

THE CHANGING COMPLAINT HANDLING ENVIRONMENT:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONSUMER

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ABSTRACT

During the 1970's, public and private sector organizations have become more responsive to consumers' needs. Many businesses have realized that "complaints are the key to sales." Forward looking organizations have adopted innovative complaint handling practices that characterize the current state-of-the-art. The next decade should see further improvements.

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. It's a pleasure for me to be here today and to share with you TARP's view of the changing complaint handling environment and the implications of those changes for the consumer. The focus of my remarks today will be the "Complaint Handling in America Update Study" which TARP completed in 1986 for the United States Office of Consumer Affairs [1]. We'll look at some of the key findings from that study, highlight several of the innovative techniques which characterize the current state-of-the-art of complaint handling, consider what this means for the consumer, and take a brief look at complaint handling in the 1990's and beyond. However, before getting into the substance of today's presentation, I'd like to take a couple of minutes to tell you about TARP -- who we are and what we do.

TARP is a Washington, D.C. based management consulting firm that has been in business since 1971. The company was founded by John Goodman and Marc Grainer when they were graduate students at Harvard. In its early years, TARP's efforts were largely concentrated in doing government contract work, particularly as it related to poverty programs.

In 1975, TARP was awarded a contract by the then White House Office of Consumer Affairs to conduct a study of consumer complaint handling in America [2]. This study considered complaint handling through all aspects of both the private and public sectors and included a national consumer survey. That study, which was completed in 1979, changed the direction of TARP.

Since that time, TARP's emphasis has been on aiding private sector companies in improving their complaint handling service to the consumer. We have worked with organizations as diverse as American Express, AT&T, General Motors, Brooklyn Union Gas Company, Marriott, Southland, AARP, and the Consumer Federation of America.

TARP is a small organization. We are a staff of 12 full-time professionals. We have been told that we are the only management consulting firm in the country whose focus is strictly in the area of customer service -- both in delivering quality service the first time and in effectively handling consumer complaints when problems arise. We offer assistance that includes assessing the effectiveness of an existing complaint handling system, helping an organization establish an effective 800 number customer response unit, quantifying the market implications of existing levels of service, establishing measurement systems to track customer satisfaction on an ongoing basis, and training personnel in direct customer contact roles in practically based techniques for defusing the anger of an unhappy customer.

Now, for the actual substance of my remarks to you today. In its entirety, the "Complaint Handling in America Update Study" contains:

- a survey of the complaint handling practices used by the business community;
- a survey of the complaint handling practices of state and local governments and private voluntary agencies;
- a detailed literature review focused on recent studies dealing with whether it pays to handle complaints;
- profiles of selected organizations whose complaint handling practices highlight the state-of-the-art; and
- an assessment of complaint handling practices within the federal government.

However, before considering the key findings from that study, we need to take a brief look at the business environment as it currently exists. That environment allows us to put the study's findings into the proper perspective.

What we see is that industry today is in transition. We are moving from a time when market conditions were fairly stable and technology was not changing rapidly to a time when market conditions have destabilized -- there is increasing competition in every industry -- and technology is changing so rapidly that it is difficult to keep up with the latest innovations. What this means is, over the long term, most corporations will never again have a competitive advantage in either product or price.

Let's take a brief look at an example of what I mean. Ten years ago, long distance and local

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telephone service was basically available from one or two major suppliers. Then things began to change and alternative long distance telephone service became available from a myriad of suppliers. Several of those companies no longer provide such long distance service. They were unable to sustain a competitive advantage in either product or price and certainly were not differentiating themselves from other suppliers based on service quality. They either merged with other companies or went totally out of the long distance telephone business.

In the not too distant future, both consumers and business will probably also have a choice in the provider of local dial tone service. That will serve to make an already chaotic environment even more chaotic. I would imagine that we'll see some of the existing companies unable to compete in this more competitive environment. It would also not surprise me to see new companies enter the marketplace.

When I took my first graduate statistics course, my father paid a hundred dollars for a calculator that had the four basic functions, one memory, and did squares and square roots. Now for about a quarter of that cost, there are at least 25 or 30 different calculators that seem to do almost everything but slice bread.

If a competitive advantage in product or price is not attainable, then there is a need for companies to create a sustainable competitive advantage in other areas, such as quality products and service, if they are to survive.

Think about personal computers. I don't know about you, but I don't have the background to fully understand how one is different from another. Moreover, the prices on what appear to be similar pieces of equipment give me no clue as to which one is a better buy. I make my decision based on either the reputation of the company as a provider of quality products and service or on the recommendation of friends I consider knowledgeable about computers.

How can a company survive in this atmosphere? Does it have to virtually give away its products and services in order to maintain a competitive edge? Well, I think not.

The solution to the dilemma is really quite simple. In order to survive and succeed, a corporation needs to make a total commitment to:

- . identifying and satisfying the needs and expectations of consumers better than the competition;
- . taking exceptional care of customers through superior and consistent service and product quality;
- . being open to innovation and new ideas throughout the organization; and

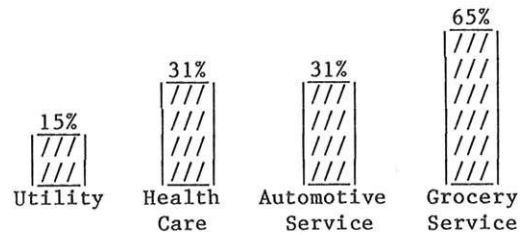
- . providing compensation and incentives that ensure highly motivated personnel who exhibit a desire to win and an exceptional degree of teamwork.

These are the characteristics of the company that will survive and grow throughout the next decade and beyond.

Complaints Are the Key to Sales

The findings from the "Update Study's Literature Review" tell us that a substantial segment of American consumers experience problems with the products and services they purchase (Figure 1).

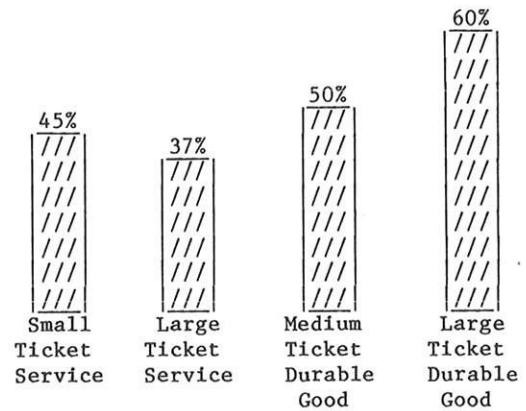
FIGURE 1. Percentage of Consumers Experiencing Problems with Selected Product/Service



Source: TARP Industry Specific Data

It also tells us, that regardless of the industry, many consumers who experience problems do not complain (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Percentage of Consumers Experiencing Problems with Selected Product/Service Who Did Not Complain



Source: TARP Industry Specific Data

We have seen several instances of this. First, a company inadvertently produced a defective ladies garment. The defect was such that the garment tore the first time it was worn. The company knew how many of the defective garments had been manufactured and shipped. What they discovered was that the ratio of complaints to defective garments was one to 2,000.

Also, are you aware that the New York City subway system gets fewer complaints per passenger

mile than any other mass transit system in the country? I seriously doubt that it's because they provide such wonderful service. I think it's more likely because people are happy just to have survived the trip!

If you don't believe me, think about your own experience as a consumer. How many times have you complained about a mediocre meal or bad service in a restaurant. If you're like I am, when the waiter or waitress asked if everything was all right, you nodded your head and indicated it was. How many times have you complained about long lines in a department store, grocery store, or bank? I would tend to think rarely, if at all.

Consumers consistently relate three primary reasons why they don't complain when they experience problems:

- . complaining wasn't worth their time and trouble;
- . they didn't know how or where to complain; and
- . they believed that complaining wouldn't do any good.

This latter reason is most disturbing for the business community because it shows consumer pessimism about businesses' ability to stand behind the products and services that are being sold today.

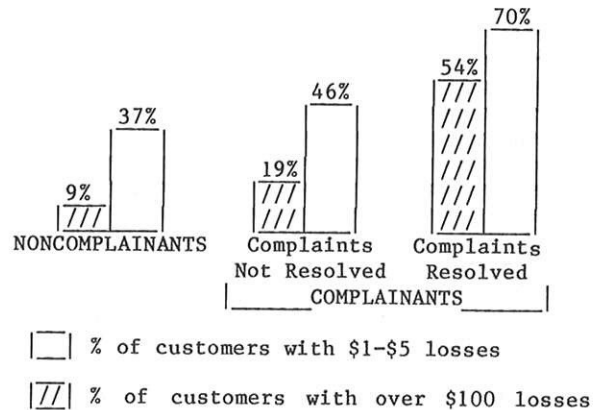
Why should businesses care about the problems customers experience and their subsequent complaint behavior? Well, unfortunately, many corporate executives don't care. They adopt an attitude that no news is good news or that those customers who complain are wild eyed nuts that have gone straight to the top.

