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Advertising

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



In comparing newspapers published in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century with those published one hundred years later, one is immediately struck by a number of prominent visual differences—one of the foremost being the style and type of advertising. While at the start of the century, advertisements were almost wholly textual and were packed together in an undifferentiated manner within the column rules, by the end of the century the pages of many newspapers were festooned with large, illustrated advertisements promoting a cornucopia of products and services. Indeed, the nineteenth century witnessed a number of important developments in advertising in Britain—most notably in the press—with a general expansion in advertising and changes in advertising techniques and methods. Focussing particularly on advertising in the newspaper press, this essay will provide a general overview of the history of advertising in nineteenth-century Britain.

1800-1850

During the early nineteenth century, advertising was already well-established in Britain—highly visible on its streets and in its press. While not all manufacturers and merchants were convinced of the value of advertising—deeming it unrespectable and unseemly—more and more were choosing to advertise during this period. Moreover, these years saw the introduction of increasing numbers of nationally-distributed branded products—particularly non-perishable domestic goods such as shoe blacking, hair oils and razor strops—which were advertised in nationwide marketing campaigns.

Advertisers made use of a number of different media. Posters were extremely popular, allowing great creative scope and providing a means for rapidly disseminating information. Indeed, some people complained that practically every naked surface exposed to the public gaze seemed to be pasted over with such posters. Public spaces in Britain during this period were also invaded by advertising vehicles, sandwich-men and freely-distributed handbills. As for the press, advertisements were published in both newspapers and magazines. However, although magazines were able to publish illustrated advertisements—for example, illustrations by George Cruickshank were utilised in advertisements for Warren's shoe blacking—advertisers faced various restrictions and impediments in newspapers, stemming largely from the imposition by the government of a number of taxes. Firstly, due to the Advertisement Duty, advertisements placed in newspapers were taxed individually at a flat rate. Secondly, the size and content of advertisements was constrained. With the Stamp Duty levying taxes on each printed sheet of a newspaper and the Paper Duty levying further taxes on the paper which was used, most newspaper proprietors tried to cram the contents of their papers onto four pages—a single sheet folded once—which resulted in newspapers consisting of closely-printed columns of letterpress. Due to these space constraints, advertisements were placed among the news and editorial matter, largely devoid of illustrations and confined within the column rules.

Nevertheless, despite these drawbacks, newspapers were an important advertising medium during the early nineteenth century. Indeed, advertising occupied a

large amount of space in newspapers during this period—often consisting of up to 50% of most papers. Frequently appearing were advertisements for books, auctions, retailers, property, medicines, lotteries, employment (particularly for servants), theatre, horses, and carriage and coaching services. Advertising was an important source of finance for papers, as sales alone were often inadequate to cover production costs (especially since many publishers were investing in new machinery which permitted higher circulations.) Some newspapers were even able to earn large profits through advertising. For example, the advertising profits of the *Morning Chronicle*—a London daily—increased from £4,300 in 1800 to £12,400 in 1819. The increasing profits which were made through advertising during this period, moreover, allowed newspapers to be more politically independent, as they could afford to do without the government subsidies and official advertisements which were used to ensure favourable editorial coverage.

However, while some newspaper proprietors quite obviously embraced advertising and its associated revenues and while some readers appreciated the printing of advertisements in the press (allowing them to find out about employment, sales and so on), others were less enthusiastic. Sharing the concerns of some manufacturers and merchants, they deemed advertising as lacking respectability—at times advancing fraudulent claims, containing offensive and indecent material, and promoting products of poor quality; this was especially the case with medical advertising, which could be quite explicit and often made outrageous claims. Advertisements were also disliked because they significantly impinged on the

amount of reading material which could be published. Consequently, some newspapers—such as *Bell's Weekly Messenger*—deliberately excluded advertisements. While they could still make a profit, many had to charge a high cover price and sometimes had to accept subsidies from political and other sources.

Nevertheless, despite the heavy weight of taxation and continued aversion to advertising in some sectors of British society, advertising in newspapers grew quite markedly during the first half of the nineteenth century—especially from the mid-1830s onwards, when the Stamp Duty, the Advertisement Duty and the Paper Duty were reduced. It has been estimated that the national expenditure on newspaper advertising increased from around £161,000 in 1800, to £277,000 by 1832 and to £500,000 by mid-century, with the number of advertisements published in the stamped press rising from 511,000 in 1800 to 1,902,000 in 1848.

