

CHAPTER 1
ADVERTISERS
AND
CONSUMERS,
1890–1930

Modern advertising is part and parcel of the whole set of thought movements and mechanical techniques which changed the medieval into the modern world.¹

What a nation eats and wears—its pleasures, comforts and home conditions—these questions are being settled by the modern economic force called Advertising.²

Mr. James Ultimate Consumer is the most famous man in the world. He has to wear all the Knox hats, eat all the Premium bacon, listen to all the Victrolas and Panatropes, wear all the Fashion Park clothes, monkey with all the Radiolas, wind all the New Haven Clocks, roll over sleepy-eyed to shut off all the Big Bens in the morning, plod his way to work in all the Regals, poke his fingers through all the Adler gloves, step on all the Texaco, wear out all the Goodrich Cords, eat up all the Bean Hole beans, cram down his hungry neck all the Fifty-Seven varieties, find some reason for drinking all the Canada Dry, and take care of all the Camels in the world. James Ultimate Consumer—he's the Man! He is "It" in every sense of the word. He is the destination of all made things.³

Advertisers should never forget that they are addressing stupid people—one of which I am whom.⁴

The American advertising business evolved to sell goods. From shadowy origins on the fringes of respectable bourgeois society before the Civil War, advertising became an important element of American culture in the half century after 1880. In those years advertisers defined themselves as a unique, influential profession to serve the industrial capitalism then revolutionizing daily life.⁵ Seemingly ubiquitous, advertising dominated both the structure and content of mass communications, assuming an unmistakable prominence in the built environment. Just as important, advertisers claimed for themselves the critical task of defining identity for Americans. Advertisements encouraged people to purchase a plethora of products to meet the material needs of their everyday lives. In conveying information about goods and ideal living, advertisers also provided images and prescriptions for the self.⁶ They encouraged consumers to understand themselves through their possessions and to fabricate their identities in and through things. In that process, advertising became “the privileged discourse for the circulation of messages and social cues about the interplay between persons and objects.”⁷ The late nineteenth-century experience of modernity in its many guises showed

that the individual was not a fixed and stable character but a complex, changing entity shaped by the external world. Advertising encouraged customers—now increasingly termed “consumers” by the national corporations that were supplanting the face-to-face relationships of local commerce—literally to make themselves from their things.⁸ In this capacity, advertising shaped modern culture. This was achieved haltingly over many years and seldom with conscious purpose: after all, advertisers sold goods, not symbols. Yet they trafficked in images and ideals, and they educated consumers to interpret goods totemically as intimate, even animate, parts of their lives. As consumption helped define the self, advertisers taught Americans to view themselves as consumers.

Over its long history, critics have castigated advertising for encouraging demeaning behavior and crass concerns. They have charged that advertising fosters greed and insecurity and diverts us from humane values. Detractors assert that advertising’s depictions of social life insult our intelligence and strain our credulity. Such criticisms were leveled in 1904 as well as 2004. Yet however distorted their depictions of American life, advertising campaigns, I argue, served as social and political representations. Advertisers crafted and purveyed a vision of social life in the United States that highlighted consumption as the key not only to individual happiness but also to the health of American society. National media advertising presented a social order in which the consumer held a central place as both free individual and ideal citizen. Depicting the good life, the distribution of wealth, and a class system enforced through goods, advertisements worked as political documents. They intervened in broad economic and political discussions along with other forms of popular culture: the movies, periodical fiction, popular songs, the comics, theater. In company with editorialists, critics, and statesmen, advertisers interrogated politics and economics. The social world as seen in advertisements no doubt struck many as false and irrelevant, and we should on no account mistake them as transparent or reliable renderings of social experience. Yet advertising proved no more distorted than representations made by party politicians, self-help writers, or businessmen. As the voice of corporate capital, advertisers’ visions of wealth and the social order likely enjoyed an equal or greater popular appeal than others offered in entertainment, the press, or the pulpit. Throughout this study, the passionate critiques and defenses of mass-produced goods and culture reveal Americans’ investment in consumption’s manifold possibilities.⁹ By 1930, advertising was ingrained in American everyday life, not only as a thoroughly integrated tool of industrial capitalism, but also as a widely accepted cultural influence. By 1930, for better

or worse, the United States was a consumer society. In order for that to have happened, advertisers first had to establish their authority with both business and the public.

SERVANTS AND SALESMEN:
ADVERTISING PROFESSIONALISM AND IDEOLOGY

Early in 1909, the legendary Claude C. Hopkins, copy chief of Chicago advertising agency Lord & Thomas, addressed the Sphinx Club, a New York organization of advertisers, agents, and publishers:

From our desks we sway millions. We change the currents of trade. We populate new empires, build up new industries and create customs and fashions. We dictate the food that the baby shall eat, the clothes the mother shall wear, the way in which the home shall be furnished. We are clothed with no authority. Our very names are unknown. But there is scarcely a home, in city or hamlet, where some human being is not doing what we demand. The good advertising man comes pretty close to being an absolute czar.¹⁰

Hopkins's self-satisfied oration sums up the contemporary claims of his profession. Between 1880 and 1930 advertising agents became indispensable to marketing goods. When Hopkins spoke, advertisers already worked for hundreds of businesses and influenced millions of purchasing decisions.¹¹

Advertising men gained their influence because they developed specific expertise: publicizing information about goods to prospective buyers and conveying detailed information about retail customers to those with goods to sell. They became professionals, cultivating their expertise and selling it as a specialized, exclusive commodity. Veteran agent C. E. Raymond said bluntly, "The 'goods' an agency produces is service." Advertising agents developed a professional ethos, based on their skills and alleged independence in judgment.¹² Like other professionals, advertisers organized to promote their expertise and to serve as gatekeepers to professional practice. In addition, they mounted sporadic reform efforts and self-regulation of standards and practices.¹³ Ideals of service to both business and consumers undergirded the profession's legitimacy and hastened its ascendance as a commercial and cultural institution.¹⁴ To understand fully advertising's role in inventing the modern consumer requires an exploration of the service commodity advertisers sold to business and the consuming public.

The advertising business underwent a significant transformation after

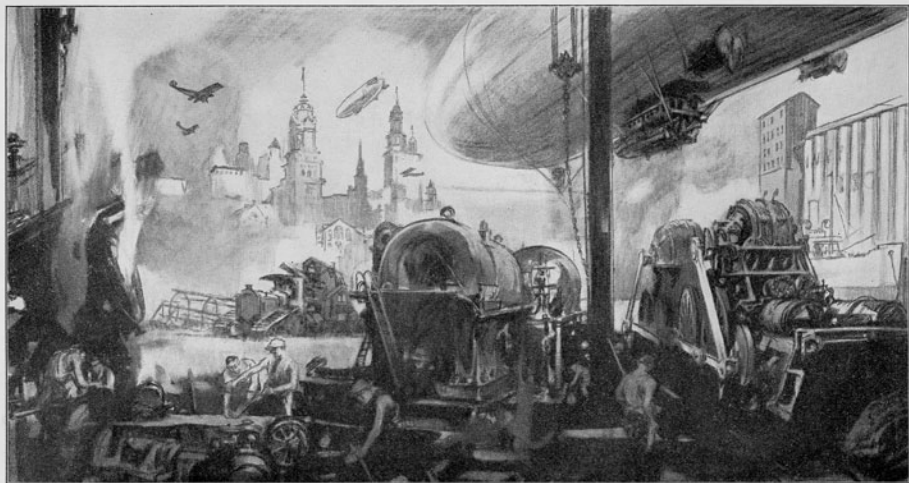
1880. Challenged by industry's needs to expand and rationalize markets, advertising agents changed their methods and redefined their functions. They had originally been speculative brokers in advertising space (newspapers, magazines, signage), but they now turned to preparing and placing advertising artwork and copy in that space for business clients.¹⁵ Ultimately, advertising agents helped invent marketing by identifying and analyzing appropriate segments of the populace who could buy their clients' wares.¹⁶ Advertisers critically enabled the rise to national dominance of branded goods, which were mass-produced and sold under copyrighted and trademarked names. As historian Susan Strasser has shown, the branded goods system assumed its characteristic form by 1920, after a fierce thirty-year struggle over patterns and control of retail distribution. By pinpointing and fostering demand in the retail market for specific brands, advertising tipped the balance of power away from wholesale distributors and retail merchants, who had previously controlled the flow of goods to store shelves and influenced consumers' selections. As Daniel Pope has observed, an advertiser "had to persuade consumers to buy his brand at the same time he convinced dealers that they could profit by stocking it." Manufacturers increasingly used advertising to bypass wholesalers and retailers alike, ultimately winning the struggle to determine which goods made it to the shelves, the market basket, and ultimately the home.¹⁷ In this process advertising emerged as a beneficiary of as well as principal agent in the new distribution.¹⁸

Advertising's primary service to business, then, was creating, maintaining, and increasing demand for goods. To foster demand, advertisers developed expertise in locating, addressing, and ultimately persuading consumers. By 1920, a number of agencies had become involved in their clients' overall business operations. Led by the nation's largest agency, J. Walter Thompson, advertisers routinely researched competitors and distribution conditions. Less frequently, they conducted investigations into markets, gathering information ranging from demographic data to taste preferences.¹⁹ They implemented a range of ancillary services for clients, such as devising brand names (such long-lived brands as Uneeda Biscuit, Karo Syrup, Yuban Coffee, and Kelvinator were all coined by advertising agents), preempting competitors' entry into markets, designing packaging, and originating what eventually became corporate public relations.²⁰ Yet advertisers always accompanied this vision of business acumen by portraying themselves as public servants with information about commodities and values that would enhance the public welfare.²¹ Identifying their clients' interests with the general good of the public and the state, advertisers adopted a stance of enlightened

stewardship. They accomplished this largely by portraying products as offering solutions to otherwise baffling personal difficulties.²² Advertisements depicted products as the means to self-transformation, and ad men held themselves out as the dispensers of happiness and enlightenment. The material modernity offered in advertising placed America at the pinnacle of world civilizations.

