

Advertising in the 1920s

by Bob Batchelor

During the 1920s, sophisticated salespeople, graphic designers, and copywriters bombarded Americans with attractive, persuasive advertising campaigns. Modern advertising sought to convince consumers that the key to increased status, health, happiness, wealth, and beauty existed in the mass-produced goods available in department stores, chain stores, and mail-order catalogs. In prior decades, Americans had tended to define themselves at least in part based on factors such as race, ethnicity, region, religion, and politics. During the 1920s, however, Americans increasingly defined themselves through the houses, cars, clothes, and other goods and services they purchased.

Materialism: The Early Years

Most Americans not only had more money during the 1920s than they had in previous decades, but they also increasingly equated personal success with material goods—and modern advertising fueled this new attitude. Billboards, newspapers, magazines, and radio commercials touted the virtues of their various advertisers' products, and companies poured enormous sums of money into advertising. Collectively, American companies spent around \$700 million on advertising in 1914, but by 1929 that figure ballooned to nearly \$3 billion. Advertisers attempted to convince consumers that choosing their product instead of one sold by a competitor would enhance their health, safety, beauty, even the quality of their lives. Companies quickly found that advertising paid. For example, after an extensive advertising campaign, the American Tobacco Company, the manufacturers of Lucky Strike cigarettes, saw its earnings swell from \$12 million in 1926 to \$40 million in 1930.

Modern advertising flourished during the decade. Many 1920s ads created associations between a product and such desirable traits as youthfulness, attractiveness, intelligence, and popularity. These ads encouraged Americans to buy newly developed or "improved" items that they had never before considered necessary. Companies developed persuasive advertising campaigns that taught consumers regularly to purchase brand-name, often nonessential products.

You Are What You Buy

As late as the early 1920s, some print advertisements still functioned largely as informative declarations of a particular product's merits. These advertisements sought to create a subtle but positive impression on consumers. As the 1920s progressed, however, copywriters developed advertisements that appealed more overtly to consumers' psychological needs and fears. Increasingly, ads featured people enjoying a product, rather than merely showing the product itself. The language of advertisements became more personal and intimate, essentially encouraging American consumers to judge themselves and each other based not on strength of character but rather on the brand-name products they purchased.

During the 1920s, most advertising professionals were men, but about 10% were women, most of whom worked as assistants or copywriters. Many of the men who joined advertising firms were college graduates, and some had even earned degrees from the new business schools or advertising programs that flourished in the 1920s. Many of these university-trained advertisers gravitated toward the emerging field of market research and learned how

to track consumer reactions to particular products and advertisements using statistics, surveys, and other analytical methods.

Billboards: Advertising on the Road

Eye-catching billboards along roads and highways promoted everything from the newest typewriter to breakfast cereal. And in one of the 20th century's most famous ad campaigns, in 1925, the Burma-Vita Company launched its billboards for Burma-Shave shaving cream. The company's first billboards were erected in Minnesota, but soon Burma-Shave signs were dotting the roadways across the country. What made these small billboards unique was that they were multiple signs designed to be read in succession by passing motorists. For example, a 1929 series of Burma-Shave signs read: Every shaver / Now can snore / Six more minutes / Than before / By using / Burma-Shave.

Streetcar ads catered to the industrial laborers who rode the cars back and forth to work, while neon signs, first introduced in 1923, provided a modern, high-tech look that made it easier to advertise products at night. In addition, department stores began hiring professional window dressers to present merchandise in appealing and creative ways. And comic strip characters hawked dolls and toys in the pages of the "funny papers."

Small-scale advertising also continued, as hired boys walked the streets of cities and towns wearing sandwich boards to promote a restaurant's lunch special or a department store's big sale. Giant corporations sponsored early "commercials" that ran in motion picture theaters before feature presentations. Even architecture itself became a form of advertising, as roadside restaurants developed unique architectural designs to catch the attention of passing motorists. A coffee shop in the shape of an enormous coffee pot or an ice cream stand built to resemble a giant milk bottle was sure to attract customers.