1850-1900

During the second half of the nineteenth century, advertising in Britain continued to expand. This growth was fuelled by a number of developments. Firstly, there was a striking increase in real wages in Britain during this period, with increasing numbers of people having more money to spend. Crucially, by the 1870s and 1880s, consumer spending among the working classes—who comprised 75-80% of Britain's occupied population—started to rise. Thus, more and more people in Britain were able to concern themselves not just with purchasing basic necessities, but with buying

more and better food, clothing and furnishings; they could also afford to spend more money on leisure activities. Secondly, increasing numbers of products were being introduced during this period to meet and take advantage of this growing demand—products which were moreover increasingly branded and nationally-distributed. Thirdly, more and more manufacturers were choosing to advertise. While some manufacturers still disliked the introduction of advertising into commercial practice, many found themselves forced to advertise in order to keep up with their rivals or to introduce new products to consumers. Indeed, during the second half of the nineteenth century, reservations about the respectability of advertising largely disappeared and it came to be regarded as a normal element of business practice.

Thus, more and more goods were being advertised to an increasingly receptive public—clothing, patent medicines, furnishings for the home, foods such as cocoa and tea, and new inventions like sewing machines, cameras and bicycles. With competition between manufacturers sometimes being fierce, advertising budgets increased in size over this period, and the sums could be extravagant. For example, the expenditures on advertising of Thomas Holloway—a pill and ointment manufacturer—increased from £5000 in 1842 to £50,000 in 1883. Thomas Beecham—another manufacturer of patent medicines—increased his advertising budget from £22,000 in 1884 to £120,000 in 1891. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century, more firms were making use of the services of Britain's growing and developing advertising industry. While the primary purpose of advertising agents earlier in the century had been to buy advertising space on behalf of

their clients, by the end of the century leading agents were offering all the services that were required to prepare and execute advertising campaigns. More sophisticated advertising techniques were also introduced into campaigns during this period, with many advertisers striving to provide memorable slogans and striking pictures which would fix the image of products in consumers' minds. One of the most brilliant advertisers of the late nineteenth century was Pears Soap. It not only advertised extensively, but with great originality and humour, inventing slogans which caught the public's imagination (such as "Good Morning! Have you used Pears Soap?"). With particularly fierce competition existing between soap manufacturers during this period, Pears spent an enormous amount on advertising—£100,000 in 1889 alone.

Advertisers continued to use a range of media, including enamel signs, circulars, telegrams, sandwich-men and handbills; advertising stunts were also utilised. In particular, posters remained very popular throughout this period. In the 1870s and 1880s, colour lithography for large-scale commercial use was perfected and posters began to be designed with more attention to illustration and artistry. For example, in the late 1880s, Pears famously bought a piece of artwork by Sir John Millais entitled "Bubbles", which it then utilised in its advertising campaign. Text eventually began to take a second place to illustrations, and was sometimes omitted completely.

It was the press which firmly established itself during this period as the primary medium for advertising in

Britain. In the 1850s and early 1860s, the Advertisement Duty, the Stamp Duty and the Paper Duty were abolished, which led to a proliferation of new newspapers, an expansion of newspaper circulations and an enlargement of newspapers themselves (which made more space available for advertisements.) With advertisements also no longer being taxed, newspapers were consequently rendered even more attractive as a medium for advertisers both large and small. Indeed, the mass-circulation papers which appeared from the 1850s onwards provided advertisers with an effective means of promoting their nationally-distributed products to large numbers of consumers across Britain in a timely and effective fashion. Local traders and shopkeepers could choose from a large number of papers covering the particular towns or districts in which they traded. The second half of the nineteenth century also witnessed the proliferation of magazines—many of which by the 1880s were carrying large advertisements that contained stunning illustrations and inventively-persuasive text—and the many special-interest periodicals which were established enabled advertisers to target specific groups. Women's magazines were a case in point, publishing large and superbly illustrated fashion advertisements by the 1890s.

However, it took several decades after the abolition of the Stamp Act for many newspaper proprietors to introduce larger, illustrated advertisements, as many were reluctant to disturb the format of their papers. Indeed, new attitudes towards advertising started to develop only slowly, with fresh varieties and sizes of type being increasingly introduced, with advertisements beginning to break across the column rules and

illustrations being more frequently used. The introduction of these innovations was gradual and uneven across the newspaper press, and it was not until the 1890s and later that many newspapers, feeling pressure from advertisers, finally succumbed—with 'display' advertisements being the final hurdle; with more and more newspapers competing for the patronage of advertisers, newspapers had to eventually yield to commercial pressures in order to attract greater revenues. Indeed, newspapers continued to be very dependent on raising revenues through advertising, especially as the larger and more widely-circulated papers which resulted during this period required expensive machinery and engendered higher news-gathering costs; advertising revenues were also used to subsidize low cover prices.

Thus, over the course of the nineteenth century, advertising in Britain expanded greatly, with an ever-increasing variety of goods being marketed to a British public enjoying rising incomes and living standards. Moreover, the press rose to pre-eminence as the advertising medium of choice amongst advertisers. Indeed, with newspapers like *Lloyd's Weekly* and the *Daily Mail* reaching circulations of around one million by the end of the century, the press provided an effective and timely means for reaching large numbers of consumers. By 1907, approximately £12 million was being spent annually on advertising in Britain—almost 90% of which was spent on advertising in the press.

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