

Ad Agency Lost: The Rediscovery of Compton Advertising

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The past quarter century has seen Madison Avenue transformed by domestic and international mergers and acquisitions. Venerable agencies that for decades led the industry and defined its practices—Backer & Spielvogel, Ted Bates, Benton & Bowles, Doyle Dane Bernbach, and Needham Harper & Steers to name a few—were “slapped together into new amalgamations” (O’Leary & Farrell 1998). In the process, many agencies were diluted or submerged. Others, like Compton Advertising, vanished entirely. This paper seeks to resurrect Compton Advertising and tell the story of this lost agency. It is based on an extensive review of secondary sources, primarily business and trade periodicals, accessed through library databases and Internet research. The next phase of the study will employ primary source materials to better understand the inner workings of the agency and its client relationships.

Compton Advertising was best known for its more than 60-year association with Procter & Gamble (P&G). The relationship began when the agency was the Blackman Company (Schisgall 1981). Oscar H. Blackman and Frank Hermes founded the Blackman Company in 1908 (Printers’ Ink 1986). In 1922, with J. K. Fraser at the helm, P&G retained Blackman as its first full-service advertising agency to handle its Ivory and Crisco brands (Schisgall 1981).

With radio emerging as a new commercial medium, Fraser encouraged P&G to test radio advertising by recommending “Crisco Cooking Talks” and other, similar homemaker targeted morning programs, where Crisco shortening-based recipes were read. For Ivory soap, Blackman created a newspaper serial cartoon “The Jollyco Family,” about a fictitious family of Ivory devotees and Mrs. Percival Folderol who used another brand (Schisgall 1981). P&G adapted this concept to a new daytime radio format dubbed “soap operas” because of the sponsorship by soap brands. Compton produced other Ivory sponsored radio shows and, later, extended the format to television where Ivory was among the first products advertised.

During the radio advertising experiment, Richard J. Compton, who started with Blackman in 1917, made partner (Printers’ Ink 1986). He was appointed president in 1934 and Compton, Leonard Bush, and Alfred Stanford

bought the Blackman Company in 1935 (Advertising news and notes 1937, Viewpoint 1988). The agency was renamed Compton Advertising, Inc. in 1937 (Advertising news and notes 1937).

Compton’s association with P&G and other demanding packaged goods clients led it to build strengths in marketing and media. Through the 1950s-60s Compton built a merchandising (sales promotion) department, added a publicity subsidiary, co-developed with other agencies a computer-based media planning program, and set up a direct-mail unit (Barton 1955, New service is formed 1956, Rutter 1964, Dougherty 1969). Fifty years after its founding as the Blackman Company, Compton, with billings of \$70,000,000, had 24 clients and 750 employees in six offices (Spielvogel 1958).

The agency’s growth during this time was led by Barton A. Cummings who, after overseeing all work for P&G, was named agency president in 1955 and CEO one year later, a post he held for 15 years (Cummings 1987). Under Cummings’ leadership Compton’s business and international presence expanded. During the 1960s Compton won work from Seagram, Kaiser Jeep (later American Motors), U.S. Steel, General Electric, Johnson & Johnson, and Quaker Oats (Compton, Bates win 1960, Alden 1960, Kaiser Jeep picks 1964, Big steel’s search 1969, Agency billings 1969). Still, P&G remained Compton’s largest client and the consumer product marketer’s “go-to” agency.

In December 1961, P&G moved its top brand, Tide, to Compton which was already handling Gleem, Crisco, Comet, and Ivory (P&G shifts Tide 1961). Although much of Compton’s creative work for P&G was considered mundane “soap-and-suds” advertising, some campaigns were enduring. For example, Compton’s television campaign for Comet featuring actress Jane Withers as “Josephine the Plumber” forged a strong brand identity (Cohen 1994). The campaign ran for twelve years.

