



# The 1920s in America

## Advertising in the United States

by Jack Ewing

*The 1920s were a watershed decade for American advertising.*

An economic boom—higher wages, lower prices, pro-business government, and the introduction of exciting new products—combined with increased mobility, improved communications, and the emerging power of women to help manufacturers and their ad agencies usher in an age of rampant consumerism.

After World War I, America entered a decade of unprecedented prosperity. Factories that had rolled out military armaments were soon retooled to produce consumer goods, and a “buy American” attitude was instituted through the imposition of high tariffs on imports. Hordes of workers, including returning veterans, failed farmers, and African Americans migrating from the South, were hired at relatively good salaries. Employees with disposable income were eager to spend, and manufacturers were happy to oblige.

As a result of farm surpluses and mass-production techniques, affordable canned and packaged foodstuffs were turned out in great abundance and found a ready market. Brand names, reinforced via print ads, posters, and billboards extolling their virtues, established loyal audiences and generated repeat business. Such comestibles as Planters Peanuts, Kool-Aid, Jell-O, Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, Oscar Mayer hot dogs, Del Monte and Green Giant canned vegetables, Cracker Jack, and Cream of Wheat flourished during the decade. Nonfood items, such as ready-made clothing in standardized sizes and inexpensive synthetic fabrics such as rayon, also became popular during the 1920s, spurring the growth of chain stores and mail-order businesses.

The rapid spread of electrification—more than 75 percent of American homes were connected by the end of the decade—had a considerable effect on the overall economic climate. The availability of electricity to most average citizens resulted in the creation or perfection of numerous plug-in appliances, and vigorous competition for customers sprang up among makers of vacuum cleaners, washing machines and spin dryers, phonographs, sewing machines, electric razors, curling irons, and heating pads. The home kitchen was changed forever with the introduction of electric refrigerators, which made frozen food storage and easier meal preparation possible. Other electrical innovations, such as pop-up toasters, mixers, percolators, corn poppers, and ranges that were safer and cleaner than gas-, wood-, or coal-fired models, further transformed American eating habits. Significantly, most ads for food, clothing, appliances, and other domestic products were primarily aimed at females. Not only were women the usual decision makers for such purchases, but they had also become a growing influence on the market since obtaining the right to vote in 1920.

The proliferation of such products, and the need to distinguish competitive advantages in the consumer’s mind, led to the development of full-service advertising agencies. Formerly relegated to negotiating favorable placement rates in print publications, agencies began to take on additional responsibilities. Research and demographic studies, campaign creation (concept, copy, artwork, layout, production), and follow-up effectiveness studies encouraged consumption, helped fine-tune advertisers’ messages, and increased profits for manufacturer and agency alike.

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An advertisement for chewing gum.

(Getty Images)

**ADAMS**  
Pure Chewing Gum

**ADAMS**  
California Fruit  
Gum

AMERICAN CHICLE COMPANY

**ADAMS CALIFORNIA FRUIT CHEWING GUM**  
WITH THE FRUITY FLAVOR

*MARION DAVIES*, the musical comedy Star, says: "All of California's Fruits combined could not be more delightful than the flavor of Adams California Fruit Gum. It is delicious."

*Marion Davies*

## Advertising Takes to the Air

A major contributor to the upsurge in consumerism during the 1920s was the advent of radio. The first commercially licensed radio station was KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which began broadcasting in 1920. At the time, there were just sixty thousand radio receiving sets throughout the United States, many of them inexpensive do-it-yourself crystal sets that delivered only faint, static-laced reception via earphones. By 1925, however, radio had become a national obsession, and some four million Americans owned manufactured radios. Hundreds of stations were broadcasting music, news, election results, sporting events, religious services, and comedy shows to homes across the nation.

Early radio broadcasts were labors of love, staffed by unpaid volunteers serving as electrical engineers and announcers. Within a short period of time, stations turned to advertising to finance their operations. The first true radio commercial, broadcast in 1922 from New York City, was a ten-minute pitch for a real estate company. The inexpensive, adaptable new medium proved to be an effective marketing tool, and by 1925, radio advertising had topped \$500 million, representing about one-eighth of national expenditures for advertising.

At first, typical radio advertising consisted of simply paying a fee to sponsor a program, with regular brief reminders of who was providing the entertainment for listeners. Later radio marketing incorporated full-fledged agency-written commercials that presented a social problem (for example, halitosis, a term for bad breath) and the advertiser's solution (Listerine). These one- or two-minute spots were usually read live but occasionally prerecorded, sometimes featuring celebrity voices where available. Professionally produced radio commercials, complete with music, jingles, multiple voices, and sound effects, did not become common until the 1930s.

Throughout the 1920s, a single company would sponsor an entire radio program, becoming closely identified with the show as a result. The first commercially sponsored variety program was *The Eveready Hour* (1924), and most early nationally sponsored radio consisted of

musical and variety shows, such as *The Clicquot Club Eskimos* (1923), *The Ipana Troubadors* (1923), and *The A&P Gypsies* (1924). Radio's first major dramatic series, *The Collier Hour*, premiered in 1927 as a vehicle to promote *Collier's* magazine.