Like many different elites, advertisers viewed themselves as guardians of greater values. They linked consumption to national progress, one of the most cherished core beliefs about American life.²³ For advertisers, progress entailed the forward advance of higher civilization through goods; as agents of commerce, advertisers were fundamentally servants of civilization, the sum total of human achievement (fig. 1.1). “Yours is the profession of enlightenment,” one advocate wrote. “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.”²⁴ The trade journal *Printers’ Ink* claimed in 1889 that advertising “is a test of the increasing wants of the people . . . a sign of civilization.” According to advertising writer Edwin Balmer, “The rapidity of our progress as a nation is determined very largely by the efficiency and effectiveness of our advertising . . . Individuals, communities and races are progressive as they acquire new needs—as they learn to make things and to use them.”²⁵ Ad men interpreted the variety and numbers of goods they sold as the raw evidence of the quality of civilization itself. “Look for a nation whose people are not advertisers and you will find a country whose inhabitants are either semi-civilized or savages,” announced one advertising writer.²⁶ “Give me a list of a nation’s wants and I can tell you of the state of that nation’s civilization,” claimed the president of the Alexander Hamilton Institute, a correspondence school. “If their wants are increasing in number and quality, we know that the nation is alive, that it is not decadent. The man whose wants are those of his forefathers [is] making no progress.” The extent of advertising thus reflected a nation’s progress.²⁷ Perhaps the pinnacle of such advertising puffery and self-congratulation was reached in this pious sentiment: “The creator, in his infinite wisdom, could confer no greater benefaction upon an increasing population than that which we find in the one word ‘advertising.’”²⁸

Spreading civilization meant deploying advertising throughout the world. Ad men contrasted the United States’s leadership in advertising and consumption to nascent commerce in other countries.²⁹ Long before the Cold War’s contrasts of capitalism and communism made “underdeveloped” synonymous with “underconsuming,” China and Russia frequently served as



P R O G R E S S

THE Soul of the world has found a new desire. Out of the wreck of war a new branch appears on the tree of life,—world-progress. We have fought, and learned more of both friends and foes than a century of peace had taught us. Through helping others we have helped ourselves.

Peace is here, but no unintelligent peace will satisfy us. The good of human nature requires constructive peace. Out of the eternal past into the eternal future Progress leads on, or casts aside.

Business for man; not man for business, is the watchword of progress. Service to mankind must be our standard of judgment.

What is true of our social and industrial life is true of advertising. The advertising ways of yesterday are

not the ways of today or tomorrow. Here also enters the problem of service to mankind.

We of N. W. Ayer & Son believe our work must be an acceptable contribution to society if it would serve commerce; for commerce must serve society or it is not commerce, but piracy. To make our advertising service true to the spirit of Progress, we must keep our finger on the pulse of humanity and diagnose desire while it is in the very process of development.

Our organization is trained to meet changing conditions. This elasticity accounts for our known ability to increase trade for both the large and small house, the old and the new business. Perhaps these are the reasons why we are this year celebrating our Fiftieth Anniversary.



N. W. AYER & SON

ADVERTISING HEADQUARTERS

PHILADELPHIA

NEW YORK

BOSTON

CLEVELAND

CHICAGO

FIGURE 1.1. "Progress." (N. W. Ayer Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

Madison Avenue's examples of nations whose ignorance of advertising and material desire kept them in semibarbarity.³⁰ Implicit in these views was a corporate anthropology of mass consumption, no less articulate, if much more simplistic, than the complex taxonomies produced in the academy. Advertisers judged civilizations by the number and complexity of their material artifacts. Only the mass-produced goods of industrialism ranked as the highest forms of civilized attainment.³¹

Not surprisingly, advertisers flattered themselves by continually contrasting their wares with the goods of so-called primitive peoples. In a particularly telling example, O'Sullivan's Rubber Heels in 1908 claimed to "bridge the chasm between the barefooted savage and the civilized man." The advertisement demonstrated the instantaneous transition from savagery to civilization with the proper product. The O'Sullivan workman strides purposefully across the frame, the menacing crowd behind him embodying the march of civilization upon a prone Indian's doomed wilderness (fig. 1.2).³² Consumption separated modern nations from decay and decline. "A world without advertising" as one critic wrote in 1907, would resemble nothing so much as "the primitive past, or the undeveloped savagery of the present."³³ In 1927 executive and popular writer Bruce Barton summarized three decades of such thinking:

You go into a savage tribe and what do you find? You find men who have no wants. You find that the savage is perfectly content if he has a skin to wrap around his loins, another skin to keep off the rain, a skin to lie on, and a little food and a fire But suppose that out of an airplane an advertising man dropped into that tribe and brought with him pictures of red neckties and tan shoes, and underwear and new hats, and automobiles and bicycles, and feathers and strings of beads. Instantly there would be in that tribe a transformation. Wants would be kindled, and the desire to satisfy those wants would overcome all other desires, and in obedience to them even a savage is willing to abandon his life of leisure and voluntarily enlist himself in servitude to the creation of civilization.³⁴

The enthusiastic embrace of instant transformation through the talismans of tan shoes and neckties represented the profession's grandest fantasies of influence. Barton's was a corporate anthropology, where primitives still existed in the twentieth century, scarcely removed from their ancestors millions of years before, whose ascent into civilization and true happiness awaited only the timely arrival of Madison Avenue missionaries.³⁵ Himself a preacher's son, Barton later made a specialty of convincing the most powerful corpo-

O'Sullivan's
Heels
of New Rubber

O'SULLIVAN'S
SAFETY-
CUSHION HEEL

D. PAT. JAN. 24, 1899. U.S.

O'Sullivan's Heels of New Rubber bridge the chasm between the barefooted savage and civilized man. The savage walked gracefully because he used his foot muscles and his toes and had the earth for a cushion. The disuse of the foot muscles and the impact of hard leather heels cause improper attitude in walking, which in turn causes flat foot and kindred deformities. Walking is man's natural means of locomotion and is universally conceded to be the healthiest and best exercise.

Heels of New Rubber fitted to your walking shoes enable you to walk naturally, gracefully, and faster, with the same effort. The new rubber absorbs the impact at each step, saves nervous and physical strain, and restores the natural cushion to the human foot. Price, 50c. All dealers. Specify "O'Sullivan's" for new rubber. By mail send 35c. and diagram of heel to the makers.

Valuable Booklet on Walking, Walking Shoes, and Foot-fitting for a postal.

O'Sullivan Rubber Co., Lowell, Mass.

FIGURE 1.2. "O'Sullivan's Heels."

(*Munsey's Magazine*, April 1908, Advertising Section, n.p.)

rate executives to advertise their contributions to civilization and progress as much as a particular product.³⁶

Advertisers thus viewed their work as a benevolent process of destabilization.³⁷ In no uncertain terms, the J. Walter Thompson agency proclaimed, “Advertising is revolutionary. Its tendency is to overturn the preconceived notions, to set new ideas spinning through the reader’s brain, to induce something that they [*sic*] never did before. It is a form of progress, and interests only progressive people.” Agency executive James Webb Young told his University of Chicago advertising classes, “The purpose of advertising is to disturb the status quo.” Advertising served as the “energizing power” of American society, which not only propelled the engines of commerce but also “implanted the modern man’s mind with thousands of desires his great-grandfather knew not of.”³⁸ Advertising’s ultimate boon was its initiation of new desires, which led to greater freedom and unprecedented happiness. Advertising seemed revolutionary because it promised more opportunities for self-cultivation, leisure, and escape from toil.

Copywriters propelled civilization by imparting new knowledge to the citizenry. Advertisers viewed themselves as teaching the public what it wished to know.³⁹ If consumer demand was the focus of the economy, advertisers showed consumers how to develop more intelligent desires. By serving as “the school where consumers are trained to know the true value of commodities,” advertising “has educated the consumer into being a connoisseur.” Advertising was “the most potent educator in regard to the standard of living” and “the schoolmaster of the human race.”⁴⁰ Thus advertisers characterized their sales work as education in the public interest. As the chairman of the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company told an advertising writer, “People subconsciously crave knowledge. Advertising that points a way to improve our homes and our health, that assists us to dress better, to live better and to think better, or that helps us in any way, is the advertising that is vital.” Its educational value appeared not only in shaping buying habits for advertised brands but also in encouraging the public’s extensive curiosity and willingness to adopt the new ideas and values proposed in advertising.⁴¹

MASSES AND MARKETS: ADVERTISING SOCIOLOGY

Never at a loss for stating their own importance, advertisers eagerly interpreted their pervasiveness as power. The N. W. Ayer agency’s 1912 claim—“It is difficult for one not associated with the advertising business to correctly measure the influence of advertising upon the very existence of the aver-

age man”—echoed the sentiments of most agents and numerous clients.⁴² J. George Frederick crowed that an ad man

can put an argument for his product in the newspaper at the breakfast tables of most of the comfortable families in all the cities of the country inside of twenty-four hours. He can now even flash across the continent an illustrated ad via radio. He can put a message in a single periodical which reaches practically every village and town in the whole of the United States and Canada. . . . He can make the very rail fences along the farm roads speak to the passers-by; he can mass the one thousand and one methods of advertising into a concentrated volume of appeal which will make people absorb his thought as through the air they breathe, and as naturally.⁴³

Yet this routine boasting barely concealed ad men’s frustration that their persuasive powers had distinct limits. Professionals often expressed displeasure at their inability to predict, guide, or control consumer spending. One disgruntled executive complained, “If you were able to present Jesus Christ giving the Sermon on the Mount, and said it was sponsored by Chase and Sanborn Coffee, no one would buy any coffee as a result of that favor.”⁴⁴ Consumers did not purchase simply as advertisers exhorted. Sales resistance was the first refuge of the consumer and every advertiser’s bane.