A major financial services company found that only about 15 percent of its executive complaints were from customers who had gone straight to the top. In fact, the majority of executive level complainants had tried an average of six times to work their way through the system before escalating.

By examining the findings from the "Literature Review," we also find that there is a strong relationship between complaining and brand loyalty. What this means is, if a company can get a customer who experiences a problem to complain, and can satisfy that customer, a substantial number of those customers can be retained. In fact, we find that even if the customer is not satisfied with the way the company handled the problem, there is usually more willingness to repurchase the product or service than if the customer had not complained at all (Figure 3). Thus, the mere existence of the complaint handling system can result in incremental brand loyalty and increased sales. This is true whether one is dealing with a small ticket item such as a hair dryer or a

large ticket item such as a major appliance or an automobile.

FIGURE 3. How Many of Your Unhappy Customers Will Buy From You Again?



Source: "National Consumer Survey"

The impact of customer problem experience and complaining behavior becomes even more visible when one realizes that the impact on loyalty is not just related to repurchase of the same product. A customer's experience with one product or service provided by a company also impacts his or her willingness to purchase other products or services provided by and identified with that company. This is true whether one is dealing with a soft drink, a bottle of aspirin, or an automobile.

The impact of problem experience and complaint behavior on consumers' future purchasing patterns is compounded by a phenomenon called word of mouth. People talk to each other about their good and bad experiences. Moreover, there is twice as much negative word of mouth generated by a dissatisfied customer than there is positive word of mouth generated by a satisfied customer. Coupled with research that has been conducted which shows that the opinions of friends are by far the most important factor in a consumer's prepurchase decision, one quickly realizes the market damage that can be caused by word of mouth. Thus, a large number of customer problems in a small area of a company's business can be as harmful, if not more so, than problems in the company's major product line.

Furthermore, many organizations view complaint handling activities as a corporate liability -- they require an expenditure of resources to operate without returning anything to the company. To put it bluntly, this is simply not true. By effectively soliciting and dealing with consumers' complaints, the corporate complaint handling department can not only pay for itself, it can generate profits which contribute to the company's bottom line (Table 1). In short, it pays to invest the resources required to establish an effective complaint handling system.

TABLE 1. Return on Investment by Corporate Complaint Handling Units

<u>Industry</u>	<u>ROI</u>
Package Goods	15% - 75%
Financial Services	50% - 170%
Gas Utilities	20% - 150%
Consumer Durable Goods	100% +
Electronic Products	50%
Retailing	35% - 400%
Automotive Service	100% +

Source: TARP Industry Specific Data

Unfortunately, many businesses today are not maximizing the benefits they could derive from effective complaint handling systems. Many consumers remain dissatisfied with businesses response to their complaint.

Thus, corporate executives who believe that complainants are wild eyed nuts who have gone straight to the top are missing a major marketing opportunity. So are the executives who pay lip service to the value of complaint handling without being willing to commit the resources necessary to have an effective complaint handling system.

INNOVATIVE COMPLAINT HANDLING PRACTICES

There are a number of organizations which have adopted innovative complaint handling techniques which typify the current state-of-the-art. These are:

- . customer assistance 800 numbers;
- . quantifying the market impact of current levels of service;
- . complaint handling software;
- . retail outlet complaint handling programs;
- . satisfaction tracking systems;
- . defusion of anger training;
- . preventive analysis; and
- . customer satisfaction core groups.

Satisfaction Tracking

The primary purposes of satisfaction tracking systems are to enable a company to monitor: (1) its ability to deliver products and services in a manner that meets customer needs and expectations, and (2) the ability of complaint handling policies and procedures to satisfy customers who encounter problems and request assistance.

There are six characteristics of an effective customer or complainant satisfaction tracking system. The first is that the system must be transaction based. Very simply, this means that

to conduct ongoing measurement of customers who have not dealt with you provides very little in the way of actionable data. Customers typically love you until they have to deal with you. It is when the customer has a transaction with you that you have the opportunity of turning satisfaction into dissatisfaction.

Think about it. If you're anything like I am, your health insurance provider is fine until you have to file a claim, your car dealer is fine until your car needs repairs, and the local department store is fine until you have to return something. It is the customer's satisfaction with those types of experiences that has to be monitored.

The second characteristic is that the system needs to be easy and cost effective to implement. No organization has unlimited resources. Therefore, the implementation of a tracking system cannot require a substantial resource commitment. The answer is to use a low cost postcard questionnaire which is either pre-printed or computer generated with computerized sampling, addressing, precoding, and automated report generation.

The short postcard survey also serves to meet the third criterion of an effective tracking system -- requiring a minimal response burden on the part of the recipient. The four or five questions which can be included on a card take only a couple of minutes for the customer to answer. Of course, this also means that the questions have to be carefully selected so the necessary information can be obtained.

It is important that the tracking system enable you to rank the performance of certain groups or individuals within the organization. For instance, a complainant satisfaction tracking system should enable you to rank the performance of customer service representatives, individually and by operational groups. If you are an automotive manufacturer, for example, the system should enable you to also rank the performance of zones, areas, and/or dealerships. If you are a utility, you should be able to rank the performance of field service offices.

If you are working with a customer satisfaction tracking system, you might want to rank the performance of sales offices, repair facilities, order taking personnel, etc. Such a ranking will enable you to monitor the organization's ability to deliver products and services right the first time.

The ranking we are discussing here is an index which is constructed from two items on the questionnaire. Basically, these are a measure of satisfaction and a measure of repurchase intention. This is a 0-100 point scale with each of the aforementioned questions weighted equally.

Including a measure of repurchase intention, either in terms of buying the same product, buying other products or services, or recommending

the product or service to a friend or associate is a necessary component of the tracking system. We know, for example, that a satisfied customer will be more likely to repurchase than a dissatisfied customer. However, the correlation is not perfect. Therefore, both components need to be included in order to obtain the most accurate measure of the impact of the transaction on the customer's future buying habits. And, that is the most important consideration in the long run.

Fifth, an effective tracking system must provide managers with actionable information in a timely manner. There are typically flaws in many of the measurement systems in use today. The results contain all kinds of things that are nice to know, but they are not actionable. For example, if the results indicate that the customer is not satisfied, very few of the systems give a manager any indication of what is causing the customer's dissatisfaction.

With an effective tracking system, this problem can be solved. By identifying and including key attributes of service on the questionnaire, a manager can pinpoint customer perceived weaknesses in the service delivery system. The diagnostic report provides a manager with easily reviewed data on the attribute ratings. Also, because the report shows changes over time, the manager has the information necessary to determine if corrective actions have been effective.

Additionally, the results from most tracking systems are not available in a timely manner. For a tracking system to have the greatest utility, results must be available almost instantaneously, before additional market damage can be incurred. A lot of what is out there involves such things as a survey conducted in September with results available in December or January. Some companies try to get around this problem by using a telephone survey. However, this tends to violate the "cost effective" criterion.

Finally, the system must support "management by exception," allowing an organization to target its limited resources to those areas where they can have the greatest impact. The performance ranking and diagnostic data from the attributes included in the questionnaire support "management by exception." They allow a company to expend its resources in those areas where there are problems, rather than wasting time and effort in tending to "nonproblems." Not only does this effectively use existing resources, it also improves the overall ability of the company to satisfy the customer, as performance of the individuals and/or groups whose ratings are low improves over time.

Defusion of Anger Training

The second innovation indicative of the current state-of-the-art of complaint handling involves providing personnel in direct customer contact

roles with defusion of anger training. This type of training provides personnel with practically based skills in how to lower the anger level of an unhappy customer to the point where the customer can be dealt with on a rational, rather than an emotional, basis. This is an area, I might add, where the training programs of most organizations are lacking.

Organizations use a "Jack Webb" approach to complaint handling. Representatives are trained to first capture the customer's name, address, or other identifying information such as account number. This is in order to access some existing records or begin to complete a "computer screen." Unfortunately, a customer who is really angry does not want to be interrupted to provide this information; often the customer's anger level will increase when this happens. The end result is a madder customer and a customer service representative who has a more difficult situation on his or her hands.

