

# From Success to Progress: The Professionalization and Legitimization of Advertising Practitioners, 1820-1920

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Between 1890 and 1920, American advertising agents adapted to their rapidly changing business and cultural environments by changing their clients, their services, and their rhetoric. The professionalization that accompanied these changes reflected the fundamental business developments of the period. In making this transition, advertising practitioners began both to broaden their range of functions and to argue for a new basis of professional legitimation. In this period, advertising professionals aggressively absorbed greater control over their clients' advertising, claiming that only they had the expertise to direct the campaigns that were being conducted on ever increasing scales. Furthermore, admen and their advocates began to argue for the legitimacy of the emerging profession as a necessary contributor to national progress, both material and cultural. This paper will explain this aggressive case of professional specialization, including the advertising specialists' expanding sense of their importance in the nation's business and cultural life.

## **The Role of Advertising in the New Business Environment**

The beginnings of the modernization of advertising practices can be traced to the profound changes that American business institutions underwent between 1890 and 1910. Before 1890, continuous-process technologies had been increasingly applied to produce expanding varieties of goods [8]. Between 1890 and 1910, the concentration of industrial assets into fewer, larger firms also dominated developments in business organization and practices. As the sizes of firms and their industrial capacity grew, they began to explore and to exploit national and international markets in order to maximize their turnover, or throughput, and therefore the efficient and profitable use of their technologies. Controlling business conditions, including markets, was a major consideration in the business strategies of this period [7, 8, 26, 30].

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<sup>1</sup>This paper summarizes one conclusion of my dissertation, "The Business of Progress: The Transformation of American Advertising, 1870-1920."

How could industries using continuous-process machinery generate consumer demand and, hence, prices, volume, and profit? Well-promoted, trademarked products were the key, and many industrialists had already come to appreciate and to exploit their trademarks as means of controlling markets before 1890. As a memory hook for advertising appeals, well-advertised trademarks help to replace the traditional push of sales forces and middlemen with the modern pull of specific demand from the consuming population and assuring that consumers would "accept no substitute."

For their part, advertising practitioners initially distrusted the concentration of industry. Indeed, the threat of the trusts forced admen to rethink the role of their services in the new business environment. They often expressed the fear that mergers would destroy the traditional forms of competition, leaving industrialists with no incentive to advertise [2, 43]. By 1899, however, some writers reproved those who had shown "their lack of faith in advertising as a necessary element in business building." To the contrary, while "trusts may temporarily decrease the amount expended for advertising, . . . if there is any real value in advertising it is certain that in the long run the amount annually expended for it will grow with the years" [10]. One analyst explained that despite the contentions of "some economists, most trust promoters and all Socialists," competition was not the "prime cause of advertising." Instead, advertising was "a necessary device in the modern system of distributing goods, a system by which selling can be done with far less expense than in any other way." The nature and operation of modern industry informed another's opinion:

What the automatic machine is to manufacturing goods, that the advertisement is to selling them, and as the machine thrives best where production is most highly organized and carried on on the larger scale, so advertising will be most extensively employed where distribution is most highly developed. . . . The trust will have no more incentive for abandoning the modern selling machine than throwing out the most improved machinery.

Moreover, advertising provided the "motive power by which modern selling in any branch is kept up with the procession" of production. Additionally, competition could always reemerge should a trust fail to advertise adequately to maintain its hegemony [1, 16].

The example of Royal Baking Powder was one of many cited early and often as evidence of successfully achieving product differentiation of "a common commercial product that has nothing secret in its composition or in the manner of its compounding." Consumer demand for Royal Baking Powder was such that grocers could not refuse to carry this brand, even under what they called "irksome conditions." Royal's expenditures on advertising had yielded this result, and therefore advertising was less of an expense than an investment [6; 35, p. 69].

## Specialization

By 1920 the advertising profession had achieved its modern form, yet, as late as 1900, it was not at all clear what path its evolution would take [35, pp. 142-152]. Prior to 1890, advertising practitioners had operated mainly as space brokers for business people who only wanted help in placing their messages in newspapers and journals. However, to succeed by 1900, an advertising agency had to take on new responsibilities, especially copywriting, graphics, and planning advertising programs.

Within the nineteenth-century owner-manager system of operation, founders, partners, officers, and their kin had performed most managerial functions, including making advertising decisions. However, the shift away from entrepreneurial capitalism, first to financial capitalism and then to managerial capitalism, distanced ownership from increasingly specialized managerial controls [8, pp. 6-10, 36-46, 490-500; 15, pp. 1-37, 73-89; 41; 42, pp. 161-172; 45]. Furthermore, as the costs of national advertising increased, the margins for error spiraled up, as did concerns for achieving effectiveness. Therefore manufacturers, first owners then managers, increasingly sought specialists, delegating advertising decisions either to in-house specialists or to outside advertising professionals. "Egoists" and their "superficial Knowledge" had to be replaced with "experts" in *all* phases of business [3, 9].