Pressed to develop ever more elaborate and effective sales campaigns, by the 1910s advertisers began studying consumers themselves. As one professional claimed, “Advertising men everywhere are vitally interested in the life of the people, in the conditions under which the common people are obliged to live and the chances that are accorded them for their advancements, their convenience and their pleasure.”⁴⁵ Led especially by J. Walter Thompson, agencies theorized, located, surveyed, and interpreted consumers. Ad men reasoned that they would only achieve greater powers of persuasion through more extensive and specific knowledge of consumers. Speaking effectively to consumers required advertisers to observe and engage consumers in public, in the marketplace, and in the home. Agencies here were joined by others in allied industries, most notably leading national magazines, newspapers, and eventually radio, and the manufacturing corporations themselves. Yet advertisers staked out for themselves a particular expertise in this process. Advertisements sold goods, but advertising agents sold *markets*—ever-changing aggregate representations of consumers distinguished by specific demographic and cultural attributes. Success in advertising came to mean increasing the client’s sales by connecting goods with buyers. The push to sell markets led advertisers in effect to invent “the consumer.” As markets,

consumers became advertisers' stock in trade, commodities continually redesigned and tailored explicitly to individual corporate clients. Having thus identified markets, advertisers sold them to clients and the media. Similarly, the great national magazines, newspapers, and ultimately radio and television did the same. The consumer became the commodity sold by advertising. Advertisers created abstract aggregates (people who bought oatmeal, or middle-class buyers in Cincinnati, for example), representations of buyers; they in turn developed and sold specific traits of those aggregates, the "characteristics" of a desirable market, to businesses. And then, advertisers sold those same attributes to their target markets in the form of specific products. The result was a continuous process of producing not sales but customers. The largest advertising agencies, national media, and manufacturers all collaborated in developing marketing concepts, techniques, and practices. Along with the business academics who established marketing as a field of study, advertisers made clear connections between the rationalization of industrial production and the rationalization of consumption.⁴⁶

In observing marketplace behavior, surveying popular tastes, and testing buyers' aptitudes, advertisers invoked the aura of science in their labors, thus offering clients a shimmering promise of certainty. Advertisers treated different social strata as typified by specific goods and spending habits.⁴⁷ Psychologist Walter Dill Scott asserted, "It is a well-observed fact that different classes of society think differently and that arguments which would appeal to one class would be worthless to another."⁴⁸ In this spirit, advertisers continually sought to classify people by income levels, occupations, regions, and tastes and to correlate such observations with markets. Their many attempts to understand and gauge consumers' tastes, habits, and behavior led ad men to a specific, if crude sociology. In their understandings of the "classes" and "masses," elites and commoners, advertisers created an American society symbolized and compartmentalized by income, tastes, and propensities to spend. Marketers specified basic income brackets: A (\$5,000–10,000 per year); BB (\$3,000–5,000); B (\$2,000–3,000); C (\$1,000–2,000); and D (less than \$1,000).⁴⁹ These categories and divisions persisted with surprising resilience from the Progressive Era through World War II. In most cases, advertisers catered to the comparatively fewer families in the upper BB and B brackets, even though by most calculations, the majority of Americans lived at best at the B level or below. Critical to these designations was the potential for spending; the income brackets represented not only incomes but also the ability to spend.

In this sociology advertisers told themselves that they were distinctly supe-

rior to the common people; the great mass of consumers did not view or experience the world as ad men did. Copywriters tailored arguments and imagery to an audience they believed to be far inferior in income, cultivation, and aspirations.⁵⁰ As one wag put it, “The masses . . . the words should be spelled them asses.” Another summed up the feelings of the profession: “the great buying public of the United States is composed of morons . . . whose intelligence has stopped development.”⁵¹ The images of America that advertisers presented in their work and in their deliberations on consumers reflected their own class interests and experiences as much as any scientific knowledge about their “public.”⁵² While the rudimentary “class” and “mass” distinctions withered easily under scrutiny, in fact advertisers applied pejorative beliefs about mass tastes to those of middle-class status, as well as to working people. However sophisticated their understanding of incomes, advertisers conceived of most consumers, from factory worker to office worker, cleaning woman to clubwoman, as belonging to an amorphous aggregate in need of uplift and incorrigibly beneath the standards of sophistication they held out for themselves. As one writer solemnly reminded colleagues, “The general knowledge of the average individual is quite astonishingly limited, and it is far easier to shoot over the heads of an audience than to be too elementary.”⁵³

The Madison Avenue elite were acutely aware of differences between themselves and the consuming public, and even as they painstakingly parsed the telling differences among income groups, they still held themselves to differ markedly from most consumers. A Thompson man proudly laid out the facts for his colleagues:

None of our writers belongs to a lodge or a civic club; only one in twenty-five ever attends a political meeting; not one ever goes to a public picnic. Only one out of five ever goes to church except on rare occasions. Half never go to Coney Island or to a similar resort; the other half go once in one or two years. This—in a nation that can almost be described by such experiences. Considerably *over* half our writers have never had the experience of living within the average national income of \$1580 a year, and half can't even remember any *relatives* or *friends* who live on that figure! While 5% of all homes have servants, 66% of our writers are blessed with domestics. Only one in eight does his or her own grocery shopping; half buy their own drug supplies and 60% shop in department stores. The men writers are virtually unanimous in their agreement that shopping is something to be avoided entirely. All this in an agency that depends on the retail sale of staple consumer goods to the masses for its principal income!

Although their income depended on the ability to manipulate the public's sense of class distinctions, in private advertisers clung to their difference from all but the most sophisticated and educated buyers. Advertising humor columnist, "Groucho," spoke for many: "I haven't got near enough the consumer yet to know whether he's got me licked or not."⁵⁴

Data from other sources only confirmed advertisers' beliefs about consumers' low tastes and limited intelligence. During World War I the U.S. Army conducted intelligence tests to screen inductees and volunteers to the American Expeditionary Force. Based on dubious assumptions, the test results led to shocking conclusions that immediately sparked heated debate and anxious hand-wringing. Directed by Brahmin psychologist Robert Yerkes, the tests found that the majority of male adult American citizens were illiterate and that 60–70 percent of Americans had levels of intelligence as low as that of a twelve year old. Though these claims were widely contested and ultimately discredited, they temporarily offered significant scientific support for the prejudice that the majority of adult Americans were without basic mental competence and fueled enthusiasm for the emerging eugenics movement.⁵⁵ Significantly, the "twelve-year-old mentality" had a lasting commercial after-life. Advertisers and media executives adopted it when discussing customers and audiences behind closed doors. Moreover, it became the benchmark for conceptualizing markets and addressing consumers.

Paradoxically, the closer advertisers drew to consumers and the greater the success they achieved in effective communication, the more they were determined to uphold cultural barriers between the masses and themselves. The tension between embracing the daily culture of plain people—the consuming public—and distancing itself from the common folk's habits and tastes underlay the profession's development until well after World War II. Moreover, that tension shaped advertising's depictions of personal transformation through commodities. Whatever the democratic justification for mass consumption, in fact ad men sorted consumers into different hierarchical markets. Yet fundamental to advertising sociology was a characterization of social groups *simply* by their possessions; in advertisers' minds consumers were symbolized by the goods they owned. Even as ad men tried to educate consumers to think of themselves in terms of certain products, the inhabitants of Madison Avenue were caught up in this same process, mistaking persons for products. Despite their many field trips to mingle with the masses at Coney Island, to meet Mrs. Consumer by ringing doorbells or passing out samples in groceries, and to practice sales techniques behind the counters of department, chain, and drug stores, ad men felt ill equipped to understand fully the

daily lives of consumers.⁵⁶ This myopia not only informed but ultimately shaped the most influential aspects of advertising sociology: its portrait of American women as the ideal consumer and its construction of the lower-middle and working classes as a mass audience.

COURTING MRS. CONSUMER:
ADVERTISERS AND WOMEN, 1890–1930

The Charles Daniel Frey advertising agency summarized what was by 1930 long-standing and conventional advertising wisdom:

She is 16; she is 30; she is 65. She sells eggs in the country, notions in a department store, bonds on Wall Street. She is a graduate of the fourth grade, high school, or occasionally Smith. She wears \$15 frocks, home-sewn dresses, Chanel gowns. She is a drudge, a hoyden, a help-mate, a lady; she is the aggregate American woman . . . and, in her various ways, she is the spender of the nation. Deciding how the bulk of her family's money shall be divided, she controls the profits of many manufacturers. Extravagant, frugal; wise, foolish; fickle, dependable; she holds your business, in all likelihood, in the hollow of her hand.⁵⁷

As spenders, women composed the market for virtually all forms of household goods. James Collins in 1901 neatly summed up a fundamental industry tenet: "The advertiser talks vaguely of a creature which he calls, variously, 'he,' 'it,' 'clientele,' and 'the public,' yet that creature is woman, pure and simple."⁵⁸ Through their responsibilities for homemaking and spending, women constituted the vast majority of the consuming public. From the late 1880s till after World War II, it was a commercial commonplace (admittedly overblown) that women were responsible for 85 percent of all purchasing decisions, with influence over all the rest.⁵⁹ Only that advertising which effectively addressed women would successfully sell goods. Roland Marchand has observed, "No facet of the advertiser-audience relationship held such consequence for advertising content as the perception by the overwhelmingly male elite that it was engaged primarily in talking to masses of women."⁶⁰ Not only did male advertisers believe that their audience was predominantly composed of women, but the result of their work was the creation of powerful gender prescriptions and images. It would be impossible to understand the history of mass consumption fully without acknowledging the centrality of men writing to women.⁶¹ The pervasive images of ideal spending and women's roles that made a profound impact on women's lives were shaped accord-

ing to advertisers' perspectives as corporate businessmen.⁶² Agency sage Earnest Elmo Calkins intoned in 1930, "Woman has recreated merchandising in her own image." While he undoubtedly meant to compliment women on their lasting beneficial impact on marketing and design, more often the opposite was true.⁶³ Advertisers envisioned women according to business interests, recasting women's work in male terms while promulgating an ethos of consumption as a natural female trait.

The focus on women shaped the use of early consumer "psychology," principles of copywriting, development of marketing plans, and product design. In an early formulation of advertising psychology, Walter Dill Scott in 1903 claimed that the key to effective advertising was suggestion. By implanting an idea in the consumer's memory through repetition and saturation of the visual environment, rather than attempting overtly to compel or persuade prospects with logic, advertising could gain sales.⁶⁴ Consumers responded to suggestion because human beings did not act according to strict rationality. "It was once supposed that suggestion was something abnormal and that reason was the common attribute of men," Scott contended. "Today we are finding that suggestion is of universal application to all persons, while reasoning is a process that is exceptional, even among the wisest. We reason rarely, but act under suggestion constantly."⁶⁵ Suggestion and primal emotion were keys to opening consumers' hearts and wallets.

