Research purpose
By the mid-nineteenth-century, the British merchant marine ‘ruled the waves’ – a position which continued to the First World War. In 1913, UK shipping companies still owned 42.4 per cent of global tonnage. But by 1939 this British-owned tonnage had slumped to 27.9 per cent of world merchant fleets and to a mere 9.6 per cent of the global total by 1975 (Davies, 2010, p. 28). This decline is usually explained through a combination of British industrial decay, failed government policy, entrepreneurial and organisational weakness, and economic nationalism overseas (as well the more recent phenomena of flags of convenience and air transportation) (Davies, 2010; Jamieson, 2003; Clydesdale, 2008). To date, however, no detailed study has been undertaken to establish the manner in which British shipping Lines marketed themselves and the extent to which the approach of these companies to self promotion reflects on the entrepreneurial and organisational weakness which, in part, Jamieson (2003) argues was to lead to their demise.

Fitting into a broader study, in association with Merseyside Maritime Museum (National Museums Liverpool), this paper is designed to test some of these basic ideas by taking a detailed look at posters issued by UK shipping companies in the period c.1840 to c.1970. As posters were generally targeted at capturing the passenger market, the focus of this paper is necessarily on the human cargo side of the Merchant Navy’s operations. Further, whilst, at this stage, the core focus of this project has been on the posters of British shipping Lines, it is possible to offer some comparison to foreign operated Lines. Analysis of these posters is aligned to broader developments within the shipping business, the broader travel and transport sector, as well as developments in poster design throughout this period. Whilst intended to reflect on the nature of these marketing communications in general, there is a more focussed purpose to use this source material to reflect on the development, evolution and decline of the British Lines.

Source material
At the heart of this project is a collection of 456 posters drawn from a number of important collections, viz. Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool, UK; the Mariners’ Museum, Virginia, USA; University of Glasgow Archives and Business Records Centre, UK; the P&O Heritage Collection online; and other ancillary collections. In the first instance, this body of source material has been interrogated using a system of visual content analysis in an effort to render a sensible and cohesive reading of these disparate visual representations and thereby identify common themes and trends. This has been complemented with reference to the archives of the various shipping Lines held by the aforementioned archives as well as the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK. Whilst these materials have been scant, and frequently do not provide a detailed insight into the machinations whereby marketing campaigns were devised, they do offer some insight and an additional layer of analysis. Further, contemporary trade press relating specifically to poster design and “art in industry” have also been considered to provide a view on how “experts” regarded these posters at the time, and particularly in relation to broader trends in poster design.

These marketing activities have then been considered alongside current thinking around the effective design of marketing and advertising communications that questions the efficacy of the approach taken and, thereby, a likely suggestion as to the effectiveness of these communications.
Discussion

The visual content analysis reveals that throughout the time period spanned by the sample, the most commonly recurring attribute featured in these posters is the “effectiveness” of the respective Line. This is rendered in terms of an image suggesting a sense of modernity, speed and safety: in essence it is the ship/product that is placed at the heart of these messages as opposed to anything more ethereal, creative or imaginative. Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that this was the exclusive approach of all these shipping Lines all of the time, this survey reveals that in 63 per cent of all executions, it is the image of the ship that predominates. Further, and perhaps more significantly, it was this aspect that stimulated most criticism from informed opinion at the time. An outmoded marketing message is presented, across all time, that fails to ‘de-commodify objects’ in contrast to MacRury’s (2009) understanding of the fundamental objective of advertising. Where an image of the ship is allowed to dominate the image the proposition is weak and the marketing equivocal given that a clear brand identity, where ‘a brand is simply a story attached to a manufactured object’ (Twitchell, 2004, p. 484), is not established. This, of course, has further implications when it comes to differentiating between brands given that, for the most part, to the untrained eye of the average consumer, all ships appear to be much alike.