Complainants cannot be helped until their anger is defused. Thus, even such things as requiring a representative to complete a contact in a certain amount of time, can serve to further infuriate a customer. The customer must be given time to ventilate, and the representative has to be trained in how to facilitate that process while still obtaining the needed information.

Once the customer's anger level has been brought down, the representative must be given a logical process for actually dealing with the problem. The training should include techniques in how to obtain the information as well as limited negotiation skills. When these two things are coupled in a consistent training program, the result will be increased complainant satisfaction and repurchase intention. Another benefit will be reduced turnover of customer service representatives and more dedicated personnel.

Quantifying Market Damage

The third state-of-the-art innovation deals with quantifying the market implications of current performance. Several of the more forward looking companies are beginning to quantify the market damage which results from customers' problem experience and existing service levels. This enables them to determine how many sales are being lost because existing customers experience problems and to combine this calculation with an estimate of the sales being lost because the customer service system is not as effective as it could be.

These organizations are then able to do a cost/benefit calculation regarding the potential value of making changes to either the product or the customer service delivery system. The cost of making the change can be balanced against the sales that would be retained if the change were made. In this way, the organization is able to make educated determinations regarding the most effective way to increase customer satisfaction and enhance market share.

Customer Satisfaction Core Group

The final innovation that we'll consider today is the customer satisfaction core group. This is a group of four or five individuals of senior middle management grade drawn from all segments of the organization. These are people who are senior enough to have their opinions matter yet not so senior that they cannot devote the necessary time to core group activities. At least one skeptic about the value of customer service should be included in the group. The final member of the group should be a full-time executive director.

Use of a core group is a long-term process designed to change the corporate culture from being company driven to being customer driven. It is this group that conducts or commissions the investigatory work that needs to be done to determine where the company is now. It is this group that puts together a strategy for moving the organization forward in being more responsive to customers. It is this group that monitors the organization's ability to meet the goals of the strategy which is approved by management.

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

What does all of this mean for consumers? Very simply, it means that despite commentaries such as the one that recently appeared in Time and decried the quality of service in America, major corporations are continuing in their efforts to be more responsive to the needs of customers.

More and more companies are using customer service 800 numbers in order to be more accessible. The survey of more than 600 businesses conducted as a part of the "Update Study" showed that 42 percent of the respondents that served a regional or national market were using complaint handling 800 numbers. In fact, 25 percent of the state and local government or private voluntary agency respondents had also adopted a toll-free telephone mechanism for handling complaints.

Companies are realizing the value of using complaint data preventively -- of looking at the problems customers are complaining about and trying to correct the root cause of the problem and eliminate it. Let's look at a couple of examples of how complaint data can be used to corporate advantage.

Did you know that the Polaroid SX-70 camera was conceived because of complaints? Polaroid had received many complaints that the film was tearing as customers pulled it out of the old hand cameras. They also received complaints that these cameras simply didn't work. These complaints were caused because consumers didn't realize that the camera contained batteries that had to be changed. Thus the birth of the SX-70: the film automatically ejected after the picture was taken and each film pack contained batteries. The root cause of the complaints had been eliminated.

Another good example of using complaint data preventively is provided by Armstrong World Industries, the manufacturers of Solarian®. Armstrong received a number of complaints that its Solarian® floors were not holding up under normal use. They realized that this was because customers were not properly caring for these no-wax floors, either because they weren't being given instruction booklets by the installers or they weren't reading them. They now print an 800 number in big black letters every three feet on the top side of the floor. This triggers the standard phone call. "I love my new floor, but the 800 number doesn't go with my decor." The customer is then told that the 800 number can be removed with warm water and soap. While on the phone, the customer is given instructions on how to care for the new floor. This has virtually eliminated complaints about Solarian® wearability.

The final example of using complaint data preventively comes from a recent experience of mine. I had purchased some bedding which I was financing on a "90 days same as cash" basis. Within two hours of when the bedding was delivered, I received a call from the finance company asking if the merchandise had been delivered and if everything was satisfactory to me. When I questioned the gentleman, he told me that they had been having problems because customers who were not satisfied with the merchandise they had purchased tended not to pay their bills. This meant that the finance company was left "holding the bag" because the retailer was not able to satisfactorily service the consumer. Therefore, they had adopted a policy of calling the consumer to be sure everything was satisfactory before they paid the retailer. This policy had reduced their "slow pay" or "no pay" problem by more than half.

Companies are beginning to provide personnel in direct customer contact roles with the kinds of training needed to make them most effective in dealing with the customer. About 70 percent of the business survey respondents indicated providing customer contact personnel with some type of communications skills training. Companies as diverse as Armstrong World Industries, Coors, and General Motors have provided customer contact personnel with specific skills training in how to defuse the anger of an unhappy customer.

An increasing number of businesses are implementing satisfaction tracking systems. These are being used to monitor the ability of field based organizations to meet customer needs and to monitor the effectiveness of complaint handling policies and procedures.

In general, the findings from the business survey indicate that there have been significant improvements in complaint handling practices since the original USOCA study in the 1970's. Businesses have increased complaint handling professionalism during the 1980's.

Please don't misunderstand. The situation is better, but it's still not perfect. And progress is not necessarily as rapid as many consumers or consumer interest groups would like to see. But, we can find some degree of encouragement in the fact that progress is being made. Most businesses have finally realized that it is in their best interests to try to resolve the customer's problem before a third-party such as an attorney, a Better Business Bureau, or a regulatory agency becomes involved. In fact, less than 10 percent of the complaint volume handled by business survey respondents came from such third-parties.

However, at the same time, companies have also realized that there are times when they have to say "NO" to the customer because of an unreasonable demand. No one is going to "give away the store" and give every complaining customer what he or she wants, regardless of the cost, when the request is unreasonable. Thus, the customer who wants a transmission replaced at 90,000 miles is going to be told "NO" as is the utility user who demands compensation for time lost from work because the repair person was late. And, I might add, business is perfectly justified in refusing to meet unreasonable customer demands.

I can't resist the opportunity of adding a personal note to what I've been saying. Yes, business has an obligation to be responsive to consumers. But the consumer has an obligation too. That obligation is to complain when a problem occurs; not simply sit back, do nothing, and sigh that they don't make things the way they used to. Not only should the consumer take the initiative and contact the company, but the consumer should also be persistent in his or her attempts. A busy phone line is not an excuse for not complaining -- keep trying. If the initial point of contact is nonresponsive, escalate. And, if the company remains nonresponsive, buy elsewhere. There are options for virtually every product or service. A nonresponsive company will not change unless sales go down -- things will not get better unless consumers actively use the power of the purchase.

Additionally, consumers have an obligation to be reasonable in the demands they make of business. Wanting a business to cover warranty repairs is reasonable -- wanting a five year old washing machine replaced is not. Wanting improperly made repairs corrected is reasonable -- demanding a new vehicle is not. Consumer groups have an obligation to not only try to get business to be more responsive to consumers but also to educate consumers on the value of complaining and how to complain.

Consumer groups should work with third-party complaint handlers to ensure that no assistance is provided to a consumer who has not first requested assistance from the offending company and exhausted all internal channels. Most third-party complaint handlers are working with limited resources. In order to maximize these resources, they need to avoid unnecessary contacts

and focus on those instances where they are "the court of last resort."

What does the future hold in store? Well, unfortunately, I'm not a fortune teller or a psychic, so I can't be positive. But, I think that over the next decade and beyond, we will continue to see the good companies moving toward being more responsive to consumer needs. If consumers exercise their prerogative to switch brands, the bad companies will either "get religion" or fall by the wayside. Thus, over time, the entire system will be upgraded.

I think that we will see an increasing proliferation of customer service 800 numbers as companies attempt to become more accessible to consumers. I think it will become the norm rather than the exception for the consumer to receive a brief questionnaire asking about his or her satisfaction with a particular transaction. I hope that the typical situation will see a consumer who experiences a problem complaining. I'd love to see the time when third-party complaint handlers go out of business; but, realistically, I don't think that will happen in your lifetime or mine.

However, I do think we can continue to be hopeful. Businesses want to survive and grow. The realization is spreading that, in order to do so, business has to deliver more than a quality product at a competitive price. The forward looking companies have already realized that, in an increasingly competitive marketplace, quality service may provide the only viable means of brand differentiation. Thus, they have begun to install effective complaint handling systems to deal with those instances when problems do occur.

