

Marketer and Mentor: Dorothy Dignam's Support for Careers for Women in Advertising: 1920-1950

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Abstract:

Purpose - The research purpose of this article is to illuminate how ad woman Dorothy Dignam provided mentorship to women entering advertising between 1920 and 1949. Dignam's career is an important one because her writing educated other women who sought to become advertising specialists. Her work provided them with practical advice on educating themselves as copywriters, honing advertising skills, finding a job, and surviving and thriving in a male dominated industry. In essence, Dignam provided mentorship for a number of women entering advertising.

Design/methodology/approach - Archival sources and selected publications provide the material that will help to trace a history of Dignam's mentorship activities. Such sources include material from the Advertising Women of New York Collection and the Dorothy Dignam papers at Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe; the Women's Advertising Club of Chicago papers from University of Illinois at Chicago; and chapters in books contributed by Dignam.

Findings - Dorothy Dignam's contribution to mentoring women in advertising has been overlooked. Not only was Dignam a copywriter, marketer, and advertising educator in her own right, she enabled other young women to aspire to work in advertising and, in a variety of venues, from published articles and chapters to presentations and talks, advised them on how they could build successful careers.

Key Words - Dorothy Dignam; Advertising Women of New York; Women's Advertising Club of Chicago; Mentor; feminist; marketer; educator.

Paper Type - Extended abstract

Background:

The current literature about women in advertising in history is scarce, and source material that elaborates on the contributions of Dorothy Dignam is even more scarce. Dignam is not remembered for her career as an ad woman, a women's club supporter, or a market researcher. In fact, she does not seem to be remembered at all. A survey of classic advertising histories by historians such as Pope (1983); Lears (1994); and Applegate (1994) turns up very little although Dignam appears briefly in other work. For example, Fox (1997) notes, "Visible advertising feminists, such as Dorothy Dignam of Ayer, tended to work in less visible jobs" (p. 291), but there is no suggestion of why he believes that she is a feminist or why it might be important. Marchand (1985) discusses Dignam's salary range and describes her habit of working in department and dime stores to stay in touch with consuming women (34, 74). Sivulka (2008) devotes more space to Dignam, describing in some detail Dignam's contributions to Ford Motor Company's advertising campaigns. While Dignam's papers are mentioned as a source in Zuckerman and Carsky (1990), her career is not investigated either there or in a recent volume of the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* (2013) devoted exclusively to historical women in advertising and marketing.

Paper Description:

This paper is developed in three parts to achieve its goal of creating a narrative that explains how Dignam mentored advertising women. It describes Dignam's contributions to the advertising industry, plots her career development, and illustrates her involvement with women's advertising clubs, such as the Women's Advertising Club of Chicago and the Advertising Women of New York. The paper

demonstrates how she provided support and pragmatic advice to other women in advertising and those seeking to enter the advertising industry.

Drawing on the Dignam Papers collection, this paper first briefly charts Dignam's contributions to the advertising industry by starting with her initial ventures in advertising in Chicago, and exploring some of her earliest proposals for advertising. Her work in Chicago led to her marketing research trip abroad, which was supported by several trade journals. Her trip abroad as a market researcher gave her various opportunities when she came back to the States, including speaking engagements. This section will be devoted to presenting evident that shows how Dignam worked to develop professional credibility in her industry and demonstrates her ability to present her research authoritatively. In her year abroad, Dignam was a prolific professional writer and as much as she seems to have insisted that "Women Know Women" (as one of her articles is entitled), she wrote for industry journals such as *Gas Age Record*, *Electric Traction and Bus Journal*, and *Electrical Manufacturing*. Articles in these journals advised their audiences working in these professions, presumably male, how to market their products. Her influence in trade journals suggests that Dignam not only knew women, but also knew marketing, and her competence helped her gain credibility.

The second section shows Dignam's role in and her support of advertising women's clubs to demonstrate that from the outset of her career, Dignam was a staunch supporter of helping women start careers in advertising. It will also briefly describe the educational units for which she was responsible for delivering in the advertising courses offered through the Philadelphia Club of Advertising Women. Dignam's contributions as the club historian and biographer of the Advertising Women of New York are also explored. In this role, she gathered and maintained the materials that provide a history of the AWNY club, and kept records that seemed designed to ensure that the club and its members would be remembered as a professional force that both invigorated advertising and supported women's careers.

In a 1940 document, "Conventions: Biographer's Statement" (AWNY) Dignam summarizes the AWNY club's achievements over the years from 1912-1940. In the document, she states that women's participation in advertising *increases* women's participation and their acceptance in the industry: "Going to conventions, mingling, making speeches, seeing new cities, meeting new people did a great deal for the development of advertising women." She also notes that these women "advanced themselves in the business world by being seen at and taking part in the business sessions," actions that she herself performed from the earliest days of her career.

The third section of the paper will focus on articles that Dignam wrote that offer advice to women who desired to work in the advertising industry. Dignam sometimes presented conventionally sexist advice to women, such as when she passes on the counsel of a guest instructor in an advertising course of 1946: "Looking for a job should begin with a good look at yourself" (McBride, 1948, p. 215). Dignam volunteers that the "first thing men notice about [women] is [their] carriage, particularly how [they] hold [their] heads" and, in quoting the guest lecturer, advises that it does not take "just brains" but women need "to make a pleasing impression" (215). The advice nonetheless is valuable because women needed to prove their professional competence and Dignam recognized that appearance was a way to communicate that competence.

In addition to articles authored by Dignam and published in books and periodicals, the Dignam Papers and the AWNY Collection offers the texts of several speeches that Dignam gave in a variety of venues. The articles and speeches span several decades from the 1920s until 1949. Dignam ensured her articles and speeches would be preserved for posterity, thus demonstrating self-awareness about her role as a woman in advertising and her role as a mentor.

Conclusion:

This paper's purpose is to demonstrate how Dignam's work and career itself provided mentorship for women seeking careers in advertising. However, as much as her career models what a successful ad woman's should look like, the focus of her work seems to be in an effort to mentor women into advertising careers. By calling on primary historical documents, the paper describes a woman's career and its arc of influence arguing that Dignam be remembered as an influential mentor to other women in the advertising industry.

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