Rivalries between advertising specialists as well as their joint interests in convincing ever more advertisers to rely on professional assistance motivated a rapid evolution of advertising strategies, including primitive market research and changes in the styles of the advertisements themselves. The wide experimentation and innovation in pursuit of effective marketing during this take-off period before 1920 produced a truly remarkable array of marketing successes [39]. While most recent analysts of marketing developments express the sentiment that these successes in promoting consumption have not been unmixed blessings, the trade literature was then, and generally remains, unambiguously self-congratulatory in its assessments [18, 31, 33].

## Raising Standards and Changing Clients

Competition, the innovations that resulted, and a variety of other pressures to professionalize advertising practices also fostered a wide-ranging literature of legitimation. Admen wrote not only to encourage their peers to raise their professional standards and to convince their business audiences that those standards were already adequate, but also to influence the press and the general public. Swindles, scams, and nuisances of various kinds, including patent medicine promotions, darkened the field's reputation throughout the Progressive Era.

As the only occupation entirely identified with advertising, the agents' reputations as a whole suffered disrepute. As a result, during their transformation, leaders often wrote to distance themselves from the practices that tainted the advertising profession. More importantly, the field's leaders gradually changed their clientele, seeking out the advertisers of the coming

age, the national brand manufacturers, rather than the advertisers of the past age [4; 19, pp. 111-114]. The Truth-in-Advertising movement of the 1910s explicitly attempted to forestall regulation by internal policing of assorted advertising frauds.

To replace myriad small accounts and patent medicine accounts, leading agencies sought the large-scale manufacturing corporations that were coming to dominate the national marketplace. In order to attract these clients, agencies expanded and centralized services to meet such advertisers' increasing needs, to include full planning and creative functions by 1920. As Daniel M. Lord, Chicago's leading agent, declared in 1903, "the conditions surrounding the business [had] changed" since his first years in it, and the profession's adaptations had finally earned it a respected position. The modern advertising agency, he declared,

is not only a conduit through which business passes from advertiser to newspaper, but is a developer of business, and through their agency, through their work, a manufacturer is enabled not only to increase his trade and his profit, but not infrequently adopt new methods and more satisfactory methods for developing his business.

The benefits of the agency came "not only so far as saving money, but in more efficient work, in choice of media and more efficient copy." Agencies were developing a client-centered emphasis on honesty and service, and Lord concluded that

as time goes on the honest advertising man is bound to be of more influence, fill a bigger space in the business world and be a factor to reckon with in all successful manufacturing business, or any line that is seeking general publicity. . . . In short, he stands as a leader in the development of business to the advertiser, to the publisher, and last--to his own profit [28].

Once advertising specialists began preparing advertisements on a routine basis, their legitimization literature added effective copywriting strategies to effective and efficient placement of advertisements as their contributions. Favorable comparisons with the past abounded, such as, "Advertisements are no longer the regulation musty affairs they used to be. They are among the most artistic and attractive features of the popular newspaper" [32]. By 1893 advertising's advocates predicted that shortly the widening interest in how advertisements were prepared would "make the style almost more important than the thing said. This may reverse, possibly, the order of nature, but it does not allow any more than the proper stress upon the prime value of making an impression" [5]. Advisors began to insist that only professional copywriters could prepare good advertisements. In 1891, for example, a lead article in *Printers' Ink* was entitled "Hints on Preparing Advertisements," but fully half of the "Hints" suggested hiring a professional copywriter. As firms grew, another explained in 1893, their owners could

spend less time in advertising and were not likely to develop the "popular way of writing" as successfully as professionals. The new advertising methods, some said, "coaxed along" success by amusing readers [36].

The pleasures that the new advertisements afforded their audiences were less important, however, than their effects on the successes of the advertisers who patronized the field. As Daniel M. Lord, declared,

I can remember when the advertising agent was looked upon as something to be endured because he could not be cured, and I tell you, gentlemen, no time in the history of business has the advertising man stood so high in the estimation of the business world as he stands today. . . . He fills a place broader and bigger than ever before, and as time goes on the honest advertising man is bound to be of more influence [28].

