

Watson and Advertising: Innovator or Journeyman?

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It has always been more or less assumed that Watson had some impact on the nature of American advertising. But what? Introductory Psychology books, which can serve as a rough index of how the discipline is currently treating a topic, vary widely in their treatment of the history of psychology, ranging from none at all, to some. Watson's treatment by them is correspondingly slim. A review of six current texts shows Watson as the originator of behaviorism, but only one mentions advertising calling Watson an "important pioneer in advertising". From the rest, you would assume he finished his career in academia, retired, and died.

Two recent biographical papers take opposing views of Watson and his impact on advertising. David Cohen in his book, J.B. Watson, The Founder of Behaviorism, gives Watson credit for changing the very nature of advertising. Prior to Watson, according to Cohen, advertising was still close to its original purpose which was to inform consumers of product availability. True, it had moved toward promoting one brand over another, but this was a decided minority view, and advertising still dealt with tangibles; something that was soon to change. Cohen argues that Watson began the practice of selling fantasy instead of actual products, and changed dramatically and permanently the course of American advertising.

Deborah Coon, (Not a creature of Reason: The Alleged Impact of Watsonian Behaviorism on Advertising. In Todd and Morris, modern perspective on Watson and classical behaviors.) in her treatment of Watson, argues that Watson's personal impact was much less and that he merely operated at the confluence of several cultural trends: mass markets, electronic communication, relative affluence, and industrial power and efficiency. All of which she claims makes Watson's influence appear more important than it was.

To examine the issue, we have selected 97 magazine ads for products which we know were Watson's accounts. We have followed the ads from well before Watson took over until in some cases well after. We think the ads reveal dramatic change around 1925 when his impact would have first been felt. The products are: Pebecco tooth paste, Ponds cleansing cream, Johnson's baby powder, Maxwell House Coffee, Scott towels, Camel and Chesterfield cigarettes.

By way of summary it can be said that Watson's influence leads to promises of romance, health, freedom

from disease, especially from fictitious diseases, such as acid mouth, preys on middle class anxiety, and introduces "authority" figures to bolster the product claims.

Watson did not invent scientific ads, fictitious diseases, or ads drawing on parental guilt, but he expanded them enormously and turned them into mainstream copy.

Watson also designed an ad campaign to change negative attitudes toward women smoking. Watson can also be blamed for ads touting health benefits from smoking and lack of injury from the same.

Taken altogether then, and viewing all the ads chronologically, we favor Cohen's position over that of Coon. In our opinion Watson did change the very nature of American advertising, dramatically and permanently.