SPECIAL ADDRESS

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1923: WHEN AUTOMOBILE ADVERTISING BECAME MODERN

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ABSTRACT

Despite the passion with which automobile makers typically approached their products during its early years and decades of examples from other consumer industries, the transition to consumer-oriented auto advertisements did not occur until 1923, when a combination of economic and cultural factors occurred. An individual entrepreneur, Edward S. Jordan sparked the transition with his literary affinity for the spirit of the Twenties.

SOAPS AND AUTOMOBILES

A bar of soap and an automobile differ about as much as any two consumer products can. Consequently, advertisements for soaps and cars must differ. But the natures of products and their relationships to their markets are not alone in affecting the marketing process. Looking back to 1923, we can see additional factors that complicate the picture, namely the natures of the firms—corporate or owner-managed—and the persons doing the selling, as well as how all these variables fit into a historical context that encompasses both economic and cultural conditions.

As businesses within the United States operated more and more on the corporate model at the turn of the last century—with multiple layers of managers distancing owners from output—advertising processes became increasingly specialized and professionalized. Some of the great modern advertising campaigns, such as National Biscuit Company’s Uneeda Biscuit campaign whose centennial this conference commemorates, resulted from this specialization and professionalization. As managers and specialists have increasingly intervened between owners and consumers in the ensuing century, marketing has been marked by the mixed blessing of trying to create consumer-oriented messages rather than producer-oriented messages. As I have shown elsewhere (1996, 1998), this movement occurred unevenly across industries, with some, such as the tobacco and processed foods industries leading, and others, most notably the automobile industry, lagging far behind.

By the time that American automobile manufacturers made the transition to consumer-oriented advertising in the 1920s, the advertising profession had essentially developed its modern form and sense of purpose, namely owning the process of creating as well as of placing clients’ advertisements. The language of advertising was in the air, so much so that it reverberated in popular novels, magazine and newspaper articles, and, certainly, in the trade presses of industries spending vast amounts of money promoting their wares. Because the automobile industry’s transition in advertising strategies occurred so late and involved such vast expenditures, it was recorded extensively in debates and discussions in both the trade literatures, as well as in the general press. The tensions that can still mar relationships between corporate decision makers and marketing professionals give those debates a relevance to current marketing issues. From the historian’s perspective, they elucidate remarkably vividly the transition to modern advertising practices in a major consumer industry.

Since the 1870s, marketing soap rewarded lively campaigns that competed for attention with circus and patent medicine promotions. The advertising problem—that is, what advertising needed to do—by then included not only selling soap in quantity, but also selling it in consumer-sized packages. People were
acquainted to buying chunks lopped from storekeepers' generic blocks. How other than lively ads to
induce the public to spend more on industrially-formed and wrapped, branded bars, especially when the brand
names comprised the goods’ major differentials? Even Ivory’s famous “floating” only truly mattered when
mothers tried to find the soap in the murky water of their children’s tubs! “It Floats” was nothing other
than a production error spun into a brilliant marketing slogan. And perhaps nothing sold more bars of soap
before 1900 than the question, “Good Morning! Have you used Pears’ Soap?” The notorious success of this
campaign hinted of the anxieties in cleansing ads yet to come.

A century ago this year, Adolphus Green and Henry McKinney, of the National Biscuit Company
and N. W. Ayer & Son, respectively, made the packaging for Uneeda Biscuit a major feature of the
differentials they offered consumers. Similarly, soap manufacturers, who sometimes complained that
producing soap was easier than selling it, early on resorted to premiums to make their consumer-sized
packages valuable in themselves. But increasingly they also turned to emotions such as fun,
sentimentality, humor, and hyperbole. Then soap advertisers got even more aggressive and began to
exacerbate and exploit two of the defining emotions of the twentieth century, namely, sensuality and
anxiety. In the 1910s, Helen Lansdowne enticed women to buy Woodbury’s Facial Soap so that they
would have “A Skin You Love to Touch.” By 1923, soap advertising in the Saturday Evening Post prodded
emotions with skill, just as did Norman Rockwell on the cover. In the June 23, 1923, issue of Saturday
Evening Post, Palmolive promised to help women “keep that schoolgirl complexion,” while avoiding
“blotches and other disfigurements” (pp. 80-1). And, even more chilling, Lifebuoy soap reminded readers
that germs had by then emerged on the advertising scene like the pod people: invisible, ubiquitous invaders
of otherwise safe and happy childhoods and homes. Men coming home threatened their families’ health
with “city contagions” if they failed to “purify” their hands and faces with Lifebuoy (p. 40).