### Success and Legitimation

Efficiently and effectively creating and placing advertisements have never been ends in themselves. Before 1899, they supported the practitioners' fundamental claims to legitimacy, namely serving clients' successes. N. W. Ayer & Son led the field in many innovations in serving clients by applying its slogan, "Make advertising pay the advertiser." Until the end of the century, advertising practitioners measured the field's contributions solely by individual firms' successes through enhanced profits. Advertising men had never doubted the efficacy of advertisements as selling devices, whoever created the messages. Advertisers had only to use it to succeed. From the field's beginnings, advocates like the early leader George Rowell declared,

The importance of advertising is undisputed and universally admitted. The extent to which it is carried proves beyond doubt its usefulness, and advantages. The man who advertises once is sure to do so again, . . . It opens the most direct road to success and offers equal inducements to all parties [38].

As an article in the *New York Times* concluded, "a pot of printer's ink is better than the greatest gold mine" [20].

The Panic of 1893 and its ensuing depression had a profound impact on advertising's rhetoric. As might be expected, advertising's advocates encouraged businessmen to work their individual ways out of dull times through aggressive advertising. But in addition, the severity of the depression compelled advertising practitioners to develop more effective techniques and stronger arguments about advertising's potential for generating demand. Throughout the "dull times" the advertising press pushed its case, insisting that advertising "creates trade."

### Progress Towards Progress

By the last years of the depression, advocates had begun crediting advertising with whatever prosperity existed, extending their perception of its impact beyond individual successes. J. Walter Thompson Company joined this trend in 1897 by addressing a broadly legitimating statement to "Intelligent Business Men."

Advertising forms today so important a part of the prosperity of the individual, of the corporation, even of the nation, that here at the end of this progressive nineteenth century it has, by the subtle magic of brains, art and printer's ink, been developed into a veritable science [21, p. 5].

In 1899, the agency declared,

The merchant who does not believe in advertising does not believe in banks, insurance or other modern institutions. He is a relic of the lost ages. Vigorous advertisements lead the willing customers and drag the unwilling. . . . This agency keeps on hand modern tools and equipment in the shape of ideas and experience that will prove of value even to the veteran advertiser. Keep up with the procession. . . [22, p. 9].

The title and content of *Self Culture Magazine* incorporated many of the Victorian era's strategies for both individual and collective progress. In it, in 1899 Oscar Herzberg, the managing editor of *Printers' Ink*, wrote "The Century's Achievements in Business." He announced, "More radical changes have been made in the conduct of business during the century now drawing to a close than in all the eras preceding." Herzberg glorified advertising as "indeed, one of the great developments of the century. It has revolutionized business and made it possible to accomplish in a few years what otherwise would have taken generations to compass" [17].

At last, in Herzberg's analysis, we can find an explicit articulation of advertising's roles in business and industrial progress and, importantly, in overall material progress.<sup>2</sup> Industrial innovators could now introduce their products to "the entire public almost literally at a bound." Herzberg also expounded on the expansion of trade that advertising made possible,

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<sup>2</sup>I thoroughly surveyed *Printers' Ink* on this and other issues, working through it on a page by page basis from its first issue in 1888 through 1900, intermittently from 1901 through 1906, and then thoroughly again for 1907. I examined *Profitable Advertising* for its first ten years, 1891-1900, as well as for 1908 and intermittently in between. *Judicious Advertising* was more difficult to locate in full runs, and hence, my survey of it is not exhaustive for any set of years. I have also examined all of the material that predates 1920 in the archives of N.W. Ayer & Son, J. Walter Thompson Company, and the Advertising Collection of the Collection of Business Americana at the National Museum of American History.

benefiting both seller and buyer by developing markets for the "hundreds of improvements and articles by which life can be made more pleasant" [17].

### **Appropriating Progress from Industry**

Driving advertising specialists to improve on their communications abilities were the advertisers' needs for high volumes of transactions. To promote such levels of consumption, the admen had to learn to persuade their audiences on behalf of their clients. Once advertising specialists accepted this role and then came to compete as marketing and communication experts, they developed an awareness of the marketplace that advertisers, particularly the industrialists, had formerly lacked. In *Language for Men of Affairs*, James Melvin Lee admonished advertisers that, "it is not by his own taste, but by the taste of the fish, that the angler determines his choice of bait." Only market research could provide that bait, and he explained its importance in sections entitled "Investigating the Basis of Appeal" and "Studying the Consumer's Taste" [27].

Despite the growing number of marketing successes through modern advertising methods, advertisers often challenged the specialists they had hired or commissioned to prepare their advertisements. A client's opposition sometimes resulted from "his instinctive distrust of unfamiliar ideas and methods" [19, pp. 372-382]. Whatever its source, this resistance made the specialists feel that their rightful authority in marketing matters was continually challenged, and their literature took an aggressive stance against their patrons [37; 13, pp. 517-519]. As the J. Walter Thompson Company expressed the proper order of things, modern advertising services could be most helpful "to the Manufacturer who knows how to co-operate loyally and whole-heartedly with his Advertising Agency" [24]. (emphasis in original) Some analysts complained,

About half the labor of expert advertising creators is wasted in trying to convince their clients that they really know their business, and in arguing them out of their wrong positions. The labor is all wasted, and it impairs the good agent's power to be obliged to struggle with his customer in order that he may be allowed to serve his customer as well as he can. This condition does not prevail in any other profession. It should not prevail in advertising. A man who wishes to advertise should study the science of advertising, or resign himself into the hands of someone whom he has reason to believe does know his business, and is honest [14, p. 243].

