego of the man who cannot admit to his own past, and fragile indeed is the self-respect of the firm that cannot admit its own history, even if that history by chance includes a skeleton or two in a long-locked closet.

Unless these kinds of timidities are put aside, they can undermine the value of the whole archival effort. Unless a comprehensive, unexpurgated set of records are kept, there is a real possibility of serious misinterpretation. Even more serious, if records are obviously “edited” and access to them is severely restricted, their credibility falls and all users will treat even the valid information with unnecessary suspicion.

The problem, therefore, is to respect the honorable intent and the personal sensitivities of individuals without destroying the value in the records or the records themselves. There are basically three means of accomplishing this: by controlling who can gain access to the records, by controlling what records may be accessed, and by controlling the ability to quote or otherwise publicize the information obtained from the records. In general it is advisable to adopt a liberal access policy employing restrictions only where they can be defended as necessary. A conservative policy of highly restricted access with the burden of proof of necessary usage on the user is inoperational, since users cannot attest to the value of information whose existence is unknown to them. The conservative policy becomes, therefore, tantamount to locking the records in the safe.

It is clear that an archive cannot function like a public library and that access to the records depends on some demonstration of a potential user’s purpose and “need to know,” and upon some assurance that the materials will be handled with the respect they deserve for their fragility, organization and general historical value. The types of individuals most likely to
have valid accession privileges are members of the firm, clients, academic scholars with the credentials of a university association, and some journalists—those with the authorization of a senior executive.

It is also possible to restrict access to information on the basis of what kinds of information are available to what kinds of users. Clients, for example, would probably be restricted to records pertaining to their own account only. Members of the firm might be restricted to information depending upon their function and status in the organization. Operationally, however, complex restrictions of access rules become difficult to administer. One method of structuring this complexity is to ape the military model of levels of secrecy and levels of security clearance, but this method is not recommended since it is cumbersome and defensive in tone. A simpler method uses time as its major criterion variable, with materials of varying sensitivities becoming accessible either immediately or 5, 10, or 20 years from their date of acquisition. In some cases accession may await the death of the author or the termination of the relationship with a client, but the simplicity of the system lies in the fact that material is either open or closed, and the decision need be made only once, at the moment of acquisition. Often this type of decision is written into the acquisition agreement.

The last control is on the permission to quote or otherwise publicize information obtained from corporate libraries or archives. In some ways this is the weakest control in that it cannot offer a foolproof guarantee against misuse but can only threaten the abuser with legal action. Terms and conditions of usage of the information can be written into a “request for access” which when signed by both the user and the firm becomes a contract whose violation can be easily prosecuted. The kind of terms most likely to arise would be of the following nature: an agreement not to cite clients by name in reference to activities within the last decade or an agreement not to cite specific data but only descriptions of research methods employed.

Summary and Conclusions

Advertising plays a vital role in our society, and our evolution as a society has been strongly influenced by the existence and nature of advertising. The men and firms in the industry deserve and will inevitably obtain some recognition for the exercise of their responsibilities. Whether or not that recognition is a valid one and a source of pride for all of those within the industry depends almost entirely on the extent to which the marketing and advertising librarians have the foresight to save materials of historical interest. The apathetic or shortsighted custodian of library materials may cavalierly discard important materials in order to make room for more current material, even if that material is little used. On the other hand, the librarian who has the long-term interests of the firm at heart will conscientiously institute a retentions policy to guarantee a place for the firm in the history of the twentieth century as it gets written. In the long run doing so may be the most significant thing the business librarian can do for the firm and the accomplishment which is most remembered and recognized. It may take some convincing to get management to see the value of archival retentions, but the value far exceeds the associated costs, and the librarian who successfully institutes an archival policy will be doing the firm and society a great service.

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5. For more on the need for research into the history of advertising, see Pollay, Richard W. / Wanted: Contributions to the History of Advertising. Journal of Advertising Research (in press); and Pollay, Richard W. / ‘‘The Importance, and the Problems, of


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