In this same June 1923 issue of Saturday Evening Post, automobile advertisements typically
featured mechanical and price arguments, like a double-page spread for Stephens Motor Car Company (p.
45). Harkening back to the nineteenth-century advertising practices of other industries, Stephens proudly
displayed its productive facilities, despite decades of advice from advertising professionals not to put the
factory in the ad unless it was for sale (p. 116-7). When early auto makers moved away from strictly
mechanical or productive images, the strongest consumer-oriented, or human interest, emotion to which
they appealed frequently was status, and that they did liberally, as in Packard’s classical imagery, as well as
that for its lower-priced lookalike, Hudson (pp. 45, 47). With its position near the top of the cost
hierarchy, Packard could appeal to one of wealth’s main purposes, the elimination of hassle, offering a car
“free from the haunting thought of costly maintenance.” Prestige figured heavily in early auto promotions
as the manufacturers themselves sought to enhance their own stature by the cars they put on the road (Davis
1988). Thus this 1922 Harper’s Bazar ad in Motor Age told auto makers that “Not all the people who buy
automobiles read Harper’s Bazar, but— practically all the people who read Harper’s Bazar buy automobiles.”
And these are the folks, it continued—“the social leaders in every community”—who matter, whose
patronage “kills or launches a style” (p. 81). And also whose estimation determined an ambitious
businessman’s status.

Unlike the soap advertisers, who had by this time composed complex chords for their siren’s
songs, car manufacturers had only started to hum what would become their most compelling melodies:
excitement and self-indulgence. Of course, it made sense to focus on Reason Why messages for these high
tech, expensive, sometimes intimidating, frequently frustrating, always challenging, and often exciting
consumer products, very much like computers in our time. Ads that explained the technologies, justified
the expenses, and reassured the buyers therefore resolved many of the early manufacturers’ marketing
problems, as have so many computer ads over recent years. Reason Why copy also gave consumers a
language with which to discuss, debate, and brag about the benefits of, for instance, the Gardner as the only
“four cylinder motor today with a five-bearing crankshaft” (p. 136). As in computer advertising, teaching
jargon to consumers is a major goal in promoting a new technology.
But what about the challenging and exciting aspects of these high tech, expensive, and scary machines? Appreciation flourished everywhere for the benefits of automobiles, everywhere, that is, except in the ads, even though many auto makers, like their predecessors the cycle makers, had earlier raced their products to gain visibility and notoriety, not to mention for thrills. When he was a novice, Henry Ford raced avidly; his first motor vehicle was the 1896 Quadricycle, and Ford himself built the “999,” which around 1900 famously raced to the mile-a-minute pinnacle of excitement. But his ads showed instead the staid heritage of the auto’s other ancestors, the carriage makers, often with no picture at all. In an early study, in 1923, Daniel Starch published what his students recalled from advertisements for familiar commodities. They recalled, for instance, that Goodyear tires displayed “novel photographs,” while Ford automobiles promoted the “statistics connected with the Ford” (Starch, 1923, pp. 390-1). Imagine how a photograph of Ford greeting a cross-country racer might have livened up such a page of statistics (for instance, (Stern 1955, p. 73). He was, after all, the most well-known person in the world by World War I.

In June of 1923, the Ford Motor Car Company did not even place an ad in the Saturday Evening Post or any other popular national medium, as Henry Ford insisted that his dealers place newspaper ads themselves. Even so, of the dozen or so makers that did have ads in this issue, only a few hinted at the excitement and self-indulgence with which automobile promotion later became synonymous. Pierce Arrow, an expensive make, did picture the “glorious climb. . . . Over the crest. . . . Off the beaten path, exploring the real Vacation-land. . . . [where] you may seek delights unknown to others, serene in the knowledge that tremendous power will carry you where you will—in complete comfort and safety” (p. 49). Brave words, these, for any car in 1923, but still emphasizing serenity, comfort, and safety over the potentials for power and passion!