Others connected the notion to long-standing associations of the feminine with the irrational: women responded principally to emotional, irrational appeals. Most male advertisers believed that women were less capable of "reason" than men, and therefore, successful advertising to women would have to be based on suggestion and sentimental depictions, images that aroused feeling without inducing a conscious chain of reasoning. "Men as a class are not as much influenced by advertising as women are. Men are more philosophical and do not yield as readily to outside influences. They are 'on to the game,' as it were," one expert told the advertising journal *Mahin's Magazine* in 1903.⁶⁶ By contrast, women allegedly were more emotional, more open to the subconscious influences of beautiful illustrations or helpful hints and the blandishments of sales voices. "Woman is more artistic, more influenced by sentiment, and cares more for details than men. . . . Generally speaking, she reads more advertising than men, and believes more," observed expert copywriter S. Roland Hall. "The minute a woman reads an advertisement, by her actions she brings to mind that rare melodious air written ages ago to commemorate the love of a maiden fair, and how her first glance toward her favorite swain surprised her, entitled, 'I Was Happy 'Till I

Met You, But I'm All Excited Now.'"⁶⁷ Such facetious commentary indicated advertisers' ambivalence about the use of suggestion. Ad men found suggestion very appealing, but they were troubled by its implications for human self-control. For one thing, suggestion worked most effectively through unconscious means: consumers balked at admitting advertising's overt influence on their actions. Scott cautioned, "Although we do obey commands, we are unwilling to admit it. We like to think of ourselves as independent beings, who act only because it is the reasonable thing to do and because we want to." The effect of suggestion on the subconscious challenged advertisers' notions of autonomy; although there was nothing inherently gendered in such theories, advertisers generally referred only to women when speaking of the malleability of human minds through suggestion.⁶⁸ Mrs. Consumer would take suggestion, while Mr. Consumer stood firm. To admit differently would erode the crucial barrier advertisers maintained between their female audience and themselves.

Advertisers further enhanced their notions of women consumers with the contemporary advent of the "reason-why" style of advertising, which emphasized appeals to self-interest. Copywriters assembled a sequential logical argument built around key attributes of the product's service to the consumer. First associated with Chicago's Lord & Thomas agency and advertising agent Albert Lasker, the style's adherents asserted that although most consumers were unsophisticated, naive, and ignorant, they did possess "common sense," a practical point of view grounded firmly in their own self-interest. The female consumer was unintelligent but still had the necessary smarts to make informed decisions. Reason-why copy thus deployed fact-laden, simple argumentation, unadorned by artifice or even illustrations. Copywriter John E. Kennedy's phrase "salesmanship in print" typified this approach; the most successful advertising would resemble the manner and voice of a good drummer persuading the consumer in plain language with his or her needs foremost in mind.⁶⁹

Although most advertisers viewed women as more susceptible to emotion in selling, reason-why advocates claimed that their approach to copy was especially effective in selling Mrs. Consumer. That such leading brands of domestic wares as Ivory Soap, Campbell's Soup, Uneeda Biscuit, Old Dutch Cleanser, Cream of Wheat, and Kellogg's Corn Flakes all utilized sentimental or pictorial advertising—all based on suggestion—did not deter reason-why partisans. They viewed women as busy and shrewd shoppers who responded to a convincing sales argument, not subtle suggestion or attractive illustrations. One woman advertiser commented, "A woman today doesn't buy

things as blindly as the funny papers would have us believe. She reads and forms her own opinions. She looks for proof of the claims made for a thing, and before an advertisement can induce her to spend her money, it must first convince her that the proposition is worth while; for the woman of today has a pretty keen sense of values, and it is getting good values that pleases her, not the mere spending of money, as a great many advertisers seem to imagine.” Women consumers in fact approached their spending in a businesslike fashion. Another advocate stated this view even more explicitly: “Women are not to be made buyers by pretty-polly talk If there is a hollow ring to your advertisement, if the coin of your logic be spurious, she will detect it Despite all the sarcastic reflections upon women’s reasoning owners, they enjoy reasoning—sound reasoning—and they are willing to pay close attention to it, and be convinced by it.”⁷⁰

The struggle of reason-why and suggestion dominated the trade for nearly a generation after 1900, as agencies fiercely competed for business and struggled to convert new clients to advertising. Yet these debates proved inconclusive. Advertisers on both sides of the battle believed that women did not simply use a cold-blooded economic calculus in making purchasing decisions. Moreover, they agreed that ad men had to present their appeals in simple terms, without relying heavily on elaborate reasoning: Mrs. Consumer could not pass the army intelligence tests any more than her husband. As Christine Frederick, a commercial home economist and marketing consultant, put the matter, “I really believe that the average woman’s vocabulary would be only 1200 words Mrs. Average Consumer does not know more, intellectually, than the present 14-year old adolescent, if as much.”⁷¹ Agency experts urged the heavy use of sentiment. Advertisers courted resentment and resistance if they presented consumption simply as a matter of logic, or talked above their prospects’ heads. A female commentator cautioned reason-why adherents: “For centuries women have been struggling to establish the fact that they are the intellectual equals of their brothers if the use of his [the ad man’s] product is simply a matter of intelligence, I must give it due attention—I must either buy it and use it, or be able to give reasons for not wanting it, reasons so forcibly logical that they will have weight against his [The] ad man has taken a mean advantage of me.”⁷² Logic was a primary tool of business, but of much less use at home. Helen Woodward, one of the most famous copywriters at this time, recalled, “We learned that women seldom buy anything through logical reasoning, not even for their babies. When you are selling a product to millions, you must present even its facts to the average mind and the average mind has nothing to do with reason.” She added, “To

sell articles to men it is often wise to appear to reason with them, but you must be careful merely to appear to do so—never actually to be logical. Or you will sell no goods.”⁷³ Yet the prolonged debate between suggestion and reason-why hid advertisers’ shared assumptions about women. Since women were more susceptible to emotional appeals than men, advertising could persuade women by first addressing their sentiments to attract their interest.⁷⁴ Ad men thus addressed the consumer’s self-interest, preferably through a combination of appeals to their emotions and the reason-why “facts” about the product that associated it with those feelings.

However, advertisers fretted that as men, they were at a pronounced disadvantage in addressing women. Effective copywriting depended on advertisers’ finding women to provide “the feminine viewpoint” for their products or cultivating it in themselves.⁷⁵ “There are too many advertisements written by men and not enough by women,” claimed a leading stove manufacturer in 1909. “The woman knows where lies the human element of the thing that goes into the home, better than any man that lives.” Women could speak with women more easily; most men, no matter how knowledgeable, simply did not possess adequate experience with goods and women’s work. “As a general rule, a woman knows much more about a garment than the most loquacious salesman can tell her,” another writer observed. “Anyhow, he can’t fool her very much about it. She could give a much more intelligent description of it than he could; that is, her description would be more lucidly given, and be more easily understood by women than would his.”⁷⁶ Although the profession largely remained closed to women, especially in its management and business sectors, some women did find great success in the creative aspects of advertising, writing to women or consulting on the “women’s viewpoint,” from the earliest days of the business. Women prepared artwork and wrote copy, and in Boston, Kate Griswold published one of the earliest trade journals, *Profitable Advertising*, which highlighted women in advertising.⁷⁷ Women ran agencies and managed accounts. In large agencies they almost exclusively staffed the all-important “checking” departments, monitoring published advertisements and ensuring that clients were properly billed for them. Perhaps most famously, at J. Walter Thompson co-owner Helen Resor founded and ran the “women’s” department, which trained women as copywriters and executives to specialize in the household and beauty products that were the agency’s staple accounts.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the business overall remained a male domain.

Advertisers developed two major strategies to portray women as consumers. The first was to describe spending as an inborn skill or sensibility. Hence,

consuming was women's labor as ordained by nature. Women were not only superior but natural consumers, better than men by birth. Shopping and spending came easily to women in this view, and advertisers accordingly portrayed brand preferences and taste as signs of innate instinct. Cadillac announced, "American women have a sort of sixth sense, by which they know the best in everything An American woman usually knows, unerringly, the one product in its particular field in which she can properly feel pride of possession."⁷⁹ Whether celebrating women for their choice in goods, encouraging them in the selection of specific brand-name products, or simply urging them to consume more, advertisers claimed that women were the natural and proper sovereigns of spending. Women "knew" values in goods, whereas men did not.⁸⁰ Women were attentive to practical details of housekeeping, dress, and social position.⁸¹ Even as advertisers celebrated women's increasingly public roles by linking suffrage, careers, and personal independence to the marketplace, the underlying assumption was that women were innately suited to consumption.⁸²

Yet if women were by nature better consumers, why would they need advertisers? If executives celebrated women in public, in private they often argued that women in reality were ignorant and incompetent shoppers. Many women, they contended, were scarcely able to cope with the difficulties of homemaking or even to identify brand names for popular products. Mildred Holmes of J. Walter Thompson described the discouraging results of door-to-door housewife surveys where canvassers struggled to elicit from ignorant and distracted homemakers the brand names they used: "The routine of housekeeping forces the many untrained women who follow it, daily to act upon ideas they do not formulate. So it is that the average housewife, pressed for answers and reasons becomes inarticulate." The consumer, reminded Claude Hopkins, "cannot judge values. Nor can you and I."⁸³ Advertisers told themselves that the housewife was virtually helpless in her work without advertising's education, which paradoxically taught women how to fulfill their nature as consumers. "Is there one of us," asked Louise Davis, "who, in her earliest housekeeping days, hasn't faltered, almost panic-stricken, in a crowded grocery store, confronted by some bustling, pencil-poising clerk; who hasn't glanced wildly about at shelves and counters seeking help; who hasn't gasped, at last, 'Yes, that's the kind I want!' feeling unalterably reassured at the sight of a friendly, familiar advertised package or label?"⁸⁴ Advertising enabled women to do their work more easily and thereby realize their true selves. If domesticity was still accorded to women as "natural," ad men worked to enforce consuming as women's role.

Advertisers' second strategy was to portray consumption in business terms, often drawing on scientific management and the efficiency movement popularized by Frederick W. Taylor and others, along with home economists. Uncomfortable writing about products used by women, they found it convenient to recast spending in male terms. Advertisers described housework as a business and urged women to acquire business methods and equipment in their homes.⁸⁵ "A good workman needs good tools," pronounced one ad for the Florence cookstove. The Nepee Dutch Kitchenet firm hired an efficiency engineer to analyze the work of meal preparation. Conserving time and steps, eliminating wasteful motions, and saving the worker labor and energy—all part of the agenda of industrial scientific management—lent legitimacy to kitchen and household products.⁸⁶ These strategies were well illustrated in the marketing of the Hoosier Kitchen Cabinet. Combining cupboard, food storage, and work space in one central area, the Hoosier could save steps, energy, and time; it challenged conventional kitchen arrangements, and its design became the centerpiece of Christine Frederick's popular 1912 articles on household efficiency. A one-dollar-down installment plan brought the Hoosier within easy reach of thousands. The ads equated housework with other professions and with a social movement of national import: "You will get the same enjoyment out of owning a Hoosier Cabinet that an efficient engineer gets from a perfect new tool. You will find delight in your own greater efficiency; in your ability to do better work with less effort; in the easy system which suddenly makes itself part of your kitchen work." Hoosier consumers formed a national "club" led by a "Council of Kitchen Scientists." By 1916, the company could claim, "A million women have realized their right to a Hoosier. Are their time and health worth more consideration than yours?"⁸⁷ Thus individual interest, political entitlement, and social welfare all combined in the equation of housework with industrial and managerial efficiency (fig. 1.3).

