AdAge

Women: Representations in Advertising

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Although women are depicted in various roles and statuses in advertising—ranging from homemaker to business executive and from sex object to superwoman—it is only since the mid-20th century that women have been shown in roles other than purchaser of domestic products.

While some observers may be impatient with the traditional images of women used by major packaged-goods marketers, those depictions reflect meticulously calibrated research designed to detect the subtlest element of potential offense in the target group.

This market research-based advertising may not always show trend-setting women the images they want to see, but market research seldom leads advertisers far astray. In short, the roles of wife and mother continue to be performed by large numbers of women whom advertisers seek to address.

Targeting women: Early days

One of the most enduring female characters in advertising is Aunt Jemima, a trademark that had its beginnings in 1889. Invited to breakfast with millions of families all over the world for more than a century, Aunt Jemima eventually became an icon. By the end of the 20th century, she had undergone several face-lifts to reflect the evolving African-American consumer market.

While some products are named to entice women to buy them, none has enjoyed the success of Gold Medal flour and its Betty Crocker trade character. As a result of a successful promotional campaign for a pincushion in the 1920s, Washburn Crosby Co., the marketer of Gold Medal flour and forerunner of General Mills, found itself besieged with requests for the premium, along with more than 30,000 letters asking questions about baking.

Sam Gale, head of the company's ad department, decided that a single fictional spokeswoman should sign the response letters and decided on the name Betty Crocker. Blanche Ingersoll, a Washburn Crosby employee, became the voice of Betty Crocker on the radio in 1924. Since that time there have been at least eight different images of Betty Crocker. The most recent, introduced in 1996, was a multicultural composite of the features of 75 women of varying ethnicities.

Depression and war: Changing roles

The Great Depression and World War II left indelible marks on American society, and Rosie the Riveter and other ad icons of the time left their marks on advertising. Through the 1930s, ad copy continued to portray women primarily as homemakers or objects of sexual desire. In 1931, a magazine ad for Listerine deodorant featured a photograph of a nude woman's back and the side of her breast. Woodbury soap featured what is thought to be advertising's first full-figure b&w photograph of a nude woman (shot by Edward Steichen) in 1936.

The conflict between women's actual role in society and the ways in which advertisers portrayed that role came to the forefront during World War II. While wartime propaganda encouraged women to labor for country and family, advertisers urged female factory workers to remain glamorous and keep the home running smoothly.

Many advertisers portrayed women in their newly expanded roles. For instance, Eureka showed three women in its vacuum cleaner ads—one in a military uniform, one in pants and another in typical housewifely garb.

By late 1944, however, women were being prepared, often through strategically placed advertising, to give up their jobs when the soldiers returned home. At the end of the war, advertisers began once again to show women at home, sometimes going so far as to suggest that a working mother was not a good mother. In an advertisement by Adel Precision Products Corp., a young child asked, "Mother, when will you stay home again?"

Return to the home: The '50s

During the 1950s, most advertisers portrayed women as wives and mothers. As more women entered the workforce, however, another kind of advertising made use of them as a means for selling goods and services. Those ads showed women as clerks, telephone operators and secretaries using the latest office equipment and office furniture.

Women in the ads are generally employees not bosses, followers rather than leaders; ultimately, the ads reminded readers that a woman's job was a means for finding a man and that the primary purpose for women at work was to help men succeed.

Another approach to the portrayal of women in advertising involved scantily clad females in alluring poses; those images most often appeared in ads for products used by men.

Feminism and the '60s

One of the chief targets of the revitalized women's movement in the 1960s was the representation of women in all mass media. Advertising, although a target, also became an ally, as the industry provided a variety of venues and activities for the single, self-supporting woman.

Advertisers came under severe scrutiny from feminist groups, women's organizations and students of mass communications. As the debate over women's images in advertising intensified, the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, sought to eliminate gender-based stereotypes in the mass media.

During the '60s, emphasis began to be placed on the independent woman who, although married, drove her own car, had a fulfilling job and participated in or made major purchasing decisions.

This era culminated in a December 1969 protest outside Macy's Department Store in New York. The protest, which may have been the first organized demonstration against the image of women in advertising, was staged against Mattel Toys in reaction to an ad the company had placed in *Life* to promote its Christmas toy line.

Criticism and change

In March 1970, NOW created the Barefoot & Pregnant Awards of the Week; the group distributing thousands of stickers that proclaimed: "This ad insults women."

Ad executives were re-evaluating their portrayals of women's roles in society. A classic ad from that period came from the Polaroid camera campaign featuring actors James Garner and Mariette Hartley. Ms. Hartley was shown in a distinctly non-traditional role—fixing a car.

One of the turning points in advertising's portrayal of women came with a landmark campaign from Revlon in 1973. The Charlie perfume campaign featured confident young women in tailored pantsuits pursuing traditionally male-oriented activities. Grey Advertising created the first Charlie ads.

In 1975, a new agency, Advertising to Women, was founded. Its intent was to reach the contemporary, confident, career-oriented woman who was not inhibited by her sexuality. Market research conducted by the agency showed that women were responsible for most household purchases, 60% of all vacation destination choices and nearly 30% of new car selections.

The superwoman

Advertising in the 1980s portrayed career-minded women as "supermoms," and the industry began to grapple with integrating the traditional and contemporary roles of women. One classic ad from the period was one for Enjoli perfume, which depicted a sexy but capable woman who could "bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan and never let you forget you're a man."

Women Against Pornography, a U.S. lobbying group, was concerned about the sexual images of women portrayed in advertising and the influence of such images on sexual violence against women. The group founded an annual awards program to applaud and censure ads on the basis of presence or absence of sexist overtones.

In 1983, Jockey, a company known primarily for its line of men's underwear, introduced the "Jockey for Her" campaign (from Minneapolis-based Campbell Mithun), which featured real women representing a range of professions, ages and body types. The brand became an instant success; within five years, it was the most popular U.S. brand of women's underwear, commanding a 40% share of the market.

Emerging images

By the 1990s, dramatic changes had occurred in the depiction of women in advertising. One groundbreaking ads was for Maidenform, which pictured some of the objects representing slang terms for woman—a fox, a tomato, a doll and a chick. The text accompanying the ad read, "While images used to describe women are simple and obvious, women themselves rarely are. Just something we like to keep in mind when designing our lingerie."

Other advertisers also abandoned traditional strategies that had been used to depict women. During this decade, advertisers of traditionally male-targeted products—such as athletic shoes, cars and beer—began to focus on female consumers.

A new genre of advertisements came to the forefront, signaling a new attitude: "reverse sexism." Advertisers used the liberated woman's "I don't need a man" mindset to create new ads portraying women.

Bodyslimmer Lingerie showed a woman from the neck down wearing a one-piece undergarment with copy that read, "While you don't necessarily dress for men, it doesn't hurt, on occasion, to see one drool like the pathetic dog that he is."

A breakthrough for women of color occurred in 1992 when Tyra Banks, an African-American model, signed a contract to represent Cover Girl in its ads; she was the first non-white woman used in major cosmetics advertising.

Research that showed a definitive correlation between eating disorders and advertising gained prominence in the 1990s. Because many female models were extremely thin—often two to three sizes

smaller than the average American woman—psychologists, nutritionists and activists focused on advertising as contributing to the growing numbers of girls and women suffering from bulimia or anorexia nervosa.

By the turn of the 21st century, many key positions in advertising were occupied by women, enabling them to exert a major influence on ad campaigns. Some critics of the portrayal of women in advertising hoped this situation would give rise to more positive images of women.