## America Goes Mobile

Another influential contributor to the rise of advertising and consumerism during the 1920s was the automobile. First mass-produced around the beginning of the twentieth century, autos were initially slow, clumsy, undependable novelties that only the wealthy could afford. Mechanical improvements during the 1900s and 1910s increased reliability, but there were few paved roads and supplies of gasoline were not readily available, so only rabid enthusiasts invested in automobiles.

The situation improved dramatically in the mid-1910s with increased efficiency of production, which greatly reduced the purchase price of automobiles. Henry Ford's motor company pioneered the modern assembly line in 1914, and by 1920, the cost of his no-frills Model T Ford, introduced in 1908 with a sticker price of \$850, had been cut in half. Further refinements in manufacturing reduced the price even further. By the mid-1920s, a Model T cost just \$290, about three months' wages for the average consumer. By 1927, some fifteen million Model Ts had been sold. The automobile had become not just a toy but a necessity.

General Motors (GM) did not want to engage in a head-to-head price war with Ford; instead, they offered specific brand names for different markets, and supported this strategy with extensive advertising campaigns in print, radio, and outdoor media. For lower-income families, there was the standard Chevrolet; for middle-class buyers, the flashier Buick; and for the upper classes, the luxurious Cadillac. Ford and other carmakers would soon emulate the General Motors concept, and within a few years there was a plethora of fancifully named models chugging along the nation's roads. In response to America's sudden infatuation with the automobile, GM also offered a rainbow of colors and a range of options, and changed styling annually to encourage car owners to trade in for newer models. To aid affordability across the entire spectrum of buyers, General Motors instituted the "buy now, pay later" installment plan, which was quickly adopted throughout the automotive business and by a multitude of other industries. By 1930, enough cars had been sold to provide a vehicle for every 4.6 citizens, or an average of one for each family in the nation.

The propagation of automobiles had a profound effect on American lifestyles. With so many cars on the road, the government was forced to build thousands of miles of new highways, plus bridges, interchanges, tunnels, and other car-accommodating infrastructural elements. Whole new industries, such as drive-in restaurants, service stations and petroleum refineries, motels, shopping centers and supermarkets, tire stores, parts suppliers, and auto dealerships, burgeoned around an increasingly mobile society. The film business in particular benefited from the rise of the auto; rural residents suddenly had easy access to urban movie theaters, where they could view the latest hairstyles, fashion statements, dance steps, and other modern trends. Ultimately, owning an automobile meant increased independence. Workers no longer had to live near their places of employment or rely on public transportation to get to their jobs and began moving out of inner cities, initiating the growth of suburbs.

The auto-driven expansion of businesses presented myriad possibilities for advertising, which took full advantage of the opportunity. Neon signs, visible for great distances, lit up the night sky; the first in the United States was erected at a Los Angeles Packard dealership in 1923. Illuminated billboards attracted travelers to food, lodging, and tourist destinations. Luggage labels and travel decals began decorating car windows, and trucks became moving ads for numerous businesses. The mass production of car radios began in 1927, allowing drivers and passengers to be entertained and persuaded to buy products or services, even as they rode.

## Impact

Prior to the 1920s, the primary form of advertising in the United States was through printed magazines and newspapers, which excluded the illiterate. Early in the twentieth century, more than 10 percent of the American population could not read, and illiteracy rates among blacks and immigrants were particularly high. The introduction of radio was a great equalizer, allowing listeners at all levels of education to be entertained, obtain vital information, and be convinced to buy products offered in the marketplace. In addition, many foreigners coming to the United States learned to speak English by listening to the radio. The new medium would continue to blossom as an entertainment and marketing option through the decades, contributing to the consumerism trend that exists to this day. Though it has been supplanted in popularity by television, radio continues to serve as a viable part of the corporate advertising mix, offering advantages such as affordability and immediacy.

The automobile is likewise now a mainstay of American society. The infatuation of the 1920s has become a lifelong love affair; in 2007, there were more than 254 million registered passenger vehicles in the United States, or almost one per person. Though advertising for

autos has fluctuated over the years in relation to the national economy in general, and the availability of gasoline in particular, the automotive market and aftermarket have been boons for agencies. In the twenty-first century, domestic automotive ad expenditures across all media exceeded \$30 billion, representing more than 10 percent of all advertising revenues in the United States.

## Further Reading

- 1 Best, Gary Dean. *The Dollar Decade: Mammon and the Machine in 1920s America*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2003. Explores the multitude of innovations introduced during the 1920s and their impact on American culture.
- 2 Davis, Simone Weil. *Living Up to the Ads: Gender Fictions of the 1920's*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000. An illustrated study of the relationship between the perception as presented in advertising and the reality of American life during the decade.
- 3 Heimann, Jim, ed. *All-American Ads of the 20s*. Cologne: Taschen Books, 2004. A compendium of print ads from across all market segments.
- 4 Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. An overview of the rise of the influence of advertising agencies and public relations firms and their effect on domestic business during the early twentieth century.
- 5 Olney, Martha L. *Buy Now, Pay Later: Advertising, Credit, and Consumer Durables in the 1920s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Examines the introduction of the installment plan and the effects of buying on credit on American society.

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