

## Ad Copy— Then and Now

Though There is Divided Opinion on Method of Approach There is Decided Swing Back to "Homey" Appeal



*Affirming an advertising contract in the "good old days."*

What constitutes good "copy" in an advertising sense? This is a vital question these days when everybody with something to sell is looking to advertising to lead them out of the depression. Many and conflicting are the thoughts on this subject, even from the master mind at glass-topped desks.

"Keep kid-able," suggests one authority. "Don't be academic; write down to the primer mind," volunteers another, while a third maintains that "the 12-year-old average adult mind" is a myth. "Get some 'harsh irritants' in your copy," ventures still another. "Be impudent," urges a woman advertiser. "Take advantage of the fads—particularly health," says a Chicagoan. And by far the largest group admittedly favors the old "S. A." (Sex Appeal).

In these blase and blatant days advertising copy must contain distinct elements of surprise or urge in order to "pull" bashful dollars. Times have changed since Bret Harte soft-soaped the buying public with this parody for a certain brand of soap:

The shades of night were falling fast  
As through an Eastern village passed  
A youth who bore, through dust and heat,  
A stencil-plate that read complete,  
"Sapolio."

That was when Sapolio gave out a booklet of parlor tricks, "pan-ograms" and, to anyone sending in five soap wrappers, a miniature reproduction of an angel that won first prize "at the last Paris art exhibit." It was Sapolio that created "Spotless Town" that ran so long in its copy. And who remembers Phoebe Snow who never so much as got a speck of soot on her while riding the "Road of Anthracite"? Perhaps the Lackawanna railroad may revive this copy now that Phoebe's leg-o'-mutton sleeves and jaunty hat have returned. Who knows what advertising men will do—in an emergency!

Richard Boleslavsky, formerly of the Moscow Art Theater, said not long ago over the radio that the bolshevists were able to conquer Russia because they copied the advertising methods of American gum manufacturers. There's a thought to chew on for a while!

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The dictionary definition of advertising as something "to give public notice to" is too old fashioned for many present-day advertisers. They want a more modern definition. According to Don Thomas, executive secretary of the All-Year Club of Southern California:

"Advertising is printed salesmanship."

The Advertising Federation of America suggests:

"Advertising is the business of creating a desire for, and accomplishing the sale of merchandise or service."

And the Women's Advertising Club of Chicago offers this conception:

"Advertising is the art, science and business of creating a favorable acceptance of, demand or desire for, any worthy product or service."

Some people object to testimonial "copy." But they always have, and always will. This type of advertising is not new. Toast Melba and Peach Melba and toilet articles by that name are all that are left to recall a famous singer. President Cleveland, though, knew how to steer clear of advertising exploitation. In 1893 a certain pencil company sent him a pen with a request that he use it to write his inaugural address. He obliged, but returned the pen with this note:

Pursuant to my promise I send you by mail with this, the — penholder and pen with which I have written my inaugural address. Of course I do not suspect you of desiring it for purposes of advertising.

After reading that clause, the disappointed pencil company abandoned a certain advertising campaign it had in mind. However, America still remains the land of opportunity. Any little girl or boy may grow up to be a screen, stage or radio star or social lion and see his or her half-tone in national advertising "copy."

The recent Chicago convention of the Financial Advertisers Association enjoyed an interesting exhibition of copy that "flopped." One specimen was an advertisement of a New Orleans bank which sought attention by citing an error in the Bible according to scientific revelation. The only result of the slur was to antagonize religious rural folks. Another exhibit was a handsome and costly calendar given away by a Cleveland bank. On it was featured a modernistic photograph of a piece of machinery. To the bank's surprise, housewives did not want it though they had previously exhausted the supply of calendars showing cute babies, children picking flowers and homey cottages "with sunlight filtering through the leaves." Which only goes to show that the people are less interested in modernistic ballyhoo than "homey" things.

A more recent boner was pulled by a certain hair preparation company which tried to warn women against "Coney Island hair." This copy simply meant that women should treat their hair after bathing in the ocean. But Coney Island, influential politically and otherwise, took exception and the advertiser apologized, at regular space rates. Still, about the most "horrible example" that we can recollect and one that aroused a storm of protest from patriotic America, was the thoughtless use in a war-time cut-price suit sale of a catch line to the

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effect: "Big Guns Boom Over There; Bigger Guns Boom Over Here."

Advertising must "shock" a woman in order to interest her many advertisers contend. Sometimes milady is warned about her halitosis, another time about her B. O. (Body Odor) or more personal matters. On the other hand some women's organizations have their members pledged not to purchase goods advertised in a rude or crude manner. This view is reflected by Mary Muldoon who comments in *Printers' Ink*:

I shudder to think what the generations-to-come will think about us women when, on thumbing over museum numbers of present-day publications, they learn that we are evil-smelling, foul-mouthed, bleary-eyed, rough-skinned, constipated, anaemic creatures . . . unloved, unhonored and barely unhung.

Ideal advertising, according to the purists, has a two-fold purpose—first, to make the advertiser's name a by-word and, second, to boost the sale of his products on the basis of prestige. Any departure from these principles, according to the Commercial Credit Co., is "dangerous and ultimately harmful." It comments:

The advertising extravagances committed under the influence of panic psychology demonstrate in a very conclusive way the fact that advertising continues to be regarded by far too many of its devotees as something superficial rather than as something fundamental. It also demonstrates the extent to which business institutions today are trusting in magic to relieve their troubles rather than in more effective application of tried and proven methods. To try any new type of campaign just because it is spectacular is to play with a very hot fire. And that appears to be the error into which too many current advertisers have been led in their search for some unusual technique that will put life into a sluggish market.

Which probably explains the decided turn of many disillusioned advertisers from unproductive, high-powered ballyhoo to keyed copy and other tried and proved mediums of "homey" appeal.