Men were also encouraged to view their wives' work as on par with their own. Invoking Uncle Sam, Hoosier invited men to "become a self-appointed efficiency engineer. Rule against time and energy wasters. Provide the labor-saving equipment your 'home superintendent' should have—the conveniences she deserves." Hoover vacuum cleaners urged male consumers to view housework "from her point of view" and to provide their wives the same modern technologies that led to success in men's businesses. A happy young couple in a Campbell's Soup ad counted the blessings provided by the already familiar red and white cans—economy, nutrition, convenience. The husband's last word was the capstone: "That's sense. That's business."⁸⁸

Why 700,000 American Women Use HOOSIER CABINETS

- Save miles of steps
- Save hours of time
- Save supplies
- Save money
- Save nerves
- Save health

From California to Maine you'll not find a town without at least one kitchen made up-to-date by a Hoosier Cabinet. Some entire communities have model Hoosier Cabinet Kitchens.

— Here Are Other Reasons Why So Many Women Buy It:

- (1) PERFECTLY SANITARY—Take it entirely apart in one minute for cleaning or a sun bath.
- (2) MATCHLESS CONVENIENCE—40 labor-saving features—17 entirely new.
- (3) LIFETIME CONSTRUCTION.
- (4) YOUR MONEY BACK if you're not delighted.

The HOOSIER CABINET
NATIONAL STEP SAVER
For American Women

\$1.00 puts White Beauty, the New HOOSIER, in Your Home

You simply select the Hoosier Kitchen Cabinet you want and pay the Hoosier agent \$1.00. He delivers your Hoosier at once. Balance is payable in small weekly dues of only \$1.00.

There are no extras to pay; no interest. The low cash price we fix prevails strictly. This price, based on enormous sales, is now lower than that of common cupboard cabinets.

But Only a Limited Number

of Hoosiers are sold on this plan. Each Hoosier agent sets the week of

THE HOOSIER MANUFACTURING COMPANY, 1410 Sidney Street, NEW CASTLE, INDIANA

Only one dealer in a town sells Hoosiers

his own sale. You have needed a Hoosier Cabinet a long time. This is an exceptional opportunity to own one without ever missing its small cost. Grasp this opportunity.

Write Now for "You and Your Kitchen"

This 48-page illustrated book tells what you want to know about your kitchen and the Hoosier Cabinet. With it we'll send prices and full information, without obligation to you, free of charge.

Branch—Pacific Building, San Francisco

Women all over the United States praise the Hoosier. You need it, too

FIGURE 1.3. "Why 700,000 American Women Use Hoosier Cabinets."

(Saturday Evening Post, October 24, 1914, 44)

The best thing advertisers could say about housework was that it was “The World’s Greatest Business”. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* described the home as “The First Factory” and the housewife as plant manager: “There raw materials are being converted into finished products, flour into pastry, cloth into clothes. There she competes with other men’s wives in the dressing of her children, in the dainties on her table, in the tasty arrangement of the living-room. And she reads her own trade journal, in which she studies the market for the purchase of her raw materials, and learns the alchemy of her own cooking.”⁸⁹ In purchasing guided by the ads in mass-circulation magazines, middle-class professionalism and women’s natural traits converged. No greater compliment did Mr. Advertiser pay Mrs. Consumer than to equate her work with his.

Among themselves, advertisers admitted their unfamiliarity with housework and their inability to describe it convincingly. Such unease encouraged their tendency to demean housework even while praising it. Writer Amos Bradbury kept house for his wife to generate fresh copy ideas. “It was surprising to me what a very different picture I got of the housekeeper’s job, down there on my knees on the bathroom floor. . . . I began to think of the need for new household appliances to banish still more of the drudgery of housework. And I began to have a greater appreciation for existing labor-saving devices. I wondered as I worked if my wife or our ex-maid thought as much about this while she worked at the same old routine jobs day after day as I was thinking.”⁹⁰ This patronizing or joking tone often surfaced when discussing homemakers. Advertisers admonished themselves to maintain a realistic picture of women’s work and their low mental aptitude. “It is all very well to idealize the consumer in our advertising illustrations—to picture the housewife at her five o’clock potato peeling, clad in a two-hundred dollar Lanvin model in a spotless kitchen, immaculate, unhurried, unflustered—but there is no need to deceive ourselves,” cautioned hard-sell specialists Ruthrauff and Ryan.⁹¹ Mrs. Consumer had to be both gifted and savvy enough to earn praise but incompetent enough to require Mr. Advertiser’s help.

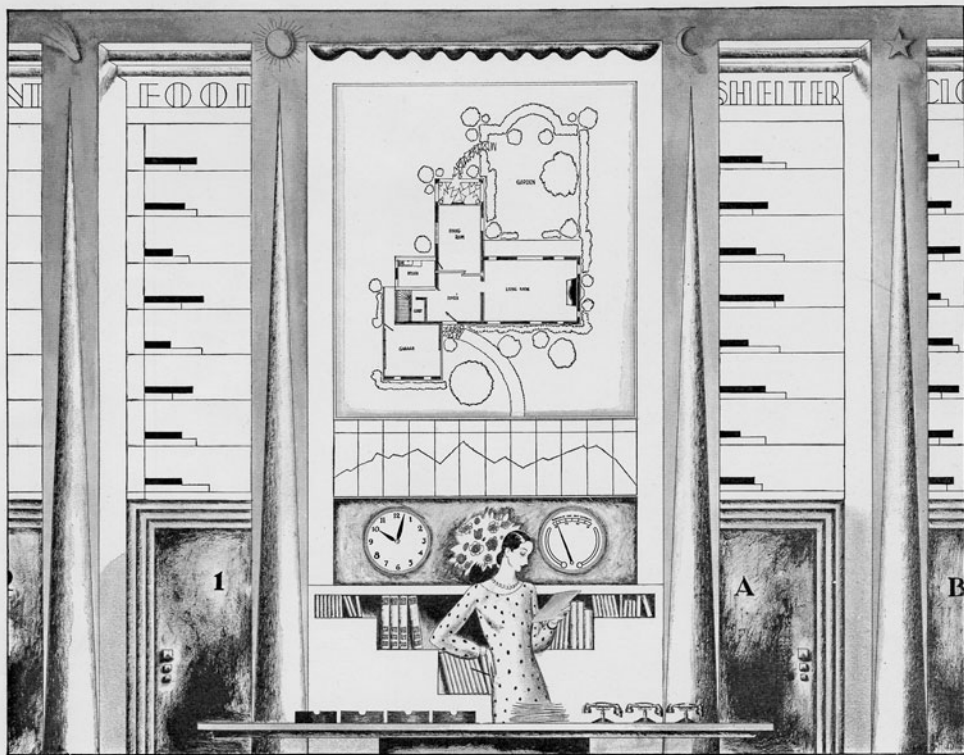
If they privately derided women’s housework, ad men quickly acknowledged her purchasing power. A standard ad industry cliché, again borrowed from business, viewed the housewife as the home executive or general purchasing agent (GPA):

Businesses may have their treasurers, . . . but homes have their wives who do the same work in 25 million independent businesses, the households of America. Without elaborate research, without the counsel and con-

ferences of big business, *these* executives spend annually 40 billion dollars. They spend it amazingly well, too, though they are not specialized purchasing agents any more than they are specialized cooks, or interior decorators, or educators, or furnace tenders.

Thus N. W. Ayer described “The Little Woman, G_{PA}” (fig 1.4). While this image was favorable, it still allowed ad men the superior edge. Even if the homemaker were a skilled purchasing agent, she was not a professional, such as advertisers, engineers, or scientists. If actual business purchasing agents utilized graphs, figures, and specifications, the Little Woman had to rely on the manufacturer of advertised goods. Her success embodied another’s expertise and not her own. She needed no tedious technical data (nor could she use it) but only an advertised trademarked name.⁹² Christine Frederick expressed this trusting partnership between women and business, made possible by advertising. “The printed page acts as a constant inter-communicating telephone or radio between manufacturer and Mrs. Consumer,” Frederick contended. “They were strangers before this was the fact, but are in effect now co-partners in advancing American standards of living.”⁹³ In her great home office Mrs. Consumer was sovereign, but she unavoidably depended on advertisers to do her work.

The contradictions of an instinctive yet incompetent consumer blossomed in a 1928 Thompson series for the Piggly Wiggly grocery chain, which pioneered self-service in grocery retailing.⁹⁴ “And Now . . . Even Husbands Can See What Their Wives Have Accomplished!” one ad proclaimed. “In their own domain of shopping for food stuffs wives are regularly doing the very thing that makes husbands feel a little cocky, when they achieve it in *their* business. Week in and week out many women are today using the business method of buying that men call ideal” (fig. 1.5). “Is She a Better Business Man Than Her Husband?” another ad needed. Self-service was not presented merely as a shopping convenience but as “a nation-wide movement sponsored by modern women.” Freedom of choice, unassisted by clerks, was not only liberation but also total autonomy: “At last she is entirely free to choose for herself. Through this new plan of buying foods, she can make her own knowledge pay full dividends.” But this movement was grounded in the mutual trust of consumer and manufacturer and not in her own innate skills. “From the vast number of brands and grades of foods offered for sale today,” the ads promised, “the able men in charge of Piggly Wiggly have sifted out the few very best of each kind.” The consumer thus depended on male experts’ doing the *real* choosing to make her a better businessman than her hus-



The Little Woman, G · P · A ·

BUSINESSES may have their treasurers, their comptrollers, even their boards of directors who watch expenditures. By careful perusal of charts and graphs, by weighty conferences, they determine how annual income is to be spent.

But homes have their wives who do the same work in 25 million independent businesses, the households of America. Without elaborate research, without the counsel and the conferences of big business, these executives spend annually 40 billion dollars. They spend it amazingly well, too, though they are not specialized purchasing agents any more than they are specialized cooks, or interior decorators, or educators, or furnace tenders.

Their decisions are governed by the welfare of their families. "Is this breakfast food better for my children to eat?" . . . "Will this davenport and these curtains, this lamp and this piano, make my home a pleasanter place to be?" . . . "Will this school give my daughter what I know she needs?" . . . "Would another kind of heating equipment make our home more comfortable, more healthful next winter?" These are samples of the questions they ask.

