Newspaper Advertising: Moving Toward The Year 2000

By Dr. Leo Bogart

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Just before coming to New Orleans, I took a couple of vacation days on an island off the coast of Mexico. One evening, I wandered along the streets of the local village, where through the open doors and windows I could see people sitting in their living rooms, talking, playing with their children, occasionally reading or listening to the radio. It struck me that I was back in a pre-television civilization, which exists at the same time as the age of television in cities a few hundred miles away.

I begin with this observation because when we talk about the year 2000 we must recognize that in our complex, varied world, the arrival of new media has never yet driven the old ones out of existence. Radio and the movies are flourishing today, but both are quite different in content and character from what they were a third-century ago. Network entertainment TV as we now know it also represents a fleeting phenomenon in the history of mass media. It is already technologically obsolescent, because all the canned entertainment for a month can be compacted and transmitted in a few seconds for storage within a home recording unit, to be played back when the viewer wants it.

In all the mass media, change is taking place today at an accelerating rate. Change always creates wider and wider disparities between those who are with it, who stay at the crest of the advancing tide, and those who are left out at sea. There is bound to be a growing gap in success and profitability between those who have the know-how to manage change and those who merely let change happen to them.

To manage change requires venturesomeness and experimentation, and this in turn involves risks and costs money. Venturesomeness demands marketing to the needs that will require fulfillment tomorrow rather than selling what we happen to have available today. The kind of venturesomeness I mean is typified by the Louisville Courier-Journal's change in format and their simultaneous switch to a single-rate structure, which has paid off for them remarkably fast.

Venturesomeness is demanded now in color, which is bound to become a more important feature of newspaper editorial as well as advertising. Color, whether ROP or pre-printed, brings headaches and complications in production. In fact an advertiser still can't buy Spectacolor in some of the biggest markets of the U.S. The investments required to solve the problems of running color cannot be justified by the short run payout for the newspaper, but these investments are vital if we are going to retain our position as the primary advertising medium.

Some bright publishing team may some day soon be venturesome enough to produce a newspaper in which display advertising is run as far as possible on a classified basis, with ads for competing products and stores placed next to each other as they are in the real market place, rather than separated to avoid the conflict which most advertisers today assume (without evidence) to be bad.

By the year 2000, the sharp distinctions among media will become blurred. Even the line between electronics and print will be hard to draw as we move into an era of condensed
transmission of information, electrostatic printing and the all-purpose home communications console. These developments imply a greater need for newspapers to present a solid front to the national advertiser and to stay in the vanguard of marketing ideas.

Other media will become more flexible. With the spread of population into sprawling interurban belts, regional magazines will find more and more advertisers listening to the argument that the traditional newspaper markets, based on communities in geographic space, ought to be replaced by the idea of vertical markets, arranged by income, occupation or special interests.

By the year 2000, I should imagine that there will be a number of national daily newspapers following the lead of the Wall Street Journal in such categories as general news, sports and cultural affairs, or else we may see weekly special interest magazines like Newsweek, Sports Illustrated or the Saturday Review stepping up their frequency of publication. As TV viewing becomes an individual affair, television and radio stations will compete more intensively for the loyalties of small, sharply defined sectors of the audience, with greater emphasis on live, documentary-type programming.

Certainly one major trend in the next third of a century will be a sharp step-up in the flow of communication through all the media, new and old. This implies that consumers will be more inattentive to unwanted messages and more selective in actively looking for information to help them make their choices. The change in retailing and merchandising practices puts greater emphasis on pre-selling before the consumer confronts his purchase decision. This carries implications for advertising: less of it may be devoted to persuading or reminding people who could not care less. Television commercials have already started to go the route of the radio jingle—taking themselves and the product lightly—abandoning hard sell for a deft touch, which is often more entertaining than the surrounding programs. More advertising ought to be informative, serving people who want to know about the subject. Newspapers, as the primary information medium, are in an excellent position to benefit from this trend.

However, with each year that passes, department stores are putting a smaller percentage of their sales into advertising budgets. Moreover, a growing proportion of retail advertising is accounted for by chain stores or by department stores affiliated with national buying organizations which carry on unified merchandising and promotion campaigns. The rising young generation of retail management is at home with the vocabulary and marketing concepts employed in the big advertising agencies, and it is bound to re-examine coldly the existing patterns of dependence on newspaper advertising.

