

Business *In* Society: A look at obituaries of business leaders in the mid-1800s

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Early macromarketing literature outlines the broad and positive social roles entrepreneurs can play, especially during periods of economic development. Business history provides anecdotal examples of successful entrepreneurs taking leadership roles in government, the church, cultural organizations, and local charities. In addition to bringing to the community the benefits of economic growth, successful entrepreneurs have also taken on the mantle of community leader and/or role model. Indeed, many towns, streets and civic buildings carry the names of successful business leaders. These broader social roles follow from not only the social influence of acquired wealth, but also the presumed skills associated with demonstrated business acumen. It is this connection that suggests a fundamental social role for those in business in general and marketing in particular.

Successful entrepreneurs serving as community leaders—what they did and how they did it—were subject to public curiosity. Their personal influence meant that issues of moral character were not separate from issues of community or commerce. For example, in colonial times it was not uncommon for commercial leaders to also serve as the local judiciary for the community. The perception that business leaders were ethical members of the community was important, and reflected in what was said and written about them. This is not to say that all successful entrepreneurs were of high moral character, but rather that there was some expectation that they were.

Obituaries serve as one source of public information on the lives of successful business leaders. The first purpose of this project is to document the varied roles played by these businessmen during a period of economic development in the United States. Using the New York Times Historical Archive, the author first explores a sample of obituaries of business leaders from the early 1850s through the late 1870s. Over 200 obituaries are analyzed relative to each subject's roles within the larger community.

Though seventy-five years after the nation is founded, the American economy in the 1850s was still in an early stage of development. In addition to continued westward expansion, businessmen operating in the mid-1800s in the United States endured two dramatic events: the Panic of 1837 and the Civil War (often referred to at the time as the

"rebellion"). The Panic of 1837 led to devalued land, restricted access to capital, and a six-year depression. The Civil War brought business opportunities for some and business disruptions for others.

The New York Times Historical Archive database contains obituaries of entrepreneurs who built their own firms, as well as those who developed businesses started by others. Often family members were involved. The database contains men almost exclusively as at that time women were generally blocked from leadership positions in business or commerce. While the author knows of some women business executives at the time (e.g., Margaret La Forge at R.H. Macy and Company), there were no business women obituaries in the database between 1850 and 1870.

The second purpose of this project is to document the prevalence of positive character references (i.e., descriptors such as: honest, integrity, etc.) in obituaries for business men and women relative to others in the database. The analysis is conducted using the full New York Times obituary database. This evidence does not lend support for the moral character of these business leaders, but rather the importance of the perception of high moral character.

To the degree that moral character was considered to be important, this research can lead to further work of either an historic or contemporary nature (e.g., To what extent can evidence be found that suggests these business leaders were/are more imbedded in their communities, and were/are actually of high moral character? Has the expectation of high moral character among business leaders changed in a post-industrial, global society?). This analysis serves as a point of departure for future research on business practices, including marketing, and ethics.

Obituaries serve as a valuable database for historians, genealogists and academic researchers. Though obituaries vary according to author, style and time period, all obituary writers produce for public consumption a succinct summary of a person's life. The summary, of course, is for the benefit of family members, acquaintances and the public at large. Obituaries written in the 1800s did not seek to portray the deceased in a balanced way, but rather tended to view the deceased in a very favorable light. Nonetheless, the fact that the obituary writer felt the need to reassure the reader that this successful businessman, active in politics and local charities, was a man of honor and integrity (even if he wasn't) is of interest. Thus, in telling ways obituaries

reveal that which the living contemporaries of the deceased are interested in reading about.

Recent and not so recent discussions of corporate social responsibility in the marketing literature (e.g., California Management Review special issue, fall 2004; proceedings of the AMA conference, winter 1961) and elsewhere demonstrate an enduring interest among academics in the broader social roles played by businessmen and -women. Evidence of unethical business behavior over the last decade has heightened awareness for the potential negative impact business leaders can have on local and national communities. This paper documents these community roles and suggests expectations of high moral character. In doing so, the paper adds one small piece of data to a subject that arguably represents a common thread woven across multiple societies and time periods.