In effect, the marketing of these shipping Lines generally remains stuck in a nineteenth-century idea of the basic sales proposition which had previously required them to focus on, and emphasise the safety and stability of their vessels in order to overcome the concerns of early maritime travellers. This was frequently conveyed by stating the displacement of the vessel featured on the posters, a practice which persisted well into the twentieth-century. Visually this was rendered by displaying the magnificence and magnitude of these ships with posters throughout the period covered being dominated by a picture of a ship, frequently spilling outside of the frame of the poster. The design of these posters is effectively weighed down by the strictures of denotation rather than embracing the better educated consumer who might be left to their devices in establishing meaning and an effective sales message via connotation. This further runs contrary to the early development of poster design when it was acknowledged in the late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century that it was necessary for posters to grab the attention of passers-by in an increasingly crowded environment and engage them in the message.

This tended towards the more abstract and symbolic, championed in the work of the Beggarstaffs (James Pryde and William Nicholson) as they simplified their designs, leaving it to the imagination of the viewer to fill in the details (Lewis, 2004, p. 61). This was then extended by the Symbolist movement, in various guises from 1900 through to c.1938, which similarly drew on iconography in order to render, enhance and suggest meaning, and also Cubism, best found in the UK in the work of E. McKnight Kauffer in the interwar period (Barnicoat, 1972, pp. 48–76). Poster designs borrowing heavily from such influences abandoned the rules of traditional pictorial composition and instead relied on allegory and symbols to create their own reality. The crucial feature here is the notion that meaning in effective posters should be less, not more, obvious: the viewer is required to work-out the meaning and they thereby become involved in the message and invest something of themselves in the message. These shipping posters simply failed to keep pace with these developments. Contrary to Davidson’s formula for successful advertising, these shipping Lines based their images on,

1. Product not brand;
2. Product specification, not lifestyle end-benefit;
3. Literal in-put, not lateral take-out (1992, 10)

The shipping companies surveyed simply failed to embrace shifts in consumer culture from the beginning of the nineteenth-century where those more accomplished practitioners stopped rationalizing and started dreaming (Campbell, 1989). Instead they remained wedded to an outmoded approach to marketing that concentrated on the literal rather than the symbolic (Lannon and Cooper, 1983). This is not an anachronism, or a shortcoming in trying to apply modern thinking and understanding out of historical context, these failings were acknowledged at the time where posters from other sectors were praised for being more creative in their poster design. Hence, Commercial Art bemoaned the lack of creativity and colour in shipping posters in general and asked, ‘Is it essential that a steamship company’s poster must have a ship?’ (Vol. 2, No. 16, Feb. 1924, p. 380).

This paper suggests that this was, in part, symptomatic of the nature of the shipping business, as alluded to above, and the arrangement of those companies. Company archives give some insight into
the rather staid thinking of these companies, a sense of propriety that restricted innovation and failed to stand up to fierce competition in the latter stages, and a self-confidence that verged on arrogance. There are suggestions here of Levitt’s idea of ‘product provincialism’ as a factor of the malaise of ‘marketing myopia’. These shipping Lines seemed to be firmly wedded to the idea that their business was ships, not transportation, ‘The industry has its eyes so firmly on its specific product that it does not see how it is being made obsolete’ (Levitt, 1975 [1960], p. 39). The archives of British India Line reveal this fascination with their own vessels, and as newly commissioned ships near completion, there is a flurry within the marketing department to secure the services of a reputable marine artist to render an impression of this latest addition in the first instance as a worthwhile piece of art for its own sake but subsequently to be used as a poster (BIS/36/12, 23 March 1949, p. 2). Such an attitude seems to support more recent research regarding where control of corporate brand image resides: wholly with the company or, in part at least, in the hands of consumers and other stakeholders (Rindell and Strandvick, 2010). There is every suggestion that these companies were committed to the conviction that it was they who dictated and controlled their brand image according with Keller’s (2008) ideas that companies take precedence over consumers. As such, the corporate brand image is seen as a static end-state (Stern et al. 2001), a situation clearly borne out by a review of these posters over this long period which reveals very little innovation or shift from the basic recurring sales proposition. These communications are one-way, a series of positioning statements which do not necessarily coincide with the shifting reality of the consumers, or their hopes and desires, best described by Pitt et al. (2006) as closed brands.

References


Commercial Art, Vol. 2 No. 16, Feb. 1924.