Always they visualize the ideal, these wives and mothers, before they consider economies. But they watch for economies as few business men do. By aptitude and training they are excellent shoppers. The

competition for their attention, the courting of their favor, is tremendous. The way to their hearts and their purses is not easy, but it is clear. These general purchasing agents are readers of advertising, consistent, critical readers of advertising. It has been estimated that they buy more than eighty per cent of all advertised merchandise.

Addressing the women of America on the printed page is an art, but an art that can be applied with almost the exactitude of a science. Already it has meant the growth and continued success of many concerns who manufacture products useful in the business of making a home and rearing a family.

N. W. AYER & SON

ADVERTISING HEADQUARTERS PHILADELPHIA
NEW YORK BOSTON CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO

FIGURE 1.4. "The Little Woman, GPA." (N. W. Ayer Collection, Series 6, Box 14, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)



No delay at a Piggly Wiggly store. Baskets in hand you shop at just the speed you wish.



You choose according to your own judgment from the Piggly Wiggly shelves and know that you are saving money.

And Now... Even HUSBANDS Can See What Their Wives Have Accomplished

*This new Method of Household Buying, Sponsored by
American Women, has become a Nation-wide Movement*

TEMPTING meals every day of the year—and enough allowance left over to buy herself a new hat!

Until recently that's about all the thought most American husbands have given to their wives' housekeeping. Mighty little credit for all the skill it takes to serve food that stirs up appetites and keeps down costs!

Now, women have had a chance to show what they are really accomplishing. At last men are forced to admit it! In their own domain of shopping for food stuffs wives are regularly doing the very thing that makes husbands feel a little cocky, when they achieve it in their business. Week in and week out many women are today using the business method of buying that men call ideal.

Women's wide knowledge of foods, their feeling for quality and value, their natural independence, have made them sponsors for a nation-wide movement in household buying. It is sweeping the country from coast to coast. It centers in an utterly new

type of store—Piggly Wiggly. Stores that are multiplying at the rate of one a day.

Use your own knowledge of values, choose as you please

With no salesman constantly at hand to over-persuade, you make your own uninfluenced choice in the Piggly Wiggly store.

You take anything you please from the attractive open shelves, examine it leisurely, decide.

There, the choice foods of five continents have been assembled by experts for you to single out what you wish.

With all plainly marked prices before you, you can compare values and know just what your saving is.

Luxuries for special occasions—favorite goods for every day. Here they all are, spread out for you to look them over. From the huge number of grades and kinds on the market, the finest of each food have been sifted out by the experienced Piggly Wiggly buyers, for your choice.



Alluring dishes are made from the choice foods you buy at Piggly Wiggly.

Quickly, or unhurriedly—you shop exactly as you wish, setting your own pace. You simply read the price tags and help yourself. There are no clerks to wait for—no delays of any kind. And you choose on merit alone.

This plan of operation means that you pay less

How easy it is to cut the budget week in and week out with the uniform low prices at Piggly Wiggly. You use your own knowledge of values to save money—to profit by Piggly Wiggly's economical plan of operation. No wonder that over 2650 Piggly Wiggly stores have sprung up and prospered in a few swift years!

To shop as you've always longed to—to buy more delicious food and yet save a bigger margin on your allowance—to surprise a rather complacent husband—join the 2,000,000 other women all over the country who are marketing by this new plan. Visit the Piggly Wiggly store in your neighborhood today.

© P. W. Adv. Co., 1928

By painstaking tests the experienced Piggly Wiggly buyers select the world's choice foods for you.



All prices are shown on ringing tags. Compare values, then make your own choice, uninfluenced by clerks. Just help yourself and save money at the Piggly Wiggly stores.

An easy way to save money

PIGGLY WIGGLY STORES

The finest kinds of each food selected for you to choose from



A SERVICE NOW OFFERED IN OVER 800 CITIES AND TOWNS

FIGURE 1.5. "And Now . . . Even Husbands Can See What Their Wives Have Accomplished."

(Good Housekeeping, March 1928, 185)

band.⁹⁵ The Thompson ads hedged their bets as well; in addition to the copy's emphasis on the consumer's competence and independence, illustrations showed her chicly attired, attended by maids and chauffeurs. The ads also did not reveal that the Piggly Wiggly "system" strictly limited the number of brands and items on the shelves, reducing the "very best of each kind" to the product lines that were most profitable for the retailer.⁹⁶ This, then, was the vision of women consumers at the height of 1920s prosperity: women were independent, sure of their skills, and willing participants in the adventure of shopping, but always the junior partners of the male domains of production and publicity.⁹⁷ Underneath, the female consumer was still in need of others to help. Women would realize their freedom only as freedom of choice.

By 1930, advertisers' collective vision of women was clear: behind every successful homemaker was a man from Madison Avenue. The imagery of smart, modern sophistication concealed incompetence and juvenile intelligence. Advertisers were beholden to millions of women whom they considered their inferiors in every conceivable standard—knowledge, cultivation, aspirations. These professionals thus were compelled to profess loyalty and dedication to women while feeling at every turn superior to them. Such dependence on the habits, interests, budgets, and attention of supposedly emotive and illogical women fostered resentment that would emerge fully when the economy ran aground. That same alienation colored advertisers' relationships and perceptions of the mass public of consumers. Advertising's construction of "the masses" can best be seen in its relationship with radio listeners, the most spectacular grouping of the American public the profession had yet encountered.

"THE PEOPLE WHO BUY TOOTHPASTE":

ADVERTISERS AND THE RADIO AUDIENCE, 1920–1935

Although advertisers had addressed large aggregates for decades, their conquest of broadcast radio as an advertising medium gave them audiences of millions, far outstripping anything they had ever achieved in print. With radio came spectacular commercial success. Yet the successful, even intimate contact with listener-consumers threatened the barriers that advertisers carefully maintained between themselves and the masses. As a result, advertisers' opinions of consumers fell much further. The more successful the selling, the greater the contempt advertisers had for the consuming public. Radio's democratic cultural promise and demographic access blurred the cultural divisions between Madison Avenue and Main Street. The closer they came to

consumers, the more fiercely advertisers maintained the gulf between themselves and the masses in radio-land.

Radio's status as an advertising-based medium was neither inevitable nor expected in 1920 when KDKA's broadcast of the Warren G. Harding–James M. Cox election demonstrated broadcasting's viability. Yet by the decade's end, broadcasting had become thoroughly commercialized. Scores of advertisers placed millions of dollars of business on national networks to broadcast "entertainment" containing some commercial message. Using broadcast radio to convey their clients' sales messages prompted advertising agencies to become producers of entertainment (the programs), as well as the commercial announcements that were their stock in trade. The medium produced vast sums for agencies and clients, often beyond all expectations. "The people—the advertising people—during the eighteen years or so of radio's rise and decline were like children turned loose in a candy store," remembered one writer.⁹⁸ As they developed radio departments to produce programming, advertisers not only built highly lucrative businesses but also found their ideas about consumers transformed. For radio not only gave national ad men a greater audience, but by its very nature as aural communication, radio also changed advertisers' ideas about their audiences.

Radio was not inevitably a commercial enterprise, and many early listeners, broadcasters, and advocates passionately opposed any commercialization of the medium. Indeed, as Susan Douglas astutely observes, "More than the movies, mass magazines, or television (and up until the Internet) radio has been the mass medium through which the struggles between rampant commercialism and a loathing of that commercialism have been fought out over and over again."⁹⁹ Although some broadcasters viewed radio as a commercial proposition from the first, most advertising agents opposed the commercialization of radio for many years. At best, they were ambivalent, perceiving that audiences expected "free entertainment" and resented commercial interruptions of their listening enjoyment. Often radio enthusiasts themselves, ad men of the early 1920s protested against commercial broadcasting as vehemently as other audience members. In 1925 a commentator who had examined hundreds of letters from listeners to the government Radio Division concluded:

There is a strong public sentiment against those stations which go in for advertising too strongly and the direct advertising now being broadcast is rapidly building up a strong prejudice against all forms of advertising over the radio. . . . In the minds of intelligent radio fans, broadcast advertising

of all kinds is considered a destructive influence closely allied with trickery and deceit. . . . An army of fans, perhaps a majority, looks upon broadcasting as an advertising medium with antagonistic disfavor, and bitterly resents the increasing attempts of stations to make broadcasting profitable by means of paid publicity.¹⁰⁰

The chairman of the Federal Radio Division even more emphatically stated the case against direct radio advertising in 1927. "The business man who employs direct radio advertising as a selling force is working against himself. . . . I know from the many letters we receive that he makes numerous enemies."¹⁰¹ Although advertising programs for such early sponsors as Happiness Candy, A&P, and Goodrich seemingly brought about increased sales to those sponsors, so-called direct advertising (messages exceeding a brief mention of a sponsor's name and product) continually provoked sharp protest against the invasion of what one listener called "God's free air." This resentment was best captured by a listener writing in 1925 to Louisville's WHAS, "If it's the last act of my life, I'm going to invent something to turn off my radio during those advertising talks, and turn it on again when the music starts!"¹⁰²

Ad men shied away from using radio as well due to its ephemeral messages. Accustomed to print, they disdained a medium of uncertain range and temporary duration, and they remained loath to spend clients' money for mere "publicity," the brief sponsor mentions of so-called indirect advertising. Barred from offering full-fledged sales messages, and with few reliable means to check radio circulation, ad men deemed broadcasting a foolish investment.¹⁰³ Only with RCA's heavily capitalized launching of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1926 on an explicit advertising basis, and the subsequent successes of advertised popular programs (most notably, *Amos 'n' Andy*), did advertising executives overcome their resistance.¹⁰⁴ Not until late 1928 did most major agencies establish their own fledgling radio departments and encourage clients to add broadcasting to their marketing plans.¹⁰⁵

What brought ad agencies and their clients to radio and kept them there was simple: it moved goods. The influential George Washington Hill, president of American Tobacco Company, told both his ad agency and NBC that radio boosted Lucky Strike sales over 47 percent in 1928. Similarly, products such as Pepsodent (*Amos 'n' Andy*), Ipana Toothpaste (*The Ipana Troubadors*) and Vaseline (*Real Folks*) enjoyed vastly expanded markets as a result of radio exposure.¹⁰⁶ By 1930, one agency executive could claim, "We have had several cases of where our clients were asked to go before meetings for example, to

tell about the results of their radio advertising and they have refused to do so because they did not want their competitors to know just how good it was Most everybody on the air does his best to keep the facts from getting to anybody in tangible form.”¹⁰⁷ That nearly 12 million homes possessed radios (about 40 percent of the total) by 1930 convinced advertisers that radio was a permanent addition to American social life. More important, as one executive noted, radio homes comprised “the cream of the middle class market of the country.”¹⁰⁸ By 1940 a veteran NBC executive could frankly admit, “It’s very hard to use radio and not make a success of it. . . . The kind of results we get just read, I admit, something like a fairy tale.”¹⁰⁹