Striking Gold: Magazine and Newspaper Ads

The rapidly increasing circulation of the larger national magazines and newspapers provided retailers with the chance to advertise their brand-name products coast-to-coast. The most popular and powerful national print advertising venues during the 1920s were mass-circulation magazines, which, by the end of the decade, collectively sold more than 200 million copies a year. Magazine publishers quickly realized that profits lay not in subscriptions or newsstand revenues, but in the sale of valuable advertising space. *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Collier's Weekly*, *Life*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Scribner's* all sold for about one-fourth to one-fifth the actual cost of printing them, yet their publishers raked in enormous profits from their many advertisers. In 1917, for example, *The Saturday Evening Post's* circulation was just under 1.9 million and generated advertising revenues of about \$16 million. By 1928, circulation had risen by about 50% (to about 2.8 million), but advertising revenues had increased 300% (to more than \$48 million). Women's magazines, including publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *McCall's*, earned more than \$75 million in advertising revenues in 1928.

As advertisers strove to distinguish their brand-name products from those of their competitors, print advertisements in magazines became more eye-catching and colorful. As late as 1924, more than three-quarters of the ads in most popular magazines were still printed solely in black-and-white; however, during the mid-1920s, the production of color

advertisements rose significantly. The Coca-Cola Company, for example, ran four-color magazine ads and billboard posters, employing slogans such as "Enjoy Thirst" and "Refreshment Time." In 1929, Coca-Cola's advertising department created its legendary slogan, "The Pause That Refreshes," which first appeared in a series of advertisements in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Daily newspapers represented another important advertising venue, but newspaper ads tended to be smaller and less elaborate than magazine ads. Nevertheless, newspapers did aid advertisers and retailers by promoting local businesses and sales. Grocery stores were one of the first industries to capitalize on daily newspaper advertisements. In the early 1920s, the Kroger grocery store chain began printing its weekly food prices and special sales in newspapers; by the end of the decade, this practice became widespread in the grocery industry. In fact, by 1929, the manufacturers of drugs, toiletries, food, and beverages spent more money on newspaper ads than did any other industry.

Early Radio: Commercial-Free

At the beginning of the 1920s, the radio industry was still in its infancy. Radio hobbyists listened to crystal sets with earphones, and few had any inkling that this new medium would soon become such a powerful force. As broadcast signals reached farther and farther, and radio's popularity soared, the public first believed that the airwaves were a public trust that should be kept free from commercial sponsorship. This was not the case for long. In 1922, a real-estate corporation became the first paid radio sponsor on WEAF, New York, signaling the advent of commercial radio advertising. As the new medium of radio became more popular, companies increasingly broadcast their commercial messages over the nation's airwaves.

Initially, the commercial radio industry remained wary of alienating listeners who might find on-air advertisements intrusive and annoying. In turn, the magazine industry, which considered radio advertising unwelcome competition, warned against cluttering the airwaves with unwanted commercial messages. Critics of radio advertising argued that listeners would directly support their favorite stations, and thus the stations themselves would need no advertising revenue. However, few radio listeners wanted to pay for a service currently provided free of charge.

New Concept: Sponsors

Still, the radio broadcasting industry proceeded cautiously, and for several years prohibited blatant "commercials" that directly offered or described merchandise. Rather, radio program sponsorship attempted to boost the name recognition of participating companies and their products. One common advertising practice was for companies to hire a band, orchestra, or other musical act to perform on a program named after the sponsor and then hope that listeners who enjoyed the show would purchase the company's products. In 1923, for example, the New York chain of Happiness Candy Stores hired two popular recording and vaudeville stars, Billy Jones and Ernest Hare, to team up on radio. Jones and Hare sang songs and told stories during their half-hour music-and-comedy program called *The Happiness Boys*, and in doing so promoted Happiness candy.

Beginning in 1923, the A&P chain of grocery stores sponsored *The A&P Gypsies*, which featured a band that played distinctive and recognizable exotic music, first for New York

listeners and then, after 1927, for nationwide audiences on the NBC network. By the mid-1920s, the B.F. Goodrich Company was financing *The Goodrich Silvertown Orchestra*, and the Cliquot Club Ginger Ale Company was promoting *The Cliquot Club Eskimos*. The Eskimos evolved into a full-fledged dance orchestra and, as early as 1926, developed what is considered to be the first radio show theme song, "The Cliquot Foxtrot March."