Considerable progress in being more responsive to consumer needs has been made over the past decade. The future is up to us. We need to continue our efforts to enhance businesses' responsiveness to consumer needs. We need to complain when we encounter a problem. We need to educate friends and associates about the value of complaining when they encounter problems. We can't allow ourselves the luxury of becoming frustrated at what seems to be slow progress or no progress. We've laid a cornerstone that seems firm and solid. We need to forge a superstructure that is just as solid. The experiences of the past decade give us hope. It is up to us to transform today's hope into tomorrow's reality.

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ABSTRACT

As advertising agents first pursued and then abandoned their aspirations toward a genteel professionalism in the 1920s, they gradually shed all vestiges of Victorian paternalism in their view of mass consumers. In the process, they acknowledged, with some dismay, that a new "consumer society" had emerged in which all consumers, not just women, were conveniently but deplorably "feminine."

INTRODUCTION

One of the benefits of adopting an historical perspective toward any subject of current relevance is that it can help distinguish those aspects of present outlook and practice that are significantly new from those which represent the repetition of old clichés. To what extent are present discourses between advertisers and consumers simply the ritual daily reenactments of earlier commercial conversations in which the social relationships and mutual perceptions of speakers and listeners have remained unchanged?

Certainly some patterns of advertising appeal have been remarkably persistent. In one of my classes I assign a writing exercise based on the evidence of 1920s visual documents, including advertisements. The initial response of nearly all students is that of instant recognition. Over sixty years, they remark, many of the appeals and stereotyped figures seem hardly to have changed.

But striking differences also exist, many of which seem evident and inescapable once the similarity of appeals has been acknowledged. For instance, the length of written text in 1920s and 1930s advertisements will puzzle anyone habituated to current advertising. "Did they really expect people to stop and read all of that?" The power of visual imagery was becoming increasingly evident in the 1920s and 1930s, but only a few advertisers were yet prepared to abandon a back-up selling message in an extended text. Yes, they did expect people to find time to read the "fine print," once a striking illustration had captured their attention.

Another clear distinction between contemporary advertising and that of a half-century ago, which an historical perspective makes apparent, is the relative directness, explicitness and even naivety of many of the earlier ads. Most

advertisements in the 1920s and 1930s had come a long way from the detailed reason-why arguments and assertive patent medicine promises of several decades before, but ad writers still made quite specific claims for the functions of most products, thus offering the reader an explicit proposition. (You won't find nearly so many explicit propositions in ads today). Moreover, ad writers rarely hesitated to specify the aspirations toward class mobility that they assumed on the part of the consumer or the exact social benefits the user could expect to derive from the product. For example, a 1926 silverware ad which carried the headline "They Just Couldn't Invite the Tarringtons" proceeded to explain at length how the purchase of a "chest of silver" enabled the featured couple to step up into the Tarrington's social set. Campbell's encouraged the housewife to believe that, by serving soup to guests, she would find a "subtle way of 'announcing' her social position." A 1931 Ivory Soap Flakes ad, depicting a young couple in evening dress at a "smart restaurant", promised middle class women without maids that "No one can high-hat us about our Hands...IF..." and a Lifebuoy 1933 cartoon ad entitled "Breaking into Society" described how the socially ambitious young couple, which received "so few invitations," made a big hit with the snobbish "Blairs" after the husband learned how to protect against "B.O." [1].

Other significant then-and-now contrasts in advertising are less apparent in the ads themselves, at least on initial inspection. It is to these less readily apparent changes that I want to devote my attention. The discourses between advertiser and consumer have been altered in significant ways over the past half-century by the increasing consciousness of, and strategizing for, market segmentation and by the way in which the advertising trade came to terms with the issue of professionalism.

GENTEEL PROFESSIONALISM

Let us begin with two basic observations about advertising people in the 1920s, the so-called "Golden Age" of American advertising. First, the advertising practitioners were intensely concerned with the issue of professionalism. Having emerged only two decades before from an era dominated by patent medicine advertising, they were extremely self-conscious about their medicine-man image as shysters and hucksters.

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The decade from 1910 to 1920 had already witnessed a surge of organization-building and proclamations of ethical standards within the trade [2]. Many ad men entered the 1920s intent on attaining a professional status analogous to that of lawyers, doctors or clergymen.

My second observation, seemingly unrelated to the first, is that the advertising trade had begun to talk more and more about "research" in the late 1920s, but that such research did not yet involve direct or systematic attempts to assess the needs and wants of consumers or the meanings that they invested in goods. As late as 1929, a Printers' Ink article entitled "Recent Developments in Advertising Research" made no reference to personal attitudes or characteristics of consumers and identified the most important current development as the use of "trading areas" rather than of political divisions by marketing studies [3]. Advertising leaders did pay some attention to the studies of such academic psychologists as Walter Dill Scott and Alfred Poffenberger, although my surveys of ad agency literature suggest that they paid much less attention to such studies than some observers have suggested [4]. Neither did the advertising agencies pursue their own studies of consumers - either because their concepts of professionalism led them to focus not on consumers as they were but as they ought to become, or because their claims to expertise asserted a knowledge of people derived from more trustworthy, if less systematic, sources of such understanding. Let's look at how these two phenomena - a search for professionalism and a reliance on personal or intuitive ways of knowing the public - were connected.

For those advertising leaders who coveted a professional image along the traditional lines established by religion and medicine, the central issues were educational and ethical standards and public service. While some sensitivity to the present condition of consumers was desirable (just as was such attention to parishioners or patients), still the central goal was to insure that the consumers' contact with the professional would elevate them to a proper state of piety, health, comfort or taste. Detailed research into consumers' impulses was unnecessary. Proper self-respect as an advertising professional required that the members of one's audience be amenable to uplift and benign advice - either because they already shared the advertisers' standards of taste and decorum or because they were receptive, whatever their present condition, to the influence of their betters.

Thus, advertising agents who sought professionalism in this sense of public service proved particularly amenable to a "trickle-down" theory of consumer influences. A cultured elite, comprising no more than the top five percent of the population, set the styles and shaped opinion, they assumed. As Arthur Page, Publicity Director of AT&T, put it, "I think there are probably not over half a million people who decide what the United States does, prime movers,

so to speak, in thinking...If these key people are thoroughly persuaded they will affect the rest of the crowd sooner or later." The Edison Blue Book of 1924 described the company's consumer market as "between 3 and 4 million outstanding families...who their neighbors are most anxious to imitate." The manufacturers of linen damask tablecloths even expressed confidence that such trickle-down influences could reverse consumption trends: "Our campaign is aimed at women with cultivated tastes," they noted in 1926, "the thought being to arouse interest in linen damask among social leaders in the community. Once this interest is gained, ...other women will fall in line rapidly and take to tablecloths once more" [5].

The magazines that aimed at an elite audience, particularly those in the "Quality Group" (The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Scribner's, Review of Reviews and The World's Work), seized upon every opportunity to educate advertisers in the trickle-down theory. In a 1926 ad in Printers' Ink, for instance, the Quality Group argued the value of the select visitors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art over the masses who patronized the movie palaces: "Those who go to the Museum, while far fewer in numbers, are vastly more effective in thinking power, in purchasing power, and in the power of leadership." They were a "controlling minority" - the "key people of the country." Harper's Bazaar prided itself on reaching the influential "Inner Circle" by making "no editorial concessions to the masses" and Cosmopolitan proclaimed itself a "class magazine," one that reached "the right kind of people...who set the buying standards for their neighbors" [6]. The N.W. Ayer & Son agency, which sponsored exhibits to identify its advertising art with high art, repeated the message of the "quality" magazines. Its ads for clients in newspapers and magazines provided better merchandising than the salesman, Ayer argued, because these publications could bypass the butlers who guarded access to the top 500,000 people "who influence, to a marked degree, the communities in which they live." Such families, Ayer pointed out, played the crucial role in "determining today what we shall wear, eat, play or ride in tomorrow. They sponsor a fashion, they find new places of amusement, and sooner or later the world follows" [7].

This commitment to the trickle-down theory found expression in ads which spoke authoritatively of the verdicts of "society." Headlines in Kotex ads consistently proclaimed that "eight in ten better-class women" had adopted Kotex. Texaco serenely advised all motorists to take a lesson from those elegant Texaco patrons whose "chauffeurs are the smartest" and who "instinctively...demand the best" [8]. Confidence in the taste leadership of the fastidious and wealthy proved comforting to those advertising leaders who sought a professional status based on high standards of decorum, education and service. The masses might currently be tasteless and benighted, but there was little need to suffer the denigration of

appealing to them at their present level - nor to engage in systematic research to understand their tastes and desires. Tasteful ads would surely uplift them to some degree; moreover, their tastes would gradually be elevated by the example and influence of their social betters, genteel people whom advertisers might address without losing self-respect. It was unfortunately true that even among the influential elite, women were the principal consumers and thus appeals had to take into account feminine emotionality, suggestibility and fickleness. But these women were at least style-conscious and fastidious and could be treated with a genteel form of condescension. Agency leaders, like President Earnest Elmo Calkins of the Calkins and Holden agency, might even conceive of themselves as missionaries of beauty and good taste, teaching manufacturers the economic value of beauty in products while uplifting the taste of the masses through products advertised to the elite [9].

