**History: 1950s**

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In the U.S., far-reaching advertising trends were established in the cultural and economic environment of the 1950s. Traditional media such as radio, newspapers and magazines remained vital ad conduits during the early years of the decade, but TV quickly became a cornerstone of many advertisers' national media plans.

Throughout the decade, advertising expenditures increased to unprecedented levels. J. Walter Thompson Co., for example, saw its billings increase from $78 million in 1945 to $172 million in 1955 and $250 million by 1960. Overall, the decade saw gross annual ad industry billings grow from $1.3 billion in 1950 to $6 billion in 1960.

**Decade of consumerism**

Until about 1953, U.S. advertising and consumerism were catching up. Products such as clothing, refrigerators, automobiles and appliances&emdash;unavailable or in short supply during World War II&emdash;were again plentiful. Pent-up demand for consumer products fueled a steady growth in manufacturing.

Conversely, the latter part of the decade was for consumers a period of acute consumption anxiety. Marketers continued to offer "new and improved" products to maintain high consumer demand. That focused selling technique relied on newly popular methods such as motivational research, demographic targeting and generational marketing.

The postwar years also saw a huge increase in population. From 1945 to 1964, a global "baby boom" occurred, which fueled a housing boom. By the close of the decade, one-third of the U.S. population lived in suburban areas surrounding metropolitan centers, lured by the increase in transportation options and affordable housing for America's new middle class.

That, in turn, fueled a need for appliances and other necessities to fill those new homes, and marketers rushed to introduce a vast array of products while manufacturers churned out new appliances, automobiles and consumer electronics. Many advertised products promoted labor-saving automation for increased productivity and leisure time. Heating and cooling products, kitchen and laundry appliances, furniture and decorating accessories, and frozen and prepared foods all promoted time-saving benefits.

Capitalism claimed the technical innovations of wartime and transformed them into labor-saving convenience products. The aerosol spray can was a by-product of the war's South Pacific "bug bomb." Adding a spray top transformed the "bug bomb" into a dispenser for everything from processed cheese, whipped cream, shaving cream, hairspray and deodorant to furniture polish.

Nylon, initially developed for parachutes, replaced expensive silk in stockings. Plastics and Styrofoam found new applications in everything from furniture to insulation.

**Advertising family values**

Advertising during this period reflected a conscious return to traditional family values. In a single generation, lingering memories of the Great Depression and war were replaced by positive futuristic portrayals of the idealized modern family—mother, father, son and daughter—enjoying the comforts of their new home, the convenience of their automobile and added leisure time together. Children were targeted for the first time, as advertising tapped their newfound affluence. Phonographs, records, radios, magazines, clothing and soft drinks, among other products, found a receptive teen audience.

Advertising also portrayed society's upward mobility and prosperity, its technological superiority and its renewed optimism. For example, the necessity of becoming a two-car family was heavily promoted throughout the 1950s—a decade that began with 59% of American families owning a car. Within a few years, many families owned at least one car while many owned several.

By the mid-1950s, automobiles surpassed packaged goods and cigarettes as the most heavily advertised products.

Car owners of the mid-1950s began to see their vehicles as extensions of themselves. Ever-changing designs pushed consumers to replace their cars yearly—not for lack of performance, but for lack of style. Automobile design, with its distinctive fins and heavy emphasis on chrome, and advertising reflected the nation's infatuation with new technology, jet planes and the atomic age.

**TV's coming of age**

Perhaps the most important factor influencing advertising in the 1950s was the growth of TV and its maturation into a viable ad medium. By 1951, regular live network service reached the West Coast via microwave transmitters, establishing coast-to-coast national coverage.

As with radio, early TV programming was advertiser-sponsored. Advertising agencies produced TV shows, with networks providing little more than facilities, airtime and occasional guidance. Programming typically promoted the name of the sponsor and not the star: "Hallmark Hall of Fame," "Texaco Star Theater," "Colgate Comedy Hour," "Goodyear TV Playhouse" and "Kraft Television Theater."

Large U.S. agencies such as [JWT](http://adage.com/directory/jwt/15), McCann-Erickson, [Young & Rubicam](http://adage.com/directory/young-rubicam/16) and Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn benefited from handling major packaged and durable goods advertisers such as Procter & Gamble Co., Bristol-Myers, Westinghouse Electric and Colgate-Palmolive.

Likewise, Madison Avenue continued to profit from spiraling TV spending. In 1949, TV spending was $12.3 million; within two years, it had grown to $128 million. By 1954, TV had become the leading medium for advertising. Network radio suffered losses as major stars and their audiences moved to TV. By 1960, TV approached 90% household penetration.

Spokespersons became readily identified with the products they represented, as product demonstrations gained significance in this visual medium. Betty Furness, a B-movie actress of the 1930s, became spokeswoman for Westinghouse appliances in 1949 on "Studio One." For 11 years her popularity soared, as did the popularity of Westinghouse refrigerators, stoves and other household appliances.

Demonstrations also helped differentiate similar packaged goods. Notable televised product demonstrations included Band-Aid brand's "Super-Stick" bandages clinging to an egg in boiling water and Remington shaver's peach test in which a razor was used to shave peach fuzz.