By now, you might have given up wondering why I have featured this particular issue of Saturday Evening Post. An ad for the Jordan Motor Car Company’s Playboy is the reason (back cover). Legend has it that a young woman who danced with owner-manager, Edward S. Jordan, at a country club asked him to build a car for her and others of her generation who loved sports and the outdoors. Although he later denied it, Ned Jordan merely took a model already in production and added “everything that women want,” to make their cars “look like a woman likes to look to the man who likes to look at her.” Whether or not Jordan really built this car “for the lass whose face is brown with the sun when the day is done of revel and romp and race,” it sold aplenty in the high end of the price range. This and Jordan’s other cars made almost 2000% on the original stockholders’ investments during the decade, although the firm succumbed to the Great Depression as did so many others. With no factories in the image, and none of what Jordan called “the old mechanical chatter” in the copy (Watkins 1959, pp. 50-1), Jordan’s marketing monument to the Lost Generation linked that era’s ethos to the automobile just as, only the year before, had F. Scott Fitzgerald in The Great Gatsby and Sinclair Lewis in Babbitt.

Besides nearly instant sales success and countless fan letters, not to mention propositions from young women all over the U.S., what other reactions did Jordan receive? Within a few weeks, the Chicago American evening newspaper placed what it called “An Open Letter” to Jordan in Printers’ Ink, the leading advertising trade journal of the time. This unusual two-page spread pictured Jordan’s Saturday Evening Post ad and reiterated that “Youth everywhere is in the saddle and riding high,” and not just west of Laramie. “Indeed,” this message to all advertisers continued, “you have struck a great note, in your appeal to youth.” The Chicago American then offered its pages to all advertisers reaching for “men and women under forty and those who think under forty” (“An Open Letter” 1923).

The reactions to Jordan’s copywriting continued, and Jordan’s stature in the auto business grew. The New York Times increased its coverage of him and his firm, including frequent reports of special stock dividends and announcements of new models (e.g., 7 September 1923, p. 18; 5 December 1923, p. 30). The journals Automotive Industries and Motor Age quoted him with increasing frequency as a prophet of
the industry, especially in judging the market and in understanding how to sell to women (e.g., “Women Dictate in Car Buying,” 1923; and Jordan 1924). And in the next year, Field and Stream awarded the Playboy ad its annual prize for “the most effective advertising built on an out-of-doors appeal, published in a national periodical during 1923.” Field and Stream thereby “paid a deserved compliment to advertising that strikes a refreshing and original note, that is daringly vigorous and successfully appealing in its spirit, that surrounds its product with an atmosphere of selling effectiveness that makes a mechanical contrivance breathe with a vivid personality—that in a word, possesses unique selling force” (“Jordan Awarded Prize” 1924). Their enthusiasm and praise indicated the breakthrough that Jordan had made.

CONTEXTS AND PROCESSES

Looking back into the past of any historical development, it is easy to conclude that the changes we see were inevitable. Surely Packard’s staid and static images and Gardner’s industrial images had to fade away so that auto advertising could come into sync with the marketing strategies of other industries. At some point didn’t they have to evolve into the lively and dynamic images of the Jordan Playboy—and beyond to today’s sport-utility-vehicle ads that promise us adventures in the wilds of grocery store parking lots? Probably so, but the transition could have come earlier, or later, or differently. Forty-six firms each produced at least 1,000 cars each in the first half of 1923 (“46 Companies” 1923), yet only one broke out of the copy pattern; such rare idiosyncrasy is not the stuff of historical determinism.

Instead, contingency lies at the heart of history’s course. A path that seems to have been inevitable as we look back on it appears less deterministic when we examine each step along it as well as all of the actual paths converging and the potential paths diverging at each step. By looking at a multi-dimensional picture of 1923, we can see some of those converging factors that moved the past of auto advertising into what remains its present, and for which Jordan’s masterpiece serves as a symbol. The Playboy ad resonated with many different forces; like anything else that acts as a cultural lightning rod, it was not an isolated event, even if unique.