Why was radio so powerful as a sales medium? Its aural element, the sound of the human voice, promised to reconstitute the ideal face-to-face relationship of consumer and vendor, which print advertising lacked.¹¹⁰ Copywriters had long labored to create sales arguments from the consumer’s point of view, written in simple, unintimidating language. For ad writers, the ideal copy evoked the friendly manner and personal authority of a good salesman, who could persuade the most uninterested or resistant consumer.¹¹¹ Radio promised to restore that personal element of salesmanship—intimacy—that had been lost in the print medium, to national advertising. Speech would collect a much larger and more responsive audience than the printed page. Although radio did not, of course, entail actual face-to-face contacts, the fiction of a direct conversation was cited repeatedly as the source of its hypnotic charm. “The radio message comes through the medium of an announcer’s voice,” one advocate explained, “[which is] naturally more interesting than cold, silent, type characters.”¹¹² One commentator noted that “broadcasting most closely resembles personal salesmanship in that the spoken message goes directly into the ears of the radio audience.” Another radio executive made the link explicit between radio’s aural delivery and salesmen, observing, “Unquestionably that is the explanation of the success of radio—it is the familiar voice in the home by invitation.”¹¹³ The restoration—indeed a remaking—of personal intimacy was the key to radio’s success with listeners. Broadcasting provided the equivalent of the salesman’s “foot in the door,” as illustrated by a Thompson executive: “Now, if you start out to sell aluminum, the first thing you are given is a little maroon book. And one chapter of the book tells you how to get into houses where you are not invited. . . . You do something, you give something [a sample pie-pan] to get in Mrs. Albright’s door but after you are inside you forget about the pie-pan and so does she. Your job is then to sell her your wares just as convincingly as you can. We believe that an advertiser should follow the same course with radio advertis-

ing.”¹¹⁴ Radio provided an entering wedge into the home, which would facilitate delivery of persuasive sales talk.

Writing for radio and the extended contact with radio audiences lowered advertisers’ opinions of their listeners’ intelligence levels still further, however. Biased in favor of the written word, some advertisers considered writing an effective print ad more difficult than a radio commercial.¹¹⁵ Radio writing seemed irredeemably unintelligent and lowbrow since its aural characteristics demanded that ad men overthrow the rules of composition, rhetoric, and grammar fundamental to their training as writers. As one radio writer advised, “Keep your sentences short. Forget all you ever learned about the rules of syntax. You don’t have to be able to diagram a radio announcement for it to be effective. Pile phrase upon phrase and forget a verb in a sentence now and then. Remember that a series of high-priced adjectives means nothing when it is heard over the air.”¹¹⁶ Accustomed to the freedom to set forth long blocks of text to elaborate their arguments, ad men chafed at the limits of writing for radio and concluded that their audiences were even less intelligent than Madison Avenue had customarily believed. The content of radio—both programs and sales messages—was proof positive that consumers were little more than children.

Still, in radio’s capacity for particularly direct communication, and in the audience’s seeming unlimited hunger for intimacy, advertisers believed they had discovered a foolproof source of sales. Students of radio generally agreed that aural communication was more effective than writing. Network publicists and radio researchers maintained that most listeners could remember broadcast advertising much better than print ads.¹¹⁷ Listening apparently was less taxing than reading. But the medium’s great advantage lay in the familiarity of an attractive human voice emanating in the home. “Not only is radio easy to listen to, it is likewise more personal than the printed word,” Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport observed in *The Psychology of Radio*. “A voice belongs to a living person, and living people arrest our attention and sustain our interest better than do printed words.”¹¹⁸ Consumers responded to the suggestions of the announcer’s voice, friendly and persuasive. Familiarity bred authority. “Think how natural it is to hear the friendly things, the intimate things and the authoritative things of life spoken to us by a human voice,” a network brochure gushed. The spoken word was radio’s “supple power to move people and mold them, to enlist them and command them. For people do what they’re told.”¹¹⁹ The spoken word provided both intimacy and influence.¹²⁰

The human voice in the home gave listeners a point of emotional contact

with the programming. In radio's early years especially, listeners often responded to broadcasts in highly personal ways that revealed strong and lasting identification with performers or proceedings.¹²¹ Advertisers learned from the floods of letters and postcards that many listeners felt convinced that the radio shows seemed broadcast expressly for them. Martin Block, a sensationally successful radio salesman and pioneering disc jockey, exploited this phenomenon, directing his sign-off "to you, to you and especially *you*."¹²² Observers of broadcasting often noted the heartfelt comments from listeners grateful for the contact with the outside world. One executive commented, "I have read hundreds, perhaps thousands of letters from men and women who find diversion, not to say needed cheer and companionship from their radio sets It is by no means rare for radio stations to find a hoarded dollar bill among the day's mail. 'I felt so grateful for my radio set last night that I just had to send you something.'"¹²³ Although skeptics doubted that many people engaged in such single-minded listening, especially to commercials, most advertisers felt that listeners maintained a personalized relationship with broadcasts.¹²⁴

The audience's seeming delight in the intimate contact of radio convinced ad men that consumers craved authentic emotional experience and contacts outside the narrow sphere of their everyday lives. In Kenneth Goode's acute observation, radio functioned "primarily as a medium of self-expression by the audience." Radio advertisers thus came quickly believe that a program, "if it is to make effectual contact with the listener at all, . . . must appeal to the listener's feelings." The spoken word addressed the emotions more powerfully than print. For ad men, "The emotional reaction makes the audience responsive to an amazing degree."¹²⁵ No rationality was necessary; sales appeals based on emotion and simplistic ideas became radio advertisers' preferred type of commercial message. Broadcasting brought to life Walter Dill Scott's process theory of suggestion and amplified it exponentially.

No other vision of the audience proved more appealing to ad men than that of the family gathered around the set, expectant, impressionable, and above all receptive to the ad messages along with the entertainment (fig. 1.6). NBC executive Frank Arnold described the archetypal radio audience: "Never visualize it as a tremendous number of people seated in an audience hall listening to a performance. Instead, visualize a family group about the receiving set. . . . Here you have the advertiser's ideal—the family group in its moments of relaxation awaiting your message. Nothing like this has ever been dreamed of by the advertising man."¹²⁶ Only a few publications had previously promised advertisers credible access to an entire family; radio promised them maxi-



FIGURE 1.6. The Advertiser's Dream: The Expectant Family Ready to Listen. (George H. Clark Collection of Radioana, Series A, Subseries 6, Box 417, File 1988-2077, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

num and effective exposure, especially at times when the prospects were susceptible to an advertising message. By 1934 one network executive would claim, "When you use radio . . . you are dealing with something that has become an integral part of the life of the average family."¹²⁷

Broadcasting not only reached families, but it also promised to penetrate the lower-middle and working class much more than advertisers had ever hoped to do with print. The greatest attraction of radio was that it would deliver to clients the families beneath the reach of national mass periodicals and beneath the A and B levels of income that occupied much of advertisers' attention. Radio reached those characterized by one ad man as the "great number of illiterates who could never read your printed advertising copy, or who would never take the trouble to decipher it."¹²⁸ Radio was likely to be a

principal form of entertainment for the mass audience. As one writer declared in 1929, "You will find the workman and his family much more faithful to the loudspeaker than those who forsake the radio for golf, tennis, yachting, theaters, motoring, swimming and fishing." Most important, radio simultaneously reached an affluent "class" audience and the "masses," the large strata of working and lower-middle class—in advertisers' terms, the Sweeneys as well as the Stuyvesants, the Clancys along with the Delanceys.¹²⁹

Of course, consumers did not simply respond whenever the advertiser broadcast a sales appeal. As one copywriter reminded his colleagues, "When '20,000,000 families buy the things they're told to buy,' radio will be a miracle, not a medium. A radio set, as such, has no more moral influence than a telephone. Less perhaps."¹³⁰ The prospect of an eager and responsive audience of millions, responding to the merest hint from an announcer, was at best an ad man's fantasy. Yet the powerful emotional responses that radio evoked from listeners, as well as its ability to gather unprecedented numbers of consumers, made advertisers reconsider their relationships with the lonely masses who could respond so emotionally to voices from the ether.

For one thing, the fervent and often painfully heartfelt responses from listeners elated, disturbed, and sometimes just overwhelmed ad men. Over 200,000 families wrote regarding one early hit program, *Main Street Sketches*. One agency alone received more than 600,000 pieces of mail between mid-1929 and 1930. NBC claimed to pull in 5.5 million letters in 1936 and nearly 23 million over its first nine years.¹³¹ Such claims were difficult to prove or evaluate, since most mail contained premium requests or contest entries. Even so, broadcasters were impressed at the flood of earnest personal confidences in the mail. One radio department head noted, "It is simply amazing the way the radio audience opens its heart to the broadcasting stations and to the advertisers who are providing them with entertainment." However, the public's personal revelation of radio's importance in their lives discomfited more than it impressed advertisers. Madison Avenue professionals were openly dismissive of listeners who claimed emotional relationships with these obviously fabricated and disembodied broadcasts. One letter shared by a radio chief with his colleagues indicates both radio's capacity to evoke such intimate responses and professionals' ambivalent attitudes toward them. Wrote one mother of her daughter's love for Cream of Wheat, "I am very grateful to you and your programs, as it has been hard to get her to eat any hot cereal . . . She eats it daily and is gaining in weight and health . . . thanking you, in the name of all the underweight children who may benefit as my little girl has from your programs." The scornful executive concluded,

“This is not an unusual letter, in fact *there are lots worse than that.*”¹³² That the mass audience responded to distant and disembodied voices with such openness indicated a childlike credulity and simple-mindedness, which for ad men verged on the fantastic. The sales manager of *Amos 'n' Andy's* sponsor Pepsodent recalled with disbelief that listeners sent in hundreds of dollar bills when the two characters started a bank on the program. Marveling at the hundreds of personal items sent by listeners to these fictional characters, executive Harlow Roberts declared, “I at one time studied psychology . . . but our radio experiences have made me give up trying to understand the workings of the human mind.”¹³³