Other memorable TV spots included the stop-motion antics of Speedy Alka-Seltzer; Old Gold's dancing cigarette boxes; Dinah Shore singing "See the USA in Your Chevrolet"; newsman John Cameron Swayze's matter-of-fact delivery of "It takes a licking and keeps on ticking" for Timex watches; and animated depictions of the Ajax Pixies, Tony the Tiger, Hamm's beer bear and beer mavens Bert and Harry Piel.

Picked as one of the best ads of the 20th century by *Advertising Age,* the TV spot for Anacin pain reliever showed how beneficial and intrusive TV advertising could be. Through slogans, demonstrations, mnemonics and repetition, Anacin positioned itself as the "tension headache" remedy by repeating the phrase "Fast, fast, fast relief" and diagramming an imaginary headache with lightning bolts and hammers. The ad's tactic of repetition drew harsh criticism for agency Ted Bates & Co., yet it increased Anacin's sales.

However, the system of advertiser control over program content and scheduling that evolved in the heyday of radio was not a practice the networks were eager to see exported to TV. As the stakes mounted and the competition between the networks intensified, broadcasters increasingly wanted the authority to remove weak programs and strategically schedule strong ones to maintain viewer numbers during the valuable evening hours.

At first, advertisers were resistant, but the networks had an ally in economics. As the '50s progressed, production costs rose dramatically to the point where many advertisers began to feel the strain. The introduction of color broadcasting in 1953 added to those expenses. Increasingly programs that had started the decade with a single sponsor retreated to "alternate sponsorships," with one advertiser sponsoring a program one week, another the next. By 1957, Lucky Strike and Richard Hudnut shared "The Hit Parade," and Stopette deodorant and Remington Rand alternated on "What's My Line?"

Ad agencies remained an important part of the process, however. An agency might produce a program and offer it to two different clients on an alternate basis or it might switch sponsors. The Kudner Agency produced "The Texaco Star Theater" for its client, Texaco, for example, but when Texaco decided to withdraw in 1953, Kudner sold the program to another of its clients, General Motors Corp., and it became "The Buick-Berle Show."

Control over content finally shifted from advertiser to network in the wake of the quiz show scandal of the late 1950s. Long a staple on radio and TV, quiz shows were among the most popular programs on both media. Revlon sponsored "The $64,000 Question" (which debuted in 1955) and controlled program content so tightly that corporate heads chose the games' winners and losers.

Revelations in 1958 about a similar quiz show, "Twenty-One," shocked the nation when it was reported that contestant Charles Van Doren had been given the answers to questions in advance. Congressional hearings ensued, and the networks established control over the content of their broadcasts by 1959.

**Selling of the presidency**

Further revolutionizing TV was the 1952 presidential race between Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower and Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson. Rosser Reeves of Bates developed the strategy for Gen. Eisenhower's TV ads. A firm believer in the TV spot, Mr. Reeves is remembered for his promotion of the "unique selling proposition," or USP, to break through the ad clutter in the mass media.

He positioned Gen. Eisenhower as "The man from Abilene" and a "Man of peace." In a series of brief TV spots, "Eisenhower Answers America," Mr. Reeves prerecorded the candidate as if he were speaking directly to the American people. Mr. Reeves then intercepted a tour bus at Radio City Music Hall in New York and filmed average Americans asking the candidate questions such as, "Mr. Eisenhower, are we going to have to fight another war?" Careful editing showed the citizen's questions matched with the prerecorded answers. Gen. Eisenhower was reluctant to participate, but acquiesced to Mr. Reeves' persuasive arguments.

Gen. Eisenhower won the election, although critics charged that Mr. Reeves had denigrated the office of presidency by selling it like toothpaste. But the objections were too late, as TV and politics now formed an inextricable union.

**Era of the hidden persuader**

Midcentury advertising was a fertile ground for critics. As the Cold War raged, critics claimed that new mind-control methods were used to manipulate unsuspecting consumers. Motivational research tapped into hidden desires to help advertisers influence consumers to purchase goods through their need for security, sex, social acceptance, style, luxury and success.

The leading proponent of motivational research was consultant Ernest Dichter. Mr. Dichter and his associates claimed to use psychological tools to analyze consumer buying habits and attitudes toward products, brands, packages, colors and other motivations. He proposed that one of the main dichotomies advertisers should resolve was what he called "the conflict between pleasure and guilt" among adults more affluent than their Depression-era parents.

Many ad agencies formed motivational research departments, and new brand personalities were born. The Marlboro man (from [Leo Burnett](http://adage.com/directory/leo-burnett/7) Co.), Maidenform woman (Norman, Craig & Kummel) and Hathaway shirt man ( [Ogilvy & Mather](http://adage.com/directory/ogilvy-mather/9)) brought parity products (those with no easily discernible differences from others in the same category) to life and offered such attachments as emotional security, reassurance, creativity and power.

Vance Packard introduced motivational research to a Cold War-weary public in his best-selling book, "The Hidden Persuaders." Revealing little about advertising technique, its ostensible subject, the book instead fueled Americans' fear of manipulation and mind control and became one of the most widely read "exposes" of advertising since the 1930s.