The context in which automobile promoters operated in 1923 included the widespread belief that the nation had finally recovered, economically and otherwise, from World War I and the recession of 1920 and 1921. Specifically, the number of cars sold rose by over 50% from 1922, itself a good year, ten years after the widespread introduction of the electric ignition; and the wholesale value of those sales rose by almost 50% from 1922 (Statistical History, pp. 700, 701, 716). Moreover, this spending was part of a larger trend in consumer economics, completed by 1924, in which household spending on durable goods shifted toward major durable goods, of which the automobile was the largest component (Olney 1991, pp. 40-1, and passim). Debates in every forum considered whether or not the market’s saturation point was nigh. Collier’s started the year by publishing an optimistic article entitled “Bring on Your 20,000,000 Cars” in answer to the question, “Can Every Family Own an Automobile?” To that author, plenty of room remained for auto ownership to continue broadening what he called “the radius of life” (Cary 1923). And this enthusiasm captured the general tone of the debate.

So automobile was in the air. In its early days, stunts and perhaps excessive enthusiasm had characterized the passion with which true believers, like Carl Fisher, made autos known to Americans. Fisher, builder of the Indianapolis Speedway, activist for the Lincoln Highway, and Miami Beach’s visionary, early on ran a dealership in Indianapolis. He once drove a Stoddard-Dayton off a two-story building, then drove it down the street. In a 1908 publicity stunt, he floated over the city in a car hanging from a hot air balloon, winning national attention (Foster 1998). Yet fifteen years later, a lead article in Automotive Industries considered stunts like this to have been “sensational” once, but it would “hardly cause a passing comment from the blasé car prospect of 1923” (Shidle 1923). Automobiles, by then, had appeared in every mode of communication, including all grades of literature, films, newspapers, and magazines, not to mention in the public’s everyday experience by contributing to the activity and noise.
levels of all but the most remote areas. So people knew about cars and did not need to be introduced to them any longer.

All this success in selling cars meant, of course, that “elements of Barnum psychology” would no longer suffice when introducing new models, again quoting the August Automotive Industries article. To resolve the problem, “The systematic planning which has characterized automotive production for many years is gradually finding its way into the efforts of the sales department. . . . More careful thinking has preceded merchandising activity than ever before. . . .” Even better, manufacturers were tooling up sales departments right along with their production departments (Shidle 1923), or even ahead of production, as Jordan claimed. Past selling successes also meant that used cars began to present a marketing problem for new car sellers, and the literature concerned itself with this possible source of a glut as well (e.g., “Messages” 1923).

Such challenges to selling in a so-called “blasé” market, a buyers’ market even, generated a wealth of advice literature directed to manufacturers, dealers, and advertising professionals. Everyone knew that advertisements were key to achieving adequate sales levels, for advertising, too, was in the air, (including in the wide-ranging debates over whether to commercialize radio broadcasts, thereby putting ads literally into the air). The reciprocal linkages between advertising and automobility were apparent to everyone. For instance, in July, the important advertising agency N. W. Ayer & Son pictured the choice for all advertisers as that between a wagon on a treacherous mountain road and a fleet limousine on an improved highway—“direct, smooth, swift” (Ayer 1923). Printers’ Ink also noted that automobility expanded markets, as consumers could travel farther and wider to obtain goods (1923, p. 176). And opposite Printers’ Ink’s table of contents during much of 1923, an outdoor advertising firm placed ads contrasting the Victorian family reading a variety of media around a lamp in the parlor with dozens of families in cars buzzing by roadside signs. This campaign added to the many assertions that the opportunities for reaching families had left the parlor for the roadway (Thos. Cusack Co. 1923).

But, all that said, how to proceed remained a topic for intense debate. Should ads continue to impart “information”? Should they emphasize “utility,” “transportation,” convenience, status—this last what a Printers’ Ink article called “Making Use of Aristocracy in the Layout” (Larned 1923a), and so on? And what did “utility” mean anyway? Was it for practical purposes, or for facilitating picnics and socializing? Should advertisers develop campaigns through “system” or through art and intuition? Of course, the Jordan ad did not end the debate, but it provided yet another answer, one that people outside of the auto industry had been urging for at least twenty years. As Judicious Advertising and other trade journals had prompted as early as 1903, “Let the makers catch up the spirit of enthusiasm”; tell the public how automobiling “will renew the life and youth of the overworked man or woman,” and so on (“The Automobile Industry” 1903). This is the spirit that Jordan intuitively captured. But how did others respond to this challenging marketing environment?

