

HUMOR *in*  
ADVERTISING



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ADVERTISING

A  
COMPREHENSIVE  
ANALYSIS

CHARLES S. GULAS AND MARC G. WEINBERGER

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We dedicate this book to our wives, Diane Gulas and Sharon Weinberger, who have always provided the love, support, and understanding needed to sustain our writing, and to our loving children, Christine and Joseph Gulas and Michelle and Dan Weinberger, who have provided us with great joy and satisfaction. We also dedicate this book to our mothers, Betty Gulas and Minnette Lewis, and in memory of our fathers, Joseph Gulas and Larry Weinberger. Our parents always encouraged us to study, to learn, and to strive to do our best.



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# Preface and Acknowledgments

This book synthesizes what has been learned about the application of humor in advertising and helps provide a roadmap for future research by way of methodology and topics that need attention. Those seeking a book that is itself humorous will find this one lacking. There is little if any actual humor in any of the studies or theories we discuss. We hope that a serious book about humor is not an oxymoron, but rather a necessity for achieving our goal.

Our collaboration on this book is the result of work that began in 1990 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Charles Gulas arrived as a doctoral student with a prior career as a stand-up comedian and owner of a comedy club. Marc Weinberger has had the good fortune of friends and former students working on humor dating back to the mid-1970s. In 1974, while at Arizona State University, he among others was commandeered by fellow doctoral student Paul Solomon to code humorous TV ads for what later became the much cited Kelly and Solomon (1975) study. In the late 1970s a new doctoral student, Tom Madden, arrived at Massachusetts with an interest in humor. Coauthoring two humor projects and serving on Tom's dissertation committee served as a springboard for future studies. Interest in the topic continued with generations of doctoral students over a twenty-year period. This book owes much to this coauthored work with Tom Madden, Harlan Spotts, Lee Campbell, Amy Parsons, and Karen Flaherty. In 1992 we published the widely quoted Weinberger and Gulas review of humor in advertising and now, more than a decade later, we develop here a major update to that work unfettered by the space restrictions of a journal article. We thank all our professional predecessors for the work that we attempt to document in this book. We would also like to thank Jacqueline

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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HUMOR *in*  
ADVERTISING



# History of Humor in Advertising

We find advertisements engraved on walls and tombs, written on parchment and papyrus, and printed by the first printing presses. The eruption of Vesuvius preserved Pompeian advertising. Babylonian barkers shouted the availability of wares, and, as a precursor to the media explosion that was to come, in France twelve town criers organized a company in 1141 (Presbrey 1929). Advertising extends back to the very beginnings of formalized trade.

Although advertising is an ancient form of communications, early ads tended to be very rudimentary. Most innovations in advertising are relatively recent. Posters, painted signs, transit placards, booklets, calendars, almanacs, handbills, and magazine and newspaper advertising have now become so well established that we look upon them as a part of the landscape. Or perhaps they are so common that we fail to notice them at all. Advertising has become so omnipresent that it is surprising to learn that most forms of advertising are relatively modern innovations.

It has been reported that the first ad in English was a printed notice tacked to church doors in 1477 announcing prayer books for sale (Goodrum and Dalrymple 1990). Although qualifying as an ad, this simple posted bulletin was hardly mass communication. The first evidence of advertising in a mass communication, albeit with very limited circulation, has been attributed to a German news pamphlet of 1525 (Presbrey 1929). This “ad” exhorted the reader to purchase a book written by a Dr. Laster. However, it is not known whether this promotion was a paid endorsement. Thus it cannot, with certainty, be determined whether this was an advertisement or an early example of publicity.

The importance of advertising is evidenced by the fact that the first regularly published periodical was an advertising vehicle. This was a regularly

published list of want ads first produced in Paris in 1612 (Presbrey 1929). The first definitive instance of mass media advertising in English was an ad printed in the *Weekly Newes* on February 1, 1625 (Presbrey 1929). Advertising caught on quickly in England, so much so that by 1652 readers were complaining about the quantity and character of advertising in “newsbooks” (Presbrey 1929). It was in the mid- to late 1600s that advertising as a distinct phenomenon began to emerge. Although the word “advertisement,” meaning a warning or a notice, was in common use by the time of Shakespeare, it was in 1655 that the term gained its modern meaning and replaced “advices” (Presbrey 1929). Although the term had gained its modern meaning, advertising did not yet resemble modern advertising.

As indicated in the following examples from 1692, early print ads were typically blind, with the publisher serving as a broker.

I have met with a curious gardener that will furnish anybody that sends to me for fruit trees, and floreal shrubs, and garden seeds. I have made him promise with all selemnity that whatever he sends shall be purely good, and I verily believe he may be depended on.

If anyone wants a wet nurse, I can help them, as I am informed, to a very good one.