Similarly, advertisers found the mass audience unsophisticated and ignorant. Radio listeners' tastes provoked snickers in the conference rooms of metropolitan agencies. Advertisers disdainfully noted the difference between their own preferences and the public's appetite for “entertainment spread with a thick, gooey coating of sentiment.”¹³⁴ J. Walter Thompson writer Carroll Carroll recalled that “it was generally conceded by the ‘sophisticates’ of the day that only morons listened to radio and that only the dopiest of those tuned in pure corn like Eddie Cantor's show.” A typical attitude emerged in one executive's description of a popular program, *Thirty Minutes of Sunshine*: “The radio program was entirely handled by one man, a Mr. Hamp, who sang, played instruments, cracked jokes and otherwise stirred up the air . . . His program is just terrible, awful. None of us would listen to it, but the people who buy toothpaste like it. . . . It is a sort of silly stuff for grownups.” As NBC programming head Bertha Brainard cautioned, “It may be, for example, that you do not like a corny program, but if it is good corn, it will in all probability attract a large audience.”¹³⁵

Clients often shared advertisers' views of the audience's tastes. Embracing an admittedly elite sensibility, clients and ad men both denigrated “jazz” on the air instead of classical music and preferred the urbane wit and wordplay of comedians Fred Allen or Ray Perkins to the broad humor and folksy platitudes of an Eddie Cantor. Such strong tastes often made sponsors and agents reluctant to offer lowbrow entertainment, even if it was lucrative. As the J. Walter Thompson radio chief John Reber noted:

Even if it were true that the Stebbins Boys would have trebled the sales of Chase and Sanborn's Coffee, we could not have used them. Every night nine or ten of the officials at Standard Brands regularly broke their ankles rushing to the radio to turn off the Stebbins Boys. You couldn't possibly

sell it to them. If someone were to suggest [vaudeville comics] Olsen and Johnson for Pond's Cold Cream, [Thompson executives] Dr. Watson, Mrs. Resor, [and Pond's owners] Mr. Lamont and Mr. Corliss would all scream and die immediately.¹³⁶

Corn might have been popular, but some advertisers preferred to remain silent on the air than present corn.

Copywriters lampooned the benighted public's lowbrow appetite, but in practice agents had to satisfy it. This led to a self-protective cynicism about programs, clients, network executives, performers, and especially the audience. Their physical distance from listeners here again allowed ad men to indulge in abstractions, thinking once more of markets rather than people. Commentator Kenneth Goode chided, "All of us have come more or less recklessly to reckon radio listeners—human beings—with the same statistical detachment with which we reckon radio sets. 'Listeners' come thus to be visualized as squadrons of soldiers on parade . . . reporting, let us say, for a daily period of three hours."¹³⁷ Moreover, their cultural distance allowed advertisers to indulge in some abstract and condescending notions about their listeners. The mass audience seemed a huge nation of children perfectly unconcerned with advertising but willing in self-interest to adopt new behaviors or products.¹³⁸ "The great mass has never had an idea," agency sage William Day proclaimed. "It has no ideas about government, it has no ideas about religion, it has no ideas about biology; it is purely and simply a vast shapeless force which is led in one direction or another by leaders."¹³⁹ Radio's spectacular success, ad men repeated to themselves, was due to the people's boundless susceptibility to suggestion and their willingness to respond to authority. Consumers not only had the intelligence level of fourteen year olds, but they were also children in their attitudes and behavior.

Advertisers nevertheless made numerous attempts to compensate for their separation from the world of the mass audience. Most important was the ongoing discussion of the "average listener." Some ad men believed that the average listener was "actually no more than a hypothetical concept, but he is extremely important for the advertiser to know." Even with this complication, many throughout the industry adopted such a model in writing for the masses.¹⁴⁰ Agency head and radio producer Roy Durstine described the advertising agent's informed sense of his audience:

The typical listening audience for a radio program is a tired, bored, middle-aged man and woman whose lives are empty and who have exhausted their

sources of amusement when they have taken a quick look at the evening paper. They are utterly unlike those who are most vocal in their criticism of radio programs—people with full lives, with books to read, with parties to attend, with theaters to visit, with friends whose conversational powers are stimulating. Radio provides a vast source of delight and entertainment for the barren lives of the millions.¹⁴¹

In contrasting the masses with urbane sophisticates, Durstine's portrait openly confirmed that ad men conceived of the consumer-masses as everything which they themselves were not.

Although they polled listeners, gave away premiums, and held contests to gauge consumers' income levels, family composition, and social status, ad men were still at a great distance from ongoing personal contact with consumers. In fact, they relied on that gulf to distinguish themselves from their audiences, as radio itself seemed to erode other barriers that separated elite and mass. Ad men conceived of their mass audience of "typical listeners" as everyone outside their own sphere. In one executive's words, "If your office boy, a stenographer other than your own, the porter who moves the desks around your office, and two of your friends' wives can understand every idea you have put into your radio copy, merely from having it read to them, probably every listener who hears it over the air will grasp what you are trying to say."¹⁴² While such a caution was no doubt sound business, it revealed the ways advertisers distanced themselves from the masses they supposedly served and addressed in their own native tongue. The working class, women, children, blacks: all were indistinguishable. For the educated, affluent occupants of Madison Avenue, the consumer was the Other.

This distance also influenced advertisers' sociology of consumer tastes. Copywriters, in fact, thought of the vast audience as symbolized by the goods and mass entertainment they sold the public. The movies, tabloids, Model Ts, dance band jazz, and even radio itself all became convenient symbols for the ad men's vague and condescending notions of the mass audience. "The people who buy toothpaste" was one such characterization. Similarly, a Thompson man eloquently articulated this Madison Avenue vision of consumers in general: "After all, the market for most products is the people who flock to the talkies to see Greta Garbo—who travel in Fords and Chevrolets munching hot dogs en route. In infancy they are attracted by bright colors, glitter and noise. And in adulthood they retain almost a similar set of reactions." This notion applied equally to the radio audience; as Roy Durstine reminded his colleagues, "The great mass of radio listeners are no higher

than the average motion picture audiences in intelligence and purchasing power.”¹⁴³ Engaged in selling to the masses, advertising agents conceived of goods and entertainment, the products that they sold, as the telling symbols of consumers themselves. The result was that advertisers often could not distinguish the commodity from the customer.

This process of symbolization went on, in part, because radio seemed to blur or eliminate other signs of class divisions. Like mass consumption itself, radio seemed to promise an unprecedented social and cultural leveling. Spokesmen had long celebrated the democratizing potential of radio and its capacity to elevate the masses. While, as Roland Marchand has shown, radio spokesmen believed that possibility was destroyed by full ascent of commercial programming, many still remained convinced that the medium provided the masses access to culture, particularly drama and classical music, they had ordinarily been denied.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, in offering common and simultaneous experience to listeners of all classes, radio had the potential to obliterate distinctions among them. Social scientists Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport described the democratizing pretensions of radio: “Millions of people listen to the same thing at the same time—and they themselves are aware of the fact. Distinctions between rural and urban communities, men and women, age and youth, social classes, creeds, states and nations are abolished. As if by magic the barriers of social stratification disappear and in their place comes a consciousness of equality and of a community interest. . . . In short it seems to be the nature of radio to encourage people to think and feel alike.”¹⁴⁵ Advertisers applauded such tendencies, however exaggerated, and defended their work as servants of the consumer in precisely these terms: advertising cultivated common habits and tastes among all consumers.¹⁴⁶

However, among themselves advertisers expressed exactly the opposite sentiments. While they openly celebrated the democratizing potential of mass consumption, privately advertisers held themselves aloof from it to preserve their own identities. Clinging to the idea of a cultural gulf, ad men continued to think of consumers in terms of their lowbrow habits. As one executive put it, “Social and cultural levels tend to parallel economic levels.”¹⁴⁷ Advertisers could study consumers, measure their preferences in programming and products, evaluate their living conditions, and compile inventories of pantries, closets, and even bank accounts. Yet the closer advertisers came to the mass of consumers and the more the cultural boundaries separating them from the masses blurred, the more fiercely advertisers sought to distinguish themselves from their audiences.

CONCLUSION

By 1930 advertisers had established firm ideas about the spending publics they addressed. Clinging to their own elevated cultural plane, ad men saw consumers as childlike, irrational, ungovernable, and unpredictable. Fabricating standardized and easily sold traits for consumers was good business, but it left professionals unprepared for the variety of behaviors and desires they encountered in real consumers. Their portraits of women and audiences were abstractions and types, suitable for selling to clients; their sales messages likewise were often simplistic and unpersuasive. In turn, actual consumers often behaved very differently than advertisers hoped: indifference or resistance often greeted sales messages. Buyers evaded and defied, as well as complied with, advertising. Everyday market behaviors thus invalidated the generalities of the ad man's invented consumer. Despite many selling successes, ad men could neither contain nor control actual consumers. Their prescriptions remained just that, the exhortations of authorities that contended with other values for popular allegiance. But equally true, consumers encountered these sales messages and ideals every day, repeatedly. If consumers ignored some, advertisers followed up with new methods and messages. A campaign or commodity might fail, but advertising would go on.

Advertisers offered a vision of consumption and consumers based on a premise of personal transformation and social distinction through accumulation and spending. Locating and addressing prospective purchasers led advertisers to imagine them as simple-minded, childlike, and irrational. They attempted to teach consumers to think of themselves as symbolized by goods, but in truth only ad men themselves viewed consumers solely through their possessions and tastes. Claiming to be public servants, advertisers contended that they knew and fulfilled popular desire. Their vision of consumption and their claims to public legitimacy were based at best on highly partial, myopic understandings. In contrast to later motivational researchers or today's retail anthropologists, most advertisers cared little why people actually bought goods. Their attempts to study purchasers understandably were aimed to increase sales, not to grasp higher truths or even the complex diversity they glimpsed in society. In the final analysis, consumers remained elusive to advertisers—fearsome and contemptible one moment, gullible and easily led the next, always aggregates to be managed rather than understood. Urging constant consumption in their social portraits, dominating the structure of commercial media, advertisers preempted other perspectives. Little penetrated the magazine pages or the airwaves that did not urge consumers to buy

more or to view themselves as an extension of their things. Advertisers saw modern America as a heterogeneous society with increased wealth and comforts but with little common culture. They proposed to fill that void with consumer goods. In material modernity—mass-produced abundance—they saw the foundation of an American identity secured by spending, an identity they could shape. They envisioned a nation imagined and unified through goods. To that end, they offered a profoundly political and nationalist portrait of consumption, and it is to that vision we now turn.