Henry Ford still owned the mass market in 1923. He also still controlled his firm with an iron hand, still insisting that his firm’s advertising not apply what he called “the pleasure principle.” He had preferred that the firm do no national advertising at all, in fact, but in 1923 the company announced what Printers’ Ink called a “sensational reversal” of policy, namely a $7 million national, institutional campaign for the next year that made headlines in the New York Times. Although the “Ford people politely declined to discuss the big reasons underlying their decision to advertise,” the Printers’ Ink writer concluded that even Ford’s “conservatism” could not deny that “advertising is the logical result” of thinking about how to “push selling opportunities to the limit.” Chevrolet’s recent successes in urban markets no doubt prompted Ford to set aside his resistance. As Automotive Industries asserted near the end of the year, “Even Ford has come to a recognition of the value of paid advertising” (Nichols 1923b; “Ford Expenditures” 1923; “Advertising Problems” 1923; Laird 1996).
Yet while you can take the manufacturer to the advertising well, you cannot make him drink of its more sensual waters. So while Ford Motor Company promised and did modernize its layouts (Larred 1923b), the institutional advertisements that Ford produced the following year as part of the $7 million campaign left no doubt about whether production or marketing mattered more. Appearing in the July 6, 1924, New York Times special supplement on automobiles and radios, the Ford advertisement’s title is “The Industrial Epic,” and its copy focuses on scientists, engineers, and inventors and their contributions to the “nation’s daily domestic and commercial life” (section 8, p. 8). Ford was not alone in sticking to his notions of imagery, of course. A Chandler ad in that same paper, claimed that it was “Modern to the Minute”; maybe the car, but not the ad, which merely showed a static profile of the vehicle surrounded by rather stale and standard copy. “But above all you will find a car so well engineered, so ruggedly built, so thoroughly proved by owner use, that, though modern to the minute, its sound and lasting service cannot be questioned” (section 8, p. 9). In contrast, Jordan advertised his car there with the headline, “69-70-71-72-73” and the subhead, “It Can Be Done—But Don’t Do It.” Like too many of our present-day ads, Jordan sang the siren’s song of dangerous speed, coyly advising against using the power he promoted: “Of course it’s wrong—we know it’s crazy. Nobody really approves. But we are all human.” Finally, “You can’t describe such a car—you have to see it—you have to feel it—you will learn to love it” (section 8, p. 7). This appeal to the consumers’ feelings about cars, rather than to their rational “Reasons Why” for buying a particular car, was and remains truly “modern to the minute.”

The Chandler, Jordan, and Ford motor car companies all still operated at that time by pre-corporate management principles, namely that the owners managed. As a result, the owners’ identities, concerns, and goals dominated and directed the firms. Operating very differently, to no small extent inventing the corporate model for the automotive industry, General Motors took a different tack than the more traditionally operated firms. Not that the personalities of forceful men did not matter, but rather that Pierre duPont and Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., shared different goals for the firm that they ran. For one thing, their names did not adorn their company or their products. For another, they had not founded either General Motors or any of the constituent divisions. So their goals focused solely on making profits, and therein lay their ambitions and their identities. As Sloan said, GM’s purpose “was to make money, not just to make motor cars” (emphasis added) (Gartman 1994, p. 14). Henry Ford could never have understood that perspective.

The corporate system reduced top-level flexibility and authority relative to that of the owner-managers, but it also placed CEO’s at the head of teams of specialists paid to solve problems. These sources of input, combined with the differing mindsets of corporate decision makers made it possible, if not necessary, for innovations to evolve rapidly and to greatly different effect. Under duPont and Sloan, General Motors had the benefits of their own individual insights into marketing augmented by teams of specialists who put those insights into action. What Sloan called his “product policy” we have come to know as marketing “a car for every purse and purpose.” By this policy, adopted in 1921, Sloan rationalized GM’s multiple, almost random, units into divisions that made motor cars for specific and different segments of the market (Sloan 1963, chapter 4). This process of incorporation, which ultimately removed most owners from day-to-day management, placed professional managers in charge of most functions of industry, including publicity. As owners became increasingly interested in deriving profits from their firms’ advertising campaigns, rather than personal prestige or support for ideological stances relative to productivity or progress, they left advertising decisions in the hands of experts (Laird 1998). In the case of automobilizing, those experts increasingly followed the leads intuitively established by Jordan and Sloan, especially as Sloan turned increasingly to specialists in design and marketing to increase market share (Gartman 1994, chapter 4; Sloan 1963).

