

Nostalgia in Advertising: The Millennium and Middle Age Collide

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As the 1990s have progressed, and especially as 1999 draws to a close, many of us archivists already may have had our fill of –millennium fever.” I’d be surprised if any one among us has not been asked to look back into our collections to find out what The Corporation was doing 100 years ago. The purposes for these fin-de-siecle historical requests may include creation of an anniversary publication or display, or very likely, something to do with marketing or advertising.

I will speak about what I have learned about nostalgia in advertising, drawing on eleven years of experience at Duke University’s John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History and a variety of printed sources I think the first query that came to me that specifically got me thinking about nostalgia in advertising was about two years ago, when a journalist wanted to know whether the nostalgia campaigns and the pre-millennium fever that appear in some advertising today had had a parallel as the 19th century gave way to the 20th. A quick literature search did not yield an answer, so I spent an interesting hour flipping through the ads in several prominent general interest magazines of the late 1890s and especially 1899-1900. It was hardly a scientific sample, but I saw not a single ad from the turn of the 20th century that made explicit reference to the dawning of a new era. Nor was there any evidence of harking back to –the good old days.”

Some advertising of the late 19th century did use historical references, employing images of ancient Egypt or Rome or events in American history. The use of such images, though, was more to provide a familiar frame of reference to an educated reader than to evoke what we would call nostalgic feelings in a prospective purchaser.

A number of factors influenced the relative lack of historical themes in late 19th century ads. The advertising industry itself was in its infancy, its techniques only beginning to take shape. Research on what would move consumers to buy, for example, was still several decades in the future. Perhaps more important, the late 19th century was a time of dramatic technological developments, and people generally were looking forward, not back. A common advertising icon of the late 1880s-1890s was the Brooklyn Bridge, a tremendous engineering feat of its time. The bridge appeared on trade cards to advertise a remarkable range of products having no connection to bridges or engineering or New York. Purveyors of soap and confections and other commodities only desired to associate their goods with progress, technology, and the future.

But today, as we prepare to enter another new century, we are, in the words of one writer, –awash in nostalgia.” This trend appears to have begun in the 1980s, when marketing campaigns began to employ 1960s music. The trend accelerated rapidly in the 1990s. Commentators tend to agree on

several factors that help account for it:

1. It is the end of both another century and a millennium;
2. Though times are prosperous, the pace of change is stressful, even frightening to many;
3. The baby boomers are aging, entering a phase of life when looking back is natural;
4. The boomers are a huge demographic bulge, at the peak of their earning power
5. Young people have glommed on to old styles and images, creating a market for “retro chic”

Researchers long have recognized that a –fin de siecle effect” tends to promote nostalgia, defined as –an emotional state in which an individual yearns for an idealized or sanitized version of an earlier time period.” A new century seems to have a powerful effect on people’s sense of the meaning of the past and the future. It can provoke excitement and also anxiety. In the view of many observers, the awesomeness of the millennial change is heightened by the stresses of our fast-paced modern life. Researchers cite the information glut, technology, and the depersonalization of modern business enterprises, as factors.

And the boomers. Some of the huge population born between 1945 and 1960 already have empty nests and have amassed considerable disposable income. Some perhaps feel that more of life’s joys lie in their past than in the future. Technologies have impinged on boomer lives and

disrupted careers and expectations, with mixed results. There is a widespread perception that boomers are insecure--in need of comfort foods on the one hand and sporty, youthful cars on the other...and that they are searching for substance, authenticity, and value for money. Insofar as these notions are true, boomers are a huge natural audience for retro-marketing.

But what about the younger generations, dubbed X and Y, who didn't grow up with

Quisp or Thunderbirds? Some researchers suggest that the 1990s lack a distinctiveness of their own, prompting borrowing of earlier trends and fads by youth, who create a campy --retro chic" image all their own. Their images of a time they never lived through are shaped by TV reruns--those caricatures of the 'real 1950s" that they see on --Nick at Night."

What has been the nature of the nostalgia boom in advertising and what effect has it had on archives?

In the course of preparing this paper, I identified over 100 products or brands that have used one form or another of retro-marketing in the 1990s. I am sure this list is far from complete, but it does include a large number of familiar names: Old Navy stores, Planter's Peanuts, Borden's, and Ford are a few. Marketers are attempting to capitalize on the research that shows that middle aged consumers --need some warm fuzzies from our past." Marketing targeted at this group is influenced by research that shows that 55% of Americans believe that the past was a better time than today, whereas in 1974, 54% reported that there was --no time better than the present." Most of the 55% who had fond memories

of the past were reminiscing about the 1950s and 60s.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a great deal of today's retro advertising incorporates that mid-century period, when baby boomers were young and idealistic, times were prosperous: when we drank our Cokes from green contour bottles and drove VW Beetles. As one marketing executive said, -- Anything that brings me back to 1967 is gonna give me a good feeling. That's the year I got my driver's license, I was thinking about girls...." In 1997 Quaker Oats staged a contest to find a new child--a new Mikey--to promote Life cereal. Why? Because --the minute you mention the [1960s] Mikey campaign in focus groups, you get word-for-word reenactments of the commercials and identification of the brand." Similarly, with Volkswagen, when the --familiar bubble shape . . . makes people smile as it skitters by, the New Beetle offers a pull that is purely emotional."

Advertisers are tugging at our heartstrings to get us to loosen our purse strings--a well-understood technique in advertising.

Ford and its advertising agency J. Walter Thompson Company have made extensive use of the JWT Archives at Duke for several nostalgia-related projects. The thirtieth anniversary of the Mustang in 1995 prompted a flurry of interest; some TV commercials showed original Mustang models morphing into new ones. JWT also created an elaborate Mustang web site for Ford, drawing heavily on the print ad archives at Duke. Such a web site leverages the brand equity. As one auto analyst wrote about tapping a brand's legend, --It's not just how many you sell, it's how many people think

about you." Absence of archives has created examples of headaches for marketers--retro or otherwise. The fellows who bought the rights to the defunct Canadian Lola drink, for example, found that the formula had been lost, so they had to recreate it.

In sum, nostalgia is one fairly prominent theme in advertising of the 1990s. Does it work? It depends whom you ask. The success of retro-cable venture TV Land, and the continuing employment of real or fake historical icons in commercials, print ads, and billboards suggests that something is working. Marketers express a variety of concerns, though. Some scoffers criticize the advertising industry for losing its creative drive and relying on --derivative behavior." A fairly frequent concern is that nostalgia ads most often target a limited, albeit large, population segment by focusing on baby boomers. Is it a turnoff for the young, who might see it as stale or boring--or by not understanding the references at all, lose interest? One response to that has been to use old or faked old images in kitschy ways when targeting younger audiences. Even lacking specific historical knowledge or personal experience, they will enjoy the effect.

Does nostalgia oversimplify history, skimming over the negatives in the effort to persuade consumers to buy? It does, of course--in ads and other applications. Some writers note that nostalgia harks back to periods of racism or sexism that will alienate some viewers. Research is not yet conclusive on the overall sales results of nostalgic-themed advertising.

A number of commentators have tried to predict the future of nostalgia-based advertising.

Sociologist Seymour Levantman expects the trend to grow as long as the boomers still make up a large demographic segment of the population. Others expect nostalgia to be used ever more creatively, to reach a broader range of consumers. –Expect to see more decades colliding,” says one writer, who suggests that ads will be influenced by the restless individuality of the young and the example set by the cut-and-paste creations of hip hop artists. We'll all have to wait a few years to see what happens.

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* For more information about the Hartman Center and its resources, please see the Center's website at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/hartman/>