



Things Change and Stay the Same

The 1920s saw a change in advertising, going from when business showed customers what was available for purchase to persuading them to buy products. Charles Coolidge Parlin, an advertising consultant, used social science to move customers away from the traditional self-denial attitude to one of instant self-gratification. Before the 1920s, advertising was done primarily in newspapers, magazines and catalogues. That all changed during the 1920s with the development of motion pictures and radio.

Products that had been sold as medical treatments became everyday necessities. Coca-Cola had been sold as a remedy for headaches, but by the 1920s it was advertised as a refreshment. Listerine became a cure for halitosis—bad breath—and for the common cold and sore throat from 1921 to 1976. Kotex bandage material, which was wood fiber during the Great War, became a paper handkerchief—Kleenex—in the 1920s. These were all promoted on the new and old platforms of communication.

Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors during the 1920s overtook Henry Ford in the number of cars sold by 1927. Sloan introduced credit buying and created new styles in cars each year. Where one could buy a Ford in any color as long as it was black, General Motors had multiple colors and different styles. Ford was forced to redesign the Model T to the Model A by 1929 just before the Great Depression.

Other marketing techniques shifted consumers away from traditional habits to new habits. Proctor and Gamble introduced short cooking programs to sell their new product to replace grease—Crisco. The florist industry began a “Say it with Flowers” advertising campaign. The advertising industry exploded during the 1920s.

The 2020s seem to be on the verge of another explosion with social media and new devices for communication. Persuasion has become more sophisticated, with your buying habits tracked. The 20th century began with Sears and J.C. Penny catalogs sent to homes for home purchases. The 21st century continues with Amazon home purchases. Things have changed—or have they?

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