In 1921, Ford had about 60% of the total car and truck market, calculated in units sold, and Chevrolet about 4%. Between 1921 and 1923, Sloan and duPont worked out a strategy to reduce that disparity. Sloan knew, he said later, that it would be “suicidal to compete with [Ford] head on,” and that
“no conceivable amount of capital short of the United States Treasury could have sustained the losses required to take volume away from him at his own game,” namely technology and production. So when Sloan became president of GM in 1923, he advanced his policy that engineering mattered less for selling than did styling. This notion, so antithetical to Ford’s, resulted in, for example, the 1923 Chevrolet campaign intended to sell “transportation rather than machinery.” The stated goal was to use fashion and advertising to compete against Ford’s lead in the lower price range. This plan, to force dealers to take on inventory because of consumer demand, rather than Ford’s doing so by fiat, included ads specifically addressing women, some in the city, others in the countryside. When the developmental technology of a copper-cooled engine failed, Sloan did not stall the campaign, but merely instructed his teams to add the latest styling to nine-year old automobile technologies and bodies (Sloan 1963, p. 69; Nichols 1923a; Gartman 1994, chapter 4). Henry Ford could have never seen the merits of this, but he didn’t have to; the car sold quite well without convincing him.

Several manufacturers introduced their 1924 models in the preceding August, 1923, a new ploy, now standard. GM introduced a new model of Buick then and succeeded in bringing one million people into the showrooms in August. Abandoning its usual “extremely conservative” practices for that campaign, GM announced no “price inducements” and precious little description, if any, but spent advertising dollars “on a very large scale.” In fact, the first stage of the campaign merely comprised teasers (Nichols 1923c), very much like the pre-introduction campaign for Uneeda Biscuit that had included such items as “Do You Know Uneeda Biscuit?”

CONCLUSION

During this signal year of 1923 Otto Kleppner was writing the first edition of his text, Advertising Procedure, published in 1925 with later editions still in print. His first chapter introduced the “advertising spiral,” or product life cycle, for calculating marketing problems and strategies. The proper application of this basic analytical tool hinged, not on the nature of a product itself, Kleppner emphasized, but, in his words, on the “attitude of the people [in the market] towards it” (Kleppner 1925, pp. 12-3). Yet, as the transition of 1923 shows, actual advertising practices also hinge very much on other variables. These include the attitudes of manufacturers and promoters towards their products plus their goals for their public offerings, promotional messages as well as products. What else might people want to accomplish besides selling? About what do they worry? What do they value? The answers include their personal stature, their emotional and time investments, even their spouses’ opinions of their advertisements. Steve Jobs was worried about the well-being of American society; hence, his “1984” Super Bowl message promised that the tiny Macintosh would break the hold of Big Brother.

We all learned in Marketing 101 that ads contribute to the meanings that consumers attach to products. An additional way to look at ads is in terms of what they most closely reflect, namely the meanings that manufacturers and promoters want to project into the public arena (Laird 1998). At the outset of the 1920s, Automotive Industries suggested that automobile manufacturers guide their advertising by answering the question, “Why did I make the car, anyway?” (Jennings 1923, p.1302). Each campaign of the Twenties essentially answered that question in one way or another. Thus, for Henry Ford, automobiles were machines that fulfilled a practical purpose, and the more cheaply the better. For Packard and many others, automobiles provided a means of enhancing their makers’ personal status within the carriage trade. For Ned Jordan, automobiles expressed a personal affinity with the spirit and sports enthusiasms of the decade that roared. For Alfred Sloan, however, whose sophisticated marketing strategies set the pace for the twentieth century, automobiles were basically a commodity to be targeted to consumers and packaged for them, not unlike Uneeda Biscuit. Do You Know Uneeda Buick?
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