AD "PROS" AS PEOPLE EXPERTS

Other leaders in the burgeoning advertising agencies of the 1920s contested this vision of professionalism. The responsibility of advertising professionals, they insisted, was not to art, beauty and civic service, but to the sales performance of their clients. As the agent of a business client, the ad man had only one claim to the status of "professional," such practitioners argued. This claim was the possession of an unique and valuable expertise - a special knowledge of "people." To the manufacturer, the advertising professional brought his "outside view", his ability to empathize with the viewpoint of the consumer. From this standpoint, a view of consumers as socially and culturally quite distinct from business executives served to enhance the importance of professional expertise. The further the manufacturer was removed from the buying public in class position, education, cultural tastes and everyday living experience, the greater was his need for the ad man's expertise in order to bridge this gap. Thus, advertising agents seeking a professional niche based on a special, esoteric knowledge were inclined to emphasize the need to appeal directly to the unsophisticated, even "vulgar," masses.

One might suppose that such an outlook would have suggested formal projects of systematic research into consumer attitudes and behavior. Eventually such a trend would emerge, but in the 1920s and 1930s most advertising agencies were little attracted to academic approaches and were not at all inclined to add so expensive and suspect an undertaking to their services. Many did have research departments, but these were engaged primarily in analyzing coupons returned from ads, surveying retail outlets for sales trends and querying householders on product preferences [10]. Agents made claims for their intimate knowledge of "the people" not on the basis of research, academically defined, but on the basis of personal experience. Again and again, they

recounted how they had obtained their expertise through their background (they had "come from the people" in all regions and circumstances) or through contact with people through personal selling on the road or in retail outlets. And they retained a fresh, up-to-date sensitivity and knowledge through constant mingling with the people at large.

One is tempted, for the sake of parallelism, to call this a "trickle-up" theory, but this would distort the idea. Advertising people did not assume that they would be influenced in their own tastes and attitudes by the masses, but merely that they would learn the necessary language in which to address them on behalf of their business clients. The advertising writer "may not live with the mass," as one contributor to Advertising and Selling put it, "but he should be part of it. He should mingle with it, listen to it, observe it, talk to it." Challenging his audience of advertising professionals he demanded: "How many (of you) sit in the bleachers at the ball games? How many ride cross country in buses? How many hang onto the trolley straps when they go about their work in the cities? Do you? Those are the places where your customers are!" [11]. Other advertising leaders were never at a loss to suggest places where the advertising man or woman should go to mingle. They should "sit in the lobby of a motion picture theater," "sit in the waiting room of a big railroad station for an hour a day," "ride the elevators in department stores," "talk with average people in barber shops...on trains...at prizefights," "gossip with clerks in small-town stores," "get some sort of a job selling something to plain folks." Advertising's "laboratories" ought to be "the movie houses, the police courts, the dance halls, the amusement parks, the ball games and circuses." Copywriters should talk to taxi cab drivers and shoe shiners; they should "pound the sidewalks before pounding the typewriter" [12].

As you might well imagine, there is little evidence that the copywriters of the 1920s and 1930s actually did much of this mingling, although the J. Walter Thompson agency did make a big production of sending John B. Watson, the noted academic behaviorial psychologist, out to gain several months of experience selling across the counter at Macy's and selling coffee on the road to retail dealers when he joined the agency as a Vice-President in the early 1920s [13]. By and large, advertising people had no time to engage in such patient, deliberate mingling and few felt the inclination to absorb the "culture of the people" as described in one agency ad:

"Perspiring thousands at Coney Island..Gaudy pennants. The crunch of peanut shells underfoot. Chewing gum. Mustard dripping from hot dogs. People struggling for a view of some queer freak in a side show. Red-faced men elbowing and crowding for the vicarious thrill of a coach dancer...Stopping for the shudder of

gaping at a gory accident...Women tearing other women's clothing in the scramble of a bargain counter...." [14]

But if most advertising people declined to mingle with the "vulgar" masses in their own haunts, still they were regularly exhorted to do so. These ritual incantations served to remind would-be professionals in the trade the specific nature of the expertise upon which they must lay their claim to provide a professional service. As the N.W. Ayer agency put it, "we have made it our business to know people" [15]. If the cross country bus trips, Coney Island excursions and police court visits represented a myth of the trade, still it was a myth that served to re-enforce a penchant to resist any academic or scientific conceptions of how one might come to "know" the people. Even now, advertising research is often resisted by creative people in the agencies as a unwelcome intrusion and a damper upon their creative work. In the 1920s, the agencies conducted virtually no systematic research on consumers; when a few began to make tentative forays into this field in the early 1930s, prestigious agency leaders such as Albert Lasker, president of Lord and Thomas, dismissed such approaches with contempt. Most research surveys merely resulted in a "competition of bunco slinging." For instance, Lasker asked, what use had a live-stock raiser for an advertising agency that would "go out and make a great research and come back and profoundly report to the advertiser that a jackass has two ears"? His own idea of cheaper and more efficient research was to assign a stenographer to review the last ten years of a company's ads in the Ladies' Home Journal and report which themes the ads stressed most [16].

Ironically, just as the "trickle-down" theory had protected the self-respect of advertising men by assuring them that they need not abandon their own artistic standards, so the "people experts" mystique, when described in experiential rather than scientific terms, could justify a certain artistic autonomy on the part of creative agency people. They might resist limitations on their creativity by asserting their special knowledge of the mass audience gained from instinct and experience.

The "experience" from which most advertising people actually gained their image of the consumer masses was their attention to the new media of popular culture. When the J. Walter Thompson agency began in 1930 to invite outside experts to speak to its creative staff, it did not invite any academic psychologists or sociologists with expertise in community studies or research methods. Neither, incidentally, did the agency call in any barbers or taxi cab drivers, nor did it propose group visits to railroad stations or movie theater lobbies. The agency invited experts from the world of newspapers, comic weeklies, movies, and popular magazines [17]. And the trade as a whole paid close attention to such booming successes as the tabloid newspapers and confession magazines. It

observed with disenchantment the way in which bad taste seemed to drive out good taste in radio programming. Then, in the early 1930s, it responded with some shock to George Gallup's findings that people of all occupations and classes preferred the comics to all other sections of the daily and Sunday newspapers. Such evidence of seemingly declining popular tastes marked the penultimate stage in the ascendancy of the "take them as they are" pros in "people expertise" over the uplift faction. The deepening depression of the early 1930s confirmed that dominance by stimulating an attack on the genteel and presumably ineffective, "pretty-pretty" advertising of the 1920s and a call for "hard-hitting, hard-working," hit-them-where-they-are styles of advertising [18].

FROM UPLIFT TO AMORAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

The uplift school of advertising never did recover from the series of blows administered by the new media, the successes of a number of low-pitched, tasteless campaigns, and the sales-consciousness enforced by the depression. It is difficult to conjure up much nostalgic sympathy for so patronizing and condescending an attitude. Whatever we may think of more recent advertising, should we not at least be grateful that it does not mask itself as social and cultural uplift? Did not advertising, in some sense, become more "democratic" when it abandoned the effort to induce mass consumers, through the influence and example of their "social betters," to adopt the cultural standards of a self-appointed elite? By putting aside their own tastes and appealing to the masses in their own cultural idiom, did not advertising people acknowledge the right of the consumer masses to make their own choices? Did they not, in some sense, put themselves in the service of those masses and their expressed preferences?

I believe that the answer to these last two questions is "no". To adopt a "just folks" tone of voice was hardly less manipulative of consumers than the earlier intonations of social guidance. Nor did the copywriters' low opinion of the average consumer as irrational, tasteless and mentally deficient undergo any significant change. Quite the contrary, vicarious familiarity, through attention to the media of mass culture, generally bred even greater contempt [19]. All that had changed was that the triumphant "take them as they are" pros had happily acknowledged the necessity of using their power to shape people's consumer choices, but to do so directly through the ads rather than indirectly through the intermediate influence of a social elite.