As early as 1923, the National Carbon Company, the manufacturer of Eveready Batteries, began to sponsor the first major radio variety show, *The Eveready Hour*. This hour-long program, which aired on WEAF in New York and featured a mixture of music, news, drama, and comedy, proved an immediate hit with radio audiences. In 1926, the NBC network picked up the show for broadcast on more than 30 stations across the country. Top celebrities such as Will Rogers and D.W. Griffith made guest appearances, and regular cast members toured the nation to promote Eveready products. Between 1927 and 1928, Eveready spent \$400,000 on the program, with pleasing results: its battery sales skyrocketed.

Radio Discovers Women

Radio advertisers quickly realized that women made up the largest segment of the listening audience. Thus, radio advertisers soon devised strategies to appeal specifically to female consumers. The first women's radio programs, sponsored by companies that produced items commonly purchased by homemakers, were largely instructional in nature. Daytime programs about cooking and sewing offered suggestions about incorporating a specific brand of food into one's menu planning or about using a particular company's clothing patterns to sew the latest fashions. These programs frequently touted the reliable advice of their "experts," who taught ordinary women how better to shop, keep house, entertain company, and generally care for their families.

By the late 1920s, women listeners regularly tuned in to hear their favorite experts give advice about homemaking. On the NBC network, a woman portraying the fictional Betty Crocker had her own radio cooking show, during which she lauded the foodstuffs produced by her "inventor"—the Washburn-Crosby Company (later General Mills). "Aunt Sammy," another fictional radio figure, offered opinions on everything from how to clean linoleum to how to cook a meatloaf. Her popular program, *The Housekeeper's Half-Hour* (later titled simply *Aunt Sammy*), was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Rather than promote particular brand-name products, Aunt Sammy passed along helpful hints and general information about nutrition, cooking, and housekeeping.

Ida Bailey Allen, a genuine dietician and cooking instructor, attracted a wide audience of American housewives with *The National Radio Home-Makers' Club* program, during which she dispensed wisdom on nutrition, menus, and beauty. Unlike most other 1920s radio programs, which were supported by a single commercial sponsor, Allen's show was underwritten by several smaller companies, each of which funded only a portion of her entire program—one of radio's first examples of "spot advertisements."

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1920s Advertisers – *Missionaries of Modernity*

Advertisers	Consumers
modernity, mechanized, based on routine, efficient, impersonal, emphasis on buying something new and to show off how modern you were	Victorian, personal, family, often agrarian, independent, based on the work ethic and savings – you don't just buy to be new, but rather save to buy something useful

How do you resolve these differences?

- The formula: use the old values to teach the new values – stimulate demand.

How did advertising help influence the creation of a national culture during the 1920s?

Which of the dynamics of culture, listed below, do you think were affected by it? Circle or highlight those as we discuss this question as a class.	
Dynamics of Culture	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Styles of dress • Ways of greeting people • Beliefs about hospitality • Importance of time • Paintings • Values • Literature • Beliefs about child raising • Attitudes about personal space/privacy • Beliefs about the responsibilities of children and teens • Gestures to show you understand what has been told to you • Holiday customs • Music • Dancing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrations • Concept of fairness • Nature of friendship • Ideas about clothing • Foods • Greetings • Facial expressions and hand gestures • Concept of self • Work ethic • Religious beliefs • Religious rituals • Concept of beauty • Rules of polite behavior • Attitude toward age • The role of family • General worldview

Advertising in the 1920s – Jigsaw Activity

Materialism: The Early Years – How did advertisers go about affecting the attitudes of people toward the products they were promoting?

You Are What You Buy – How did the strategy of advertisers change over the 1920s?

Billboards: Advertising on the Road – List four (or more) new ways that advertisers began getting their messages across to the public during the 1920s.

Striking Gold: Magazine and Newspaper Ads – What key advantage did advertisers gain by purchasing advertising space in magazines? How did advertising impact the magazine and newspaper industry?

Early Radio: Commercial-Free – How did advertising impact the budding radio industry – even against the protest of others?

New Concept: Sponsors – What was the early approach to advertising on the radio, and why did advertisers choose to work with this format?

Radio Discovers Women – How did radio programming change once broadcasters began taking advantage of women as a large segment of their audience?