In the future, the newspaper salesman will be able to rely less and less on his personal friendship with his customers as a guarantee of getting the business. In a new era of impersonal selling and hard-headed evaluation of advertising effects, there will be from the retail side, as there is from national advertisers, an increasing demand for hard data on audiences and readership. This demand cannot be satisfied in amateur fashion.

The newspaper advertising salesman of the future will have to be someone who can show advertisers how to use our medium to sell successfully, someone to whom they can look up as an authority. An estimated $1,250,000,000 of manufacturing money now goes into newspaper co-op, but a sum about half as large, which manufacturers allocate as co-op funds, is never invested because local retailers don't take advantage of what is available. Only the aggressive newspaper salesman can get them to do it. But the traditional arts of salesmanship have to be supplemented by a solid grounding in the marketing principles with which more and more buyers of advertising are familiar.

The professionalization of newspaper advertising salesmen will, I think, tend to wear down some of the traditional separation of the business and editorial sides of newspapers. Both the salesman and the reporter, the ad director and the editor, will share some strong concerns.

The decay of central business districts provides the raw material out of which the news and feature stories of the day are shaped and written. But these developments are also profoundly changing the retail business. The first goals of the rioters in Watts, Newark and Detroit were the supermarket and the appliance store, the heavily advertised symbols of the good life. By the year 2000 a majority of the population in most of our big central cities will be colored. At last week's meeting of the National Retail Merchants Association, the dominant theme of discussion was the urban crisis. If this is the number one concern of our number one customers, is it something that we as intelligent advertising people can afford not to confront when we talk about the future?

The strength of the newspaper has always been in its ability to embody a community's sense of its own identity. The deterioration of our cities has changed the advertising requirements of stores whose customers are changing or who are themselves forced to move to suburban shopping centers, where customers are drawn from a more limited area than the metropolitan newspapers' traditional circulation zone. How can we as newspaper advertising men assume that urban problems are just for the editorial side to worry about? And how can the newspaper editor fail to recognize that some of the most expert wisdom on what is really going on in the economic and social life of his community can be found right on his own advertising staff?

In the years to come it will be a matter of vital concern to advertising men as to whether or not their editorial product can retain interest for populations that are changing
radically in racial character, in age distribution, in education, and in political outlook. At the same time, editors will have to take a fresh look at the advertising side. It is high time to break down the traditional disinterest and even disdain for the business office which pervades the classical training of young reporters.

In most journalism schools a young newspaper man can pursue his entire training without taking a class on the basic economics of the newspaper business. Joseph Pulitzer, when he left his original bequest to endow the School of Journalism at Columbia, specified that no course be taught about the business aspect of newspapers, because he wanted to keep the editorial side pure and uncontaminated.

Advertising can never be separated from matters of editorial content, circulation or production. Today, advertisers aim their efforts at the best customers. Newspaper zoned editions and satellite printing plants will make it easier for each marketer to reach his own targets. But the health of newspaper advertising depends not only on continuing improvement in production capabilities.

It depends on successful efforts to broaden our editorial appeal to young people and to minority groups in the big cities. The draft, the pill, drugs and the political slogans of the New Left have transformed the basic values of the brightest youngsters in the generation which is coming of age today. If advertisers question their loyalty to newspapers it is not so much because the children of the electronic era have forgotten how to read as because they are in many cases alienated from the traditional motivations which underlie our whole business system. Is this of no concern to us as advertising men looking ahead through the rest of this century?

The growth of our economy depends on consumer acceptance of new products, new ideas, and new brands. Newspapers, through their editorial as well as their advertising columns, make people receptive to innovation. But when we train the public to accept innovation, we cannot limit this to tolerance of improvements in products and to new brand names. Advertising also makes people more receptive to change in society, it teaches them to tolerate and even thirst for what is new and different. On this change depends the growth and stability of our own business.

I don't know what newspapers will be like in the year 2000, but our own internal planning at the Bureau is predicated on the estimate that newspaper advertising in 1975, just seven years from now, will be in the $8 billion range. We have every confidence in the continuing health of our business for many years to come, because we have confidence in newspapers' ability to adapt to the revolutionary changes which are under way today in the technology of communication, in the science of distribution and marketing, and in the very structure of our society.

The future of newspaper advertising is not without its uncertainties, but it is bright. The future of any great institution is never fated; and we are not its passive subjects, but the people who can make of it what we want it to be.