If a certain degree of social pretense had declined with the demise of the uplift viewpoint, still it is difficult to argue that the language of advertising thus became more direct and more culturally "honest." A concurrent trend in America advertising in the 1920s and 1930s had moved steadily toward the dominance of visual

imagery over written text. And with the decline of text came the decline of direct argument, of explicit proposition. When we are surprised by the striking directness and naive presumption of some of the promises and propositions in the ads of a half century ago - this soap will enable you to break into society...this soup will establish your social position...this bread will induce your husband to come home from the office for dinner - we need to remember that reliance on visual imagery has allowed assertion to be replaced by allusion. As advertisers quickly learned, the visual image far surpassed words in conveying the sense of some ineffable quality in the product and associating that quality with consumers' increasingly confused and indistinct notions of what would bring them satisfaction [20]. "Logic," as one writer in Advertising and Selling put it, "is not the best technique for seduction" [21]. If contemporary advertising does not even implicitly make quite the same promises about social standing and mobility that the ads of the 1920s made so directly, its powerful visual images evasively suggest promises that even the more blunt and naive ads of an earlier day were too modest to put forward.

With the decline of the trickle-down theory and the eclipse of the uplift faction in the advertising trade, there emerged a certain resolution to the meaning of the exhortation to "give them what they want." In its purest form, the Victorian notion that consumer tastes would be shaped by the examples of a narrow social elite had stimulated such elevated conceptions of the potential tastes of the public as this preface/advertisement for a 1848 gift book:

"...in this book our mothers, our sisters, our daughters and our choicest female friends will find, reflected from its every page, the pure sentiments and councils of their own virtuous hearts [22].

Such treacly prose may have masked condescending attitudes and manipulative purposes, but it did imply some responsibility for the cultivation of the consumer's best qualities. The assumptions of the ascendant "give them what they want" school of 1930s advertising justified a much more detached, amoral view toward the consumer audience.

THE ECLIPSE OF PATERNALISM

In this connection, one additional, significant aspect of the decline of the "trickle-down" theory remains to be discussed. This is the issue of gender, which is related both as cause and as repercussion, to the decline of the uplift viewpoint. From the earliest social distinctions between producer and consumer, the role of consumer has been characterized as feminine [23]. Those who prided themselves on their roles as producers, as did the producers of advertisements, could not refrain from linking the qualities of irrationality, lethargy,

wastefulness, and unintelligence that they perceived in the consumer masses with the qualities of emotionality, capriciousness, passivity, and limited intelligence that had long been attributed to women. Since, by the common observation of the trade, women did from 80% to 85% of all retail buying, advertising men found it both natural and satisfying to look upon their messages to the consumer masses as communications from men to women [24]. Such a relationship required a certain condescension since, as a Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn agency newsletter pointed out, "women are certainly emotional!" [25]. The need to resort to simple, emotional appeals could be discomfiting. Advertising men occasionally expressed a fondness for "industrial advertising," directed to other businessmen, in which they could more self-respectingly talk "man to man" (producer to producer).

But men had always, they reflected, accepted the need to speak condescendingly to women, and the assumption of a fundamental gender distinction between producers and consumers enabled them to continue to assume that this broad "division of labor" did not undermine the producer-oriented standards of the society as a whole or their own respectability as part of the producer class (gender). These conceptions all fit nicely with the uplift outlook; advertising men could address women of the social elite as they would their own wives - on the assumption that they were tasteful, fastidious and culturally sophisticated, even if swayed by whim and emotion. And these women could then exert their influence on the tasteless masses. But the comfortable assumption of a fundamental gender distinction proved to be only a temporary refuge from acceptance of the arrival of a "consumer society," a society in which even "producers" like themselves had to pander to the lowest tastes and passions of the mob. The most mindless, tasteless forms of popular culture, from cheap movies to comic strips and radio shows, seemed to hold allure for both men and women. And male consumers proved disconcertingly receptive to low-pitched campaigns for cigarettes, razor blades, and shaving creams. Inescapably, to "take them as they are" meant to recognize the dominance of the uncultivated masses, men and women, and to gain one's self-respect from expertise in craftsmanship, not from social service in the name of cultural uplift.

Gender had represented the last stand of professional respectability in the traditional sense. From now on both the restraints and self-esteem of paternalism would fade and the aura of gamesmanship would prevail. And you all know, from your own research and personal experience that in the "advertising game," however the players may move and countermove, trust and parry, trump and over-trump, this is not an engagement in which Victorian sensibilities, for either uplift or paternalism, govern the changing rules of the game.

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RECENT TRENDS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT

Current work in the history of consumption is interdisciplinary. It emphasizes cultural meanings of consumption, stresses gender roles, rejects "hidden persuader" notions, and examines consumer movements and regulation. Future work should pay attention to visual matters, cross national boundaries and consider production as well.

In Berthold Brecht's poem, "A Worker Reads History," the proletarian voice muses,
Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
...
Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?
So many reports.
So many questions.

In the last two decades, a plethora of studies, inspired by political concern as well as social theory, have gone a long way towards answering those questions. Brecht's worker might not appreciate those findings in the new labor history that stress accommodation, divisions within the working class, and the effectiveness of employer strategies, but today he might be less inclined to complain that his story had gone untold.

Until fairly recently, on the other hand, historians have had relatively little to say about consumption. Writing in the 1970's, Theodore Zeldin could justly observe that "The consumer has yet to find a historian." [cited in 33; frontispiece] In the last few years, however, the history of consumption has begun to emerge as a field of historical research. This paper reflects my attempts to keep up with what has become a swift flow of publications. If I gasp for breath in that pursuit, it also indicates my admiration for the productivity and creativity of those who have turned their attention to aspects of the consumption process. My hope is to classify some of these contributions, point out some common themes and trends, and suggest some future

directions. Although, not surprisingly, much of the recent work has dealt with the United States, studies of British and French subjects are also noteworthy. Rather than undertake the task of defining the field of consumption history, I propose merely to indicate the variety of intriguing work being done.

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of recent historical studies is their interdisciplinary nature. Historians have rarely been shy about raiding the theories and tool kits of other academic disciplines, but their ingenuity and openness are striking when they deal with consumption. Anthropology, psychology, communications theory, literary and artistic theory have been among the sources historians of consumption have utilized. No doubt the borrowing is eased by theorists in the social sciences and humanities who have investigated consumption. For example, anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Marshall Sahlins have shown that consumption goods are laden with cultural meanings. Grant McCracken has ingeniously demonstrated how advertising and the fashion system invest goods with culturally-defined meanings and, in turn, how acquisition and use transfer these meanings from the goods to the consumer. [14] Similar concepts emerge in the work of psychologists like Erving Goffman. In Gender Advertisements, for example, Goffman pointed out how messages designed to sell products and services also conveyed a host of messages about sex roles and the behavior of men and women in modern America. The ritualized acts that Goffman sees depicted in advertisements are not merely epiphenomenal, he contends. Rather, "These expressions [of subordination and domination in rituals] considerably constitute the [social] hierarchy; they are the shadow and the substance." [9;p.6] Semiotic approaches, employed by scholars like Judith Williamson, treat commercial messages as complex signs whose layers of reference must be, as she puts it, decoded. [34] Moreover, it is notable that scholars from other disciplines are recognizing the value of historical approaches. This is the case in William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally, Social Communication in Advertising, which aims to "set the serious study of advertising firmly on the twin pillars of history and culture." [13;p.6] Similarly, Michael Schudson, in Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion, situates his sociological commentary on contemporary advertising in an historical context.

For myself, contemplation of the concepts that

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social scientists and humanists have advanced calls forth a certain amount of contrition. In my own work on advertising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I insisted that advertising could best be understood as a business strategy rather than as a cultural system. I still would maintain that this is a fruitful way to study advertising, but it is too limiting. Advertisements are of course tools to sell, but they are also laden with a cultural significance that the historian ought to try to recover. To say this, of course, is not to maintain that ads reveal the truths of society and culture. Rather, as Roland Marchand has brilliantly shown, they are zerrspiegels, fun-house mirrors that distort as they reflect. Michael Schudson's observation that advertising is "capitalist realism," selecting, accentuating and suppressing different facets of a business society, gives us another telling metaphor for the relationship of advertising and culture. [17, passim; 23, p.6]

BEYOND ADVERTISING

But the history of consumption is clearly more than the history of advertising. In the last few years, we have also learned a great deal more about changing norms and values concerning consumption, about the history of stores and personal selling, about consumer movements and consumer protection, and even about that vast and fuzzy terrain we might call the historical study of consumer behavior. Here are some of the themes these studies point to.

