Finding the Few: The History of United States Marine Corps Advertising Message

Michael Zeliff, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

Over the past 231 years, the United States Marine Corps has been extremely successful on the field of battle. Few have drawn the link between the success of the Marine Corps in war, to the success of Marine Corps recruiting, to the success and consistency of Marine Corps advertising. This is the story of the origin and consistency of the Marine Corps’ message displayed in that timeless advertising.

A FEW GOOD MEN

Most advertisers will agree that there have been significant changes in the wants and needs of America’s youth over the past two hundred years. Most will also agree that the media landscape of today has changed dramatically over the same period of time. Regardless of changes in the target and shifts in the environment, the advertising message of the United States Marine Corps has changed little in the organization’s 231-year history. This is the story of the history of the Marine Corps’ advertising message, its unique offering and its timeless relevance.

On March 20th 1779 Marine Captain William Jones posted the first recorded advertisement for the Marine Corps. The message was simple and clear: a few good Men were wanted to make up the ships’ company of Marines on board the Continental Ship Providence. Few additional details were provided. No mention was made of compensation; and interested individuals were directed to report to the ship for more information.

Ironically, this challenge to the few came right after Edmund Burke wrote in his Thoughts on the Cause of Present Discontents (1770): “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” Also during this time Edmund Burke was attributed with the quote “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

The Marine Corps remained a relatively small organization during the first one hundred years of its existence and never grew to a strength larger than 3000 men. During this time the message of the Marine Corps remained the same, “A few good men were wanted.” By the end of the 1800s the Marine Corps legend had been written by the deeds of Marines in battle, defending ships on the high seas and in raids on foreign shores. The newsmen of the day carried the story, the myth of the Corps grew and young men who wanted to serve with this elite fighting unit found their way to the small number of centralized recruiting offices.

In the late 1800’s as the nation expanded west and the concentration of young fighting-age men waned, Marine officials dispatched officers to major mid-west cities to hold information sessions and set up temporary recruiting stations. As these recruiting officers established bases, they posted notices around town and advertisements in local papers. An advertisement posted in the Chicago Tribune dated 14 May 1866 simply stated that First Lieutenant L.H. Cochrane was detailed from headquarters Washington to
establish a Marine induction station and invited able-bodied men to apply.

ILLUSTRATION 2
1891 MARINE CORPS ADVERTISMENT

Around the turn of the century the Marine Corps began to commission professional illustrators to assist in the recruiting effort. The resulting solicitation again was for able-bodied Men of good character. The images were of Marines in dress and field uniforms. From the beginning the Marine Corps realized the public value of the dress uniform and placed recruiters in formal garb to recruit, but this was the first printed image of Marines in uniform used for advertising. At the outbreak of World War I it was obvious that all the services would grow and needed additional manpower. Several popular illustrators were commissioned and a series of posters were produced to deliver the message of the Corps. These poster campaigns came quickly between 1915 and 1917. There were several complementary themes: “First in the Fight,” “Always Faithful,” “Soldiers of the Sea,” “Join Me,” “Let’s Go,” and “If you want to fight! – Joint the Marines,” were all introduced as slogans. These themes all built on the need for good men of character with an additional acknowledgment of war and a presentation of a personal challenge.

Between World War I and World War II few advertisements were run but at the outbreak of World War II a concerted effort was made to reestablish the message of the Marine Corps in print. Again popular themes focused on a youthful challenge “Want Action – Joint the U.S. Marine Corps,” “Always advance with the U.S. Marines,” and “Enlist Now with the U.S. Marines.” Also during this period the first Marine Officer advertisements appeared and the first female Marine advertisements were published. For officers, “College Men” were wanted and women were asked to “Free a Marine to Fight.” As World War II continued on, messages shifted to “Let’s go Get’em” and “Ready.”

The decades after World War II saw the Marine Corps cut its manpower significantly, and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam saw little external advertising.

ILLUSTRATION 3
1973 MARINE CORPS ADVERTISMENT

In 1973 the country abolished the national draft and the Marine Corps realized the need for professional advertising to fill the ranks. The first public service
announcement produced for television reiterated the legendary call to action, “The Marine Corps was looking for a few good men.” The traditional message worked, young men picked up the challenge and the Corps filled its ranks.

THE FEW THE PROUD

In 1975 the leadership of the Marine Corps realized that the few good men message failed to acknowledge the growing role that women Marines were playing in the Corps. An adjustment had to made but a message was needed that would not lose the image of a proud and elite organization. Strategists from the advertising agency of J. Walter Thompson suggested “One of the few” and eventually “The Few. The Proud. The Marines.”

ILLUSTRATION 4
1975 MARINE CORPS ADVERTISEMENT

Note: Provided by Marine Corps Recruiting Command

In the early eighties the Marine Corps began a series of explorations where Marines and advertising experts reviewed message strategy and shifts in the market. During these meetings it was suggested that the striking change a young person undergoes at boot camp, from civilian to Marine, was so significant that it should be expressed in advertising. This nuance was called transformation. Over the next three decades several advertisements have been created to tell the Marine Corps story, each in a new way but each has maintained the personal challenge and each has ended with “The Few. The Proud. The Marines.”

Over the years the advertising message of the Corps has changed little. Initial appeals were for “A few good men,” and then for “The Few, The Proud, The Marines.” The Marine Corps has remained as unique and relevant as it has ever been. The Marine Corps and the individual Marine are viewed as the epitome of military virtue, a group of smart, tough warriors who gain strength of mind, body, and character through membership in an elite and proud Corps.

ILLUSTRATION 5
1998 MARINE CORPS ADVERTISEMENT

Note: Provided by Marine Corps Recruiting Command