

The Remains of the Day: A Critical Reflection on Using Ephemera in Historical Research

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The term 'ephemera' refers to a "fragment of social history ... a reflection of the spirit of its time...which is not expected to survive, but which can prove to be very useful in research" (Maurice Rickards cited in Makepeace 1985, p.2). Although definitions of ephemera vary, items typically included under the umbrella term include: advertisements, calling cards, tickets, packaging labels, greeting cards, trade cards, theater programs, menus, invoices, letterheads, billheads, posters, pamphlets, bumperstickers, buttons, banners and underground newspapers (Akeroyd and Benedict 1973; Jumonville 1993; Roylance 1976). What unites these items, and makes them of interest to marketing historians is that many, if not all, were originally produced by marketers for the purpose of communicating a marketing message.

Within the marketing discipline there are a number of excellent resources which discuss appropriate methods for dealing with the kinds of printed records maintained in public and private archives (e.g., Golder 2000; Smith and Lux 1993). However, across a variety of disciplines, there is a growing recognition of the limitations of archives – they reflect the social and political preoccupations of their creators, certain histories are emphasized (e.g., the records of the elite are maintained while those of the average person are often not collected), while other histories, such as gay and lesbian history, are excluded (Booms 1991; Maynard 1991; McIntosh 1998; Schwartz and Cook 2002). There is a need to expand the sources used in historical research beyond the archive or library and beyond the sorts of formal records and documents they maintain. As O'Donnell (1994, p. 106) comments "each kind of record not only contains specific historical information as well as evidence about its creators, but also possesses a form that reveals something unique about the larger history of structured social relations" – including the relations between marketers and their customers (both business and private consumers). There is a need to consider new sources of primary evidence, such as ephemera.

Ephemera helps to provide a complete picture of life at a given point in time or place (Jumonville 1993; Makepeace 1985). Collections of ephemera provide a continuum of research materials, such that researchers need not depend solely on official and media reports of events, but can access promotional, persuasive and

advertising materials intended by their authors to reach and influence their target audience. Ephemera "reflect[s] the growing societal trends of visual awareness and the power of marketing" (Burant 1995, p. 192). For many phenomena, such as consumer protest movements, ephemera may well be the only source of primary evidence available to scholars (Akeroyd and Benedict 1973).

This is not to say that marketing historians don't make use of ephemera and non-print resources. Historians of advertising have made use of ephemera (e.g., Pollay 2001); advertisements, in particular, have figured prominently in the discussion of consumption trends (e.g., Foster Davis 2001) and industry histories (e.g., Solow 2001); and many researchers use photographs and/or images taken from ephemera objects to illustrate their papers (Seaton 1986) or as supplementary evidence (e.g., Petty 2001; Seaton 1986). However, very few examples could be found of ephemera and/or images (e.g., photographs, works of art) being used as primary evidence for documenting marketing history (exceptions include Witkowski 2001, 2003).

Knowing how to locate and use a broad range of source materials, including ephemera, effectively in historical research is important to scholars (Savitt 1980). Yet, a search of the literature revealed that a clear, explicit account of the value to and method for using ephemera and in historical research does not exist. There is a need for methodological guidance on using alternative resources in a reflective, knowledgeable and critical manner. This paper seeks to fill this need by providing methodological guidance on using alternative source materials, created through a synthesis of the literature from related disciplines (visual sociology, e.g. Dowdal and Golden 1989; and archival studies, e.g. Burant 1995, 2002; Schwartz 2000) and experience gained from the author's previous research, which made use of ephemera as primary source material. The paper details what ephemera is, how it can be used in historical research, issues related to its use, and sources of ephemera available to researchers. Examples from research on the Evangeline phenomenon in Nova Scotia illustrate the paper, and reinforce the methodological argument.

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