To serve P&G and other clients as they expanded globally, Cummings launched Compton’s international expansion. The first acquisition was of S.T. Garland Advertising Service Ltd. of London, a smaller, old-line British shop (Alden 1960). The London agency was renamed Garland-Compton, Ltd. and its facilities expanded to service Compton’s U.S. clients in Great Britain and Europe. Within a few years Compton owned or affiliated

offices were added in Paris, San Juan, Mexico City, and Hong Kong, among others (Dougherty 1966, Dougherty 1968a, Carlson 1965). As the 1960s ended, Compton had 39 offices in 23 countries (Iberia Air Lines 1969). Total billings reached \$175 million in 1968, making Compton the 14th largest agency in the U.S. (Agency billings 1961, Agency billings 1969)

Cummings also positioned Compton as a staunch industry defender and public servant. During his tenure Compton unveiled a campaign to combat anti-advertising attitudes among college students and developed a controversial PSA effort that sought to improve the public's understanding of America's economic system (Dougherty 1968b, Dougherty 1975). Most notably, the agency created for the Ad Council the ground-breaking "Why do you think they call it dope?" anti-drug abuse public service campaign (Dougherty 1970).

Cummings was succeeded by O. Milton Gossett who climbed the creative ranks at Compton, becoming president in 1968, CEO in 1975 and chairman in 1977 (Dougherty 1968c, Cummings 1985). Gossett was intent on maintaining Compton's reputation as a marketing agency while earning greater respect for its creative work. The agency had somehow managed to emerge from the 1960s creative revolution without earning the label "creative agency." However, Gossett would soon encounter the unorthodox business practices of Charles and Maurice Saatchi and larger corporate challenges would take precedence.

In 1975, Ken Gill, a Garland-Compton partner, and the Saatchis entered negotiations to merge the smaller Saatchi & Saatchi Co. (S&S) with Garland-Compton (Fallon 1989). Both sides saw value in the merger: S&S was a creative hot-shop, but lacked marketing skills. Garland-Compton had the marketing expertise S&S sought, but lacked a creative edge. Technically Compton bought S&S, but in reality it was a "reverse" takeover by S&S. In the end, the agency was named Saatchi & Saatchi Garland Compton (Fallon 1989). The merger was not considered important in the United States where the Saatchi name was not yet widely known.

By 1977, the Saatchis were approaching New York agencies in the hopes of buying an established international network (Fallon 1989). Gossett became concerned this would cause conflicts with P&G, both Compton's and S&S Garland Compton's biggest account. Gossett considered defensive options and planned a further expansion of Compton.

Under Gossett's direction, Compton added direct marketing and retail advertising units and won new accounts from Cunard Lines, Beech Nut, PepsiCo, Revlon and IBM (Dougherty 1976a, Dougherty 1976b). To keep up with its clients, Compton also expanded to Spain, Greece, Portugal, Denmark, Venezuela, Iran, and Kuwait (Compton returns to acquisition 1978). Major domestic acquisitions included Rumrill-Hoyt and Klemtner

Advertising, a healthcare agency (Rumrill jilts one suitor 1978, Kanner 1979). Despite its position as 15th largest agency worldwide, Compton still had a sleepy image. New creative talent with experience beyond packaged goods was hired to upgrade its work (Marshall 1980).

In 1981 Compton was growing fast. Billings were expected to reach \$1 billion in 1982 and creating exciting advertising was a priority (Dougherty 1981c). The agency was promoting itself as "having more No. 1 brands and No. 1 clients" than any other member of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (Dougherty 1981a). Compton's association with P&G, in particular its Crisco, Duncan Heinz, Tide, Cascade, Top Job, Comet and Ivory soap brands, made this claim possible (Alter 1982).

Compton bought another agency in London, KMP Partnership, to counter balance growing pressure to merge from S&S (Dougherty 1981b). Just after closing the KMP deal, S&S made a formal offer for Compton (Fallon 1989). Gossett resisted but by March 1982 the Saatchis had worn him down and bought the international advertising network they had sought. S&S purchased Compton Advertising, ranked 16th in worldwide billings, for \$29.2 million in cash plus performance-based incentive payments to Compton executives. It was the largest ad agency merger to date, with combined billings of \$1.3 billion, and it rocketed S&S to seventh in worldwide billings from twenty-fifth (Moving up 1982).

Compton retained its name, but not for long. To erase its persistent image as a boring soap-and-suds shop, its name was subsumed under the parental moniker in 1984, becoming Saatchi & Saatchi Compton (Marshall 1984). The history books closed completely on Compton Advertising in 1988, when the name became simply Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising (Viewpoint 1988).

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