Consumer Culture

Implicitly or explicitly, much of the recent historical literature posits the existence of a consumer culture. What that means remains somewhat vague, "an ethic, a standard of living, and a power structure," in the words of Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, introducing their important recent essay collection. [7, p.xii] For Warren Susman as for Fox and Lears and, implicitly, Daniel Rodgers, the central theme seems to be the decline of an "older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist," and the rise of "a newly emerging culture of abundance." [26, p.xx; 6; 22] For others, like Rosalind Williams in Dream Worlds, the key element is the modern tendency to invest emotions and desires in relations to objects instead of people. To Neil McKendrick and his co-authors, The Birth of a Consumer Society meant "changes in attitude and thought, changes in prosperity and standards of living, changes in commercial technique and promotional skills, sometimes changes even in the law itself." [16, p.2] According to Chandra Mukerji, what she calls "modern materialism" is grounded in a "combination of rational calculation and ostentatious accumulation..." [19, p.5]

Strikingly, while all posit a transformation of epochal proportions, there is virtually no agreement as to when the consumer revolution took place. Mukerji detects strikingly contemporary

patterns in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe. McKendrick and his collaborators fix the third quarter of the eighteenth century as the birthdate of a consumer society in England. Joyce Appleby, in studying economic ideology in eighteenth-century America, notes strains of a naturalistic, consumer-oriented world view among Jeffersonians in the 1790's. [12; 1] In Rosalind Williams's view, the dream worlds of consumption appear in fin de siècle France, and Fox and Lears date the appearance of the culture of consumption in the U.S. to the 1880's and 1890's. Warren Susman observes a shift in "modal type" of character in America to a new concern with personality and presentation of self and identifies the timing quite precisely, in the middle of the first decade of this century. Ronald Edsforth, in his recent study of workers and consumers in Flint, Michigan, Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus, contends that the automobile transformed the nation to a consumer society during the 1920's. In a more complex fashion, this is also the timing Roland Marchand suggests, though he emphasizes the varied and subtle ways in which advertising helped reconcile traditional values with the new consumer ethos.

One obvious reason for the wide disparity of dates is that historians are really talking about different phenomena. Thus, for example, the early modern materialists of whom Mukerji writes were engaged in rational calculation. Their epistemology grew out of their growing familiarity with material objects and printed representations of the physical world and was predicated on a clear subject-object distinction. On the other hand, the consumer culture that Marchand, Williams and the authors in Fox and Lears' collection see is one based on fantasy, dream and distortion. Its central institution, advertising, is a "magic system," in the words of Raymond Williams, "a true part of the culture of a confused society." [32, p.29]

One suspects that the disagreements among historians as to the timing of a consumer revolution will not be resolved as long as fundamental questions of meaning remain at issue. Yet perhaps we can live comfortably with diversity and welcome two, three, many consumer revolutions.

Gender and Consumption

Another facet of the current historiography of consumption is its welcome attention to gender roles. Much of the recent literature has sought to understand the social construction of consumption as a female activity. William Leach, for example, discussing "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," notes the duality inherent in an institution that on the one hand "reinforced gender distinctions," yet on the other challenged older divisions by offering women new tasks and new opportunities. [12, p.331] In the spectacular department stores of the turn of the century, women could play new, public, secularized roles and demonstrate a modern expressive individualism through consumption. Susan Porter Benson's

fascinating study, Counter Cultures, also takes a dialectical approach to the "ways in which saleswomen, customers, and managers jostled for power on the selling floor..." [2,p.6] Her conclusions, like Leach's, are rather optimistic. Managerial control of their salesforces was never complete. A work culture among saleswomen provided opportunities for autonomy, achievement and resistance. Also, alliances between middle-class shoppers and working-class saleswomen indicated the potential of solidarity, however transitory, based on a common women's culture in the face of male authority. Michael B. Miller's history of the great Parisian store, The Bon Marche, rests more on the company's extensive archives; perhaps for this reason, and perhaps because the sales force remained mostly male through most of the period he discusses, Miller's study has less to say about the significance of the department store for gender roles. [18]

Of course advertising is another aspect of consumption in which attention to gender has been a major theme. Acute concern about the portrayal of women in contemporary advertisements, and findings that note recurrent patterns of exclusion, subjugation and brutalization, no doubt motivates this historical interest. Professor Marchand's book is especially praiseworthy for the care and subtlety with which he explores sex roles in advertising in the twenties and thirties. Other studies of advertising, including Schudson's and Stephen Fox's lively general history, The Mirror Makers, also demonstrate sensitivity to the portrayal of women in advertising and the targeting of women as consumers.

It is "natural" to study women when we study the history of consumption not because consumption is a "natural" role for women, of course, but because industrial, urban, market societies have generally assigned tasks of shopping, selecting and purchasing household products (perishables rather than durables) to women. It is intriguing to consider the ways in which buying, a clearly public and social activity, became feminized in an epoch when historians have often pointed to women's confinement to a private, domestic sphere. Striking, too, are the ways in which women have at least partially appropriated the spaces and settings of consumption and have shaped them for their own ends. I am reminded of a recent Dutch film, A Question of Silence, in which four women, strangers to each other, spontaneously decide to attack and kill an officious male boutique manager who had accused one of the women of shoplifting. In life, of course, conflict isn't likely to go so far, but historians like Leach and Benson remind us that stores, like industrial workplaces, may be contested terrain.

Moralizing about Consumption

Yet another development in the recent historiography of consumption is the heightened attention to what might be called the intellectual history of consumption. Contemporary ideas about the ethics of

consumption turn out to be hardly as new or as self-evident as we may be inclined to believe. We have biographical treatments now of some of the Americans whose reflections on consumption still echo today. [6;3;7,pp.101-141] One common pattern that seems to emerge in these studies is that even the most "scientific" investigators of consumption were indeed moralists, prescribing and proscribing patterns of consumption. David Shi, in The Simple Life, notes variations on the ascetic theme throughout American history. [24] Finally, in his perceptive study, The Morality of Spending, Daniel Horowitz knits together a patchwork of ideas about consumer behavior and consumer culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finding a contrast between "traditional moralists" who fretted about the profligacy of the poor and "modern moralists" who wanted to inculcate moderation among the middle class, Horowitz nevertheless concludes that the two groups shared the rhetorical pattern of the American jeremiad and the sense that "worldly goods were compensatory" at best for the loss of truer satisfactions. [11,p.166]

Debates in Gilded Age and Progressive America are not so different from the controversies Rosalind Williams describes in French thought in the same era. Like the erstwhile labor journalist George Gunton in the U.S., the essayist Georges D'Avenel preached optimistically that mass consumption would heal social conflicts and broaden the satisfactions of the working classes. Camille Mauclair in France, like Simon Patten here, hoped that the expansion of wants in a consumer society would cause the intensity of particular desires to wane and thus promote moderation and restraint.

Intellectual historians have also investigated ideas about consumption in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. Albert O. Hirschman demonstrated in The Passions and the Interests that in the century before Adam Smith new concepts of human psychology and the bases of social stability provided justifications for self-interested, materialistic, acquisitive patterns of behavior. Joyce Appleby, too, has shown how changing ideas mixed in eighteenth-century America with an expansive social structure to give rise to an ideology that identified freedom and human nature with the pursuit of material well-being. [12;1]

Creativity and Autonomy

A final theme in the new historiography of consumption might be called the demise of the hidden persuader. Surely Vance Packard's 1957 best-seller never has had any serious effect on historical scholarship, and researchers seem to have paid no attention to the fevered fantasies of pornographic ice cubes and soup bowls served up by Wilson Bryan Key. However, Stuart Ewen's 1976 book, Captains of Consciousness, has been widely influential. There is much to admire in Ewen's wide-ranging essay. Resting in part on the cultural commentary of the Frankfurt School, Ewen translated their despair over the totalizing trends of industrial society into a vigorous

indictment of businessmen's promotion of an ideology of consumption. What is more dubious is the implicit contention of the book that the ideas of a few advanced and/or eccentric businessmen constitute a full-fledged corporate strategy of control, and, furthermore, that corporate strategies were almost invariably successful.