Nonetheless, advertisers were served best by advertisements that pleased them less than they pleased consumers, therefore the advertising professionals' growing influence testified to the effectiveness of the marketing campaigns they created during this transition period.

In the nineteenth century, the heroes of progress, for those who accepted the prevalent bourgeois ethos, were the inventors and entrepreneurs

whose industries generated prosperity. Accordingly, in 1849, when the first American advertising agent, Volney B. Palmer, touted his "Systematic Advertising," he claimed that it would benefit society by reducing the numbers of people engaged in marketing. This would liberate "a great proportion of the agents and servitors of Commerce, to be engaged thenceforth in Productive Labor" [34]. By the twentieth century, however, the productive capacities of industry and agriculture had fueled years of intense debates on the political economy of markets, especially tariffs and international expansion. These issues appeared to justify the advertising men's devaluation industry and production. "It is easy enough to produce," some declared, "but marketing is a vastly different matter" [11; 40; 44, pp. 23-24].

According to the advertising literature, marketing had become the challenge of twentieth-century capitalism. With so much already accomplished, further developments in the technology of production were taken for granted by this particular group of business men. As many proponents of advertising explained it, advertising was the only way to optimize marketing operations and to generate the profit that they knew "accrues from large volume and quick turn-over" [12, p. 8].

Thus, the advertising profession did not just take on a mantle of progress, it aggressively appropriated it from industry. The assault on production often became intense. Some advertising practitioners did not, in fact, think much of producers or production relative to the importance of advertising in building business success. After all, said one, "The factory may burn to ashes. . . . The members of the firm may die. . . . But the good of advertising never changes. . ." [13, pp. 273-300, 520-521, 654]. J. Walter Thompson learned from the Panics of 1893 and 1907 that "a manufacturing plant without business is not an asset, but a liability," and advertising was the only means of generating adequate business for industry [23, p. 18].

## Conclusion

In 1920, a speaker at the annual convention of the Associated Advertising Clubs told an audience of colleagues that they "had some special justification" for their "faith and pride" in their profession.

You trace your ancestry back to the very beginning of the universe; your charter is contained in the first spoken words in the book of Genesis: "Let there be light," it was commanded. Yours is the profession of enlightenment. A promoter of commerce? Yes. An instrument of distribution? Assuredly. But you think too meanly of advertising if you confine it to these terms. It is an agency of civilization. . . [25].

At the time he spoke these glowing phrases about advertising, Joseph French Johnson was Dean of the New York University School of Commerce and President of the Alexander Hamilton Institute. He had not invented these accolades nor was it likely that his speech introduced them to his audience.



Roland Marchand refers to advertising agents as elitist "apostles of modernity" between 1920 and 1940. Throughout his careful argument, Marchand demonstrates that the "ad creators of that era proudly proclaimed themselves missionaries of modernity" because they believed that they guided and improved the nation's desires and consumption [29, pp. xxi, 1-24]. Certainly, in 1920 Johnson already equated progress with consumption when he declared that "the quality of a people's civilization depends entirely upon the quality of their wants" and that people whose wants do not increase are "making no progress." Advertising contributes to progress, according to this view, because it "gives birth to new wants and so creates an economic demand for more goods, thus tending to increase the demand for . . . labor. . . ." Large scale production and low prices also depend on advertising. Thus, Johnson admonished his audience to

keep the faith . . . [and proclaim] the good gospel of advertising not merely as an economic force, but as the prophet of progress, and the moulder of public opinion, which is the strength of democracy and the hope of our civilization [25].

Anyone in 1890 who had braved such claims for advertising's impact on civilization would have been considered a visionary, and, indeed, no one is known to have committed such ideas to public record.

By 1890, advertising practitioners had begun to change the character of the advertisements they placed in the media to justify their work, mixing service to their patrons with assertion of their own territoriality. Thus, the traditional styles, practices, and rhetoric of nineteenth-century advertising passed from the scene by 1920, not just because they lacked appeal to the consumer, but because of the militancy with which advertising practitioners professionalized and took charge of this arena for cultural politics.

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The following abbreviations are used for archival collections: CBA (Collection of Business Americana at the National Museum of American History), JWTC (J. Walter Thompson Company Archives), NWA (N. W. Ayer Archives).

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