I know a peruke [wig] maker that pretends to make perukes extraordinary fashionable and will sell good pennyworths; I can direct to him.

(Presbrey 1929, 58)

Blind advertising began to fade away as it became clear that direct advertising was more effective. Correspondingly, advertisers began to take a greater role in the creation of print advertising. By the late 1700s some print advertisers in England had begun to inject creativity into the medium. One of the pioneers of this effort was George Packwood. Packwood sold razor strops, and, more profitably, a paste to be used to condition the strop. He advertised heavily, and while most of his contemporaries were using simple announcements or making exaggerated claims, Packwood was entertaining his audience. Packwood’s ads were characterized by the use of “riddles, proverbs, fables, slogans, jokes, jingles, anecdotes, facts, aphorisms, puns, poems, songs, nursery rhymes, parodies, pastiches, stories, dialogs, definitions, conundrums, letters and metaphors” (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982, 153). A Packwood ad from 1796 reads:

## HISTORY OF HUMOR IN ADVERTISING

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Why is a dull razor like a famished man?

Because he wants whet.

Why is Packwood's Paste unlike the stocks?

Because it never falls, but always rises in the public opinion.

Why is Packwood's Strop unlike the present lottery?

Because every purchaser draws a prize.

Why is a person that has been shaved with a blunt-edged razor like another on the brink of marriage?

Because each wishes the business over.

And why is the inventor himself like a clergyman?

Because he is never out of orders.

(McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982, 171)

Packwood's print campaign lasted less than two years, from October 1794 until July 1796. However, in 1800 he published a book, available for one shilling, that contained reproductions of his ads, and, remarkably, stories of adventure featuring the razor strop (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982; Presbrey 1929).

Although Packwood was a pioneer in the use of humor in print, his ads employed the all-text format of the era. The first periodical ad featuring a humorous illustration is attributed to Warren's Shoe Blacking in 1820 (Presbrey 1929). Indeed, this ad was not only pioneering in the use of humor, it is considered a milestone of print advertising since it contained the first "idea" illustration, as contrasted with a simple product illustration, to appear in periodical advertising (Presbrey 1929). The ad featured a cartoon of a cat hissing at its reflection on a shiny boot. Humorous verses appeared below the illustration. The ad proved quite successful. As Presbrey (1929) states, "this advertising, because it was a novelty, made Warren's Shoe Blacking known throughout the Kingdom and produced a heavy sale of it" (85).

Early British advertising was a precursor to early American advertising. The colonists brought British notions of advertising with them to the New World, and they brought humor with them as well. Although colonists are often thought of as dour and humorless, evidence of humor is found in some of the earliest English publications in the colonies (Kenney 1976).

Magazines and newspapers appeared in the colonies prior to the founding of the United States. Although the earliest history of print advertising is

unclear, it has been reported that the first newspaper advertisements in the United States appeared in May of 1704 in the *Boston News Letter* (Presbrey 1929). These first three ads were very basic, cumulatively occupying four inches of one column. One ad was the offer of a reward for the capture of a thief, one was the offer of a reward for the return of two stolen anvils, and the third offered a piece of property for sale or rent (Presbrey 1929).

Smith (2003) reports that the origin of magazine advertising in the New World has been alternatively traced to either 1719 or 1741. In the earlier case, the first ad was purported to have appeared in a Philadelphia magazine, the *Weekly Mercury*, in 1719 (Smith 2003). Others trace the roots of magazines in America to Ben Franklin and Andrew Bradford, each of whom launched magazines in 1741 (Smith 2003). The confusion stems from incomplete records from this early period, in part due to the short life span of many early publications. Most early magazines, including Franklin's, lasted less than six months (Russell and Lane 1996). Some confusion about this early period may also be due to differing definitions of advertising. Some scholars consider only paid advertising, while others have a broader interpretation of the term and include self-promotion by the publisher as advertising.

The real growth in magazine publishing, and correspondingly magazine advertising, in the United States, did not occur until more than a century later when increasing literacy rates, improved printing technology, and railway mail delivery—with second class postage rates for magazines—gave birth to several magazines that still survive today. By the late 1800s *Town & Country*, *Cosmopolitan*, *National Geographic*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's* and other “modern” magazines had been founded. Yet the nature and volume of advertising in these early magazines were very different from magazine advertising today.

The first advertisement appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1864. In this magazine more space has been devoted to advertising during the past year than the sum total of space for the twenty-four years from 1864 to 1887, inclusive. Indeed, advertising may be said to have been in its swaddling clothes until about the year 1887. The most rapid development has taken place during the last fifteen years. The change has been so great that the leading advertisers say that in comparison with today there was in existence fifteen years ago no advertising worthy of the name. (Scott 1904, 29)

Although we can trace the roots of early advertising with some degree of certainty, the origin of humor in advertising is less clear. Packwood's