Few historians of consumption in the last decade have adopted the model of consumption propounded by the critical theorists. On the contrary, for the most part they have seen consumption as an arena of creativity and satisfaction and view consumers as actively shaping the cultural meanings of the goods they acquire and use. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's study of The World of Goods is in large measure a polemic against views of the consumer as deluded or irrational. Indeed, "The most general objective of the consumer can only be to construct an intelligible universe with the goods he chooses." [4,p.65] Michael Schudson's study manifests a healthy skepticism about the effectiveness of even the most carefully-crafted advertising campaigns; advertising has its impact, but its consequences are more indirect than many of its practitioners hope or its critics fear. As noted earlier, Leach and Benson both find initiative and opportunity, alongside manipulation and control, downtown at the department store. And while the authors in the Fox and Lears collection sense confusion in responses to an emerging consumer culture, elites manifest disorientation quite as much as the masses. In Jackson Lears' contribution on Bruce Barton, that avatar of the new age appears "troubled by persistent doubt" about the culture he helped to mold. [7,p.29]

There is a counterpoint, however, to this emphasis on consumer control. Historians have found little use at all for the optimizing models of demand theory in economics. Douglas and Isherwood do pay brief homage to Kelvin Lancaster's newer approach to consumer demand theory. However, historians are (rightly, I should think) doubtful of approaches that posit a hyper-rationality of means and an absolute agnosticism about the ends of consumer behavior. More congenial to the historian would be the occasional maverick economist like Tibor Scitovsky or the late Fred Hirsch, who deign to take into account the nature of people's wants as well as their calculations about how to satisfy them subject to income constraints.

Organization and Protest

There is more, of course. Consumer organization and protest has drawn increased attention among American historians. In an influential article some years ago, David Thelen suggested that the Progressive movement reflected a broad-based consciousness of the victimization of consumers, an awareness that cut across class lines. Now, in Paths of Resistance, he has examined how residents of Missouri around the turn of the century fought against corporate domination through such means as streetcar boycotts, campaigns for municipal ownership of utilities,

pressures for protection against food adulteration, and drives to control industrial pollution. [29;30,pp.217-231] Another study that stresses the democratic roots of consumer protest is Elizabeth Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars. Ewen describes the 1917 demonstrations against price increases for Kosher meat and other food products that began on the Lower East Side and spread around New York City. [5,pp.176-183] Dana Frank's article in Feminist Studies, like Ewen's treatment, examines the radical potential in consumer protest. [8] Mitchell Okun, in a detailed study of pure food regulation in New York State in the late nineteenth century, sees consumer protection pressures stemming from the impact of the separation of production and consumption, the self-interest of specific business interests, and the aggrandizing drive of medical and public health professionals. [20] Norman Silber's history of Consumer's Union, Test and Protest, is similarly judicious in his appraisal of an organization that wishes to smooth the path of consumption even as it sermonizes against much of the spending it facilitates. [25] Consumers Union is only one of the latest to recognize the ambiguities of the quest for socially responsible consumption.

A different strain of literature considers the economic and business history of consumer protection regulation. Peter Temin, in Taking Your Medicine: Drug Regulation in the United States, presents a policy-oriented, theoretically-informed study. [28] Unlike Chicago-school economists who tend to see regulation as inherently monopolistic protection for producers, Temin traces drug regulation to a widespread perception of a need for greater control in the face of social and technological change. Like the Chicago economists, however, Temin is persuaded of the need to appraise the social costs of regulation and sees current limits on consumers' (and physicians') drug choices as excessive. Richard Tedlow's valuable article on the Federal Trade Commission's assumption of the task of pursuing dishonest advertising is implicitly critical of bureaucratic aggrandizement in the regulatory process and notes the advertising industry's pursuit of legitimacy through regulation in the 1910's and 1920's. [27] Tom McCraw's portrait of Alfred Kahn, in the Pulitzer Prize-winning Prophets of Regulation, seems to endorse Kahn's position that the market is a better guarantor of consumer well-being in commercial aviation than the Civil Aeronautics Board was. [15] Those of us who have had the pleasure of flying into Stapleton Airport in recent days may be intuitively suspicious, but McCraw and Kahn make a lively, if not entirely persuasive, case.

Still other aspects of the history of consumption cannot be discussed in the confines of this paper. For example, closely related to consumption is leisure, and popular entertainment and commercial amusements are emerging as a major historical research topics. So too is the history of domestic life and housework, and these have also found their historians in recent years. The history of professionals and

professionalization constitutes another overlapping subject, especially since so much of current-day consumption involves professional services. The extension of marketing techniques and consumption styles into the realm of politics is another area of current investigation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This somewhat breathless survey of the literature reveals vigorous health and activity, but it also admittedly reflects confusion and uncertainty. The history of consumption has no paradigm and no synthesis. That a transition has occurred in developed societies is widely accepted, but what that change consisted of and when and how it occurred are matters of disagreement if not open dispute. I have no over-arching interpretive framework to propose. I would like to conclude with some words of advice from someone who is currently primarily a consumer of the historiography of consumption.

Visual Aspects

First, I would urge continued attention to the visual element of the consumption process. Academic training in the liberal arts is for the most part an indoctrination into the culture of the word and the book. I think we have to recognize that, for better or worse, consumer culture is an image culture. Roland Marchand's book is pioneering here, in its ability to combine the sensitivity of an Erving Goffman or a Judith Williamson with the understanding of a skilled historian.

Cross-national Studies

Second, there is no need for the history of consumption to be tied to national boundaries. Consider here the example of Sidney Mintz's Sweetness and Power, which is about much more than consumption but which manages to set the history of the so-called English sweet tooth within the context of a modern world economy. Mukerji's study is also creative in its synthesis of developments in Great Britain, on the European continent and in India. Admittedly, market practices, patterns of consumption, and ideas about consumption are in part conditioned by policies of nation states and peculiarities of national character, but comparisons and explorations of commonalities are certainly to be encouraged. This is especially true for the writing of contemporary history. In a world of McDonald's, Saatchi and Saatchi and the Club of Rome, the institutions and environment of consumption are super-national in their scope. Work on the political economy of international communications by scholars like Herbert Schiller, Armand Mattelart, Michael Anderson and Anthony Smith comes to mind here, but much more needs to be done to understand how persuasion, shopping, purchase and use take place in today's world.

Consumption and Production

Finally, I think it is time to begin to

reintegrate the history of consumption with the history of production. For Karl Marx, the divorce of production and consumption was one of the great tragedies of capitalist society, and their reunion was one of the promises of a communist society in the future. On a more mundane, if perhaps equally speculative level, Alvin Toffler assures us that the society emerging in America will be one of "prosumers", whose activities will blend the two roles in a new synthesis. But what is utopian in reality may indeed be our task in scholarship. The history of consumption needs the history of production in several respects. First of all, the forces and relations of production (to adopt the Marxist shorthand here) condition the potential for a consumer culture. For example, a recent article by Lorna Weatherill examines household possessions found in probate inventories in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England. Her data indicate that craftsmen and yeomen were unlikely to own prosaic items like saucepans, clocks, looking glasses or table linens.[31] Perhaps, as Warren Susman claims, a culture of abundance can survive the shock of a Great Depression. "It is not," he contends, "a question of whether such abundance was a real possibility. The significant issue is the belief that it was." [26,p.xxiv] Yet surely a range of consumer commodities must penetrate below the top strata of a society for us to consider it a consumer society or consumer culture. Weatherill's findings, in my opinion, cast some doubt on the more exuberant claims in the McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb volume about the emergence of mass consumption in eighteenth-century England. The history of consumption is not, of course, to be written with statistics of gross national product and wealth distribution alone, but let us take material conditions into account.

A second reason for integrating the study of consumption with the study of production is that, to a certain degree at least, consumer desires and needs are products of their class positions and their roles in the social relations of production. A French Marxist theorist, Jean-Pierre Terrail, puts it more dogmatically than I would: "...[N]eeds are, essentially, no more than the objective demands of the mode of production with regard to its agents." He continues, "...[T]he analysis of the ideological make-up of needs...must take particular account of the effects of production practices on the forms of the consciousness of needs and on consumption practices...." [21,pp.58,60]

Finally, a consumer society is also a society of large-scale, hierarchical, complex organizations, prominent among them organizations producing the goods and services we consume. However skilled we are, individually and collectively, at carving out niches of autonomy in the arena of consumption, I would contend that we must recognize the importance and power of the institutions that surround us. An analogy with the new labor history is in order; concentration on shop-floor assertions of worker control is a useful corrective to older studies which gave us

the history of unions and businesses without revealing the history of workers. But the history of work, like the history of consumption, is not to be understood without learning about the needs and dynamics of organizations and institutions.

I am in the easy but embarrassing position here of preaching but not practicing. Whatever my advice this morning is worth, I think those of us who are consumers of the history of consumption will fare well. It is a burgeoning and fascinating field that I have tried to survey.

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