Reading Newspapers: advertisements [1]

A learner's guide to reading and understanding advertisements in historical newspapers.

Newspapers typically cover their costs through a combination of direct sales at newsstands or other outlets, subscription fees to regular subscribers, and advertising. Newspapers sell space to businesses and individuals who want to advertise the availability of goods and services or to announce special events. Advertising provides revenue for the newspaper and also provides access to that information to readers who may be interested in what is being advertised.

Types of newspaper advertisements

Advertisements can usually be divided into two categories -- display ads for goods and services that are located in the main sections of the paper, and classified ads that are listed in a specific section of the paper and divided by categories.

Display ads

Display ads in the main sections of the newspaper are often relatively large ads that often include images or other flashy visuals. Generally speaking, the larger and more elaborate the advertisement, the more expensive it is to place in the newspaper, so a full-page color ad with several different images in a very popular section of the newspaper would be quite pricey while a small text-only ad placed in a less desirable location might be more affordable. Sometimes individuals will purchase advertisements to make announcements or share a political view, but typically these kinds of advertisements are purchased by companies offering goods and services to the general public.

Classified ads

Classified advertising usually appears in a specific section of the paper and may be divided up into several categories -- "want ads" that advertise available jobs, lost and found ads, legal notices, real estate, automobiles for sale, and so on. Classified ads can be purchased by businesses (most often to announce available jobs) but are very often purchased by readers. Classified ads are typically text-only ads listing details about the items, services, or jobs available and contact information to allow readers to get in touch with the person who placed the ad.

Typically, these ads are paid for on a per-word or per-line basis and so they are often brief and to-the-point, sometimes including abbreviations or "shorthand" to shorten the text even further. For example,

> 50 gallon aquarium for sale. All access. incl. $150 OBO. 919 555 5309

Here, "access. incl" stands for "accessories included," and "OBO" stands for "or best offer."

Key questions

Here are some questions to ask about advertising.

What is being advertised, and on what terms?

Identify the goods, services or events being advertised and also make note of what terms the advertiser has placed on any future transaction. For example, is an item being listed for rent, for sale, or for trade? If a job is being advertised, what qualifications do applicants need? If something is advertised as lost, is there a reward offered? If so, what does another reader have to do in order to claim the reward? If an item is being sold, is the price fixed or is the seller willing to negotiate?

Where is this ad listed in the newspaper?

Advertising often appears mixed in with factual reporting and other newspaper features, allowing advertisers to buy space alongside articles in hopes that readers will notice the ad and act on it. Classified ads are now usually in their own section of the paper, but this was not always the case. Some historical newspapers may not have a separate section for classified ads but may, instead, mix large ads for goods and services placed by local businesses with ads more like modern classifieds that were placed by readers advertising items for sale or items that are lost or found.

Does the newspaper list its policies and rates for advertisements?

It may be interesting to know how much an advertisement cost and what limitations advertisers might have faced in terms of word limits, the use of images, or overall content. Knowing what someone likely paid to place an ad can give you a sense of the value of the advertising message to that individual.

Who placed this ad?

Ads placed by businesses will usually list the name of the business, although ads placed by individuals may just list contact information and not a full name. In older newspapers, it may be more common for a person's full name to be used since readers would need a way to get in touch with the person placing the ad. In the absence of the telephone (which allows the advertiser to list a phone number and maybe a first name) or email or web addresses that allow readers to make contact with personally identifying information, advertisers in earlier eras needed to list their full names and their location so that interested parties could contact them.

You may also want to ask yourself about the relationship between the thing being advertised and the person placing the ad -- an ad about an engagement ring being advertised for sale by a jewelry store may tell a very story than an engagement ring being advertised by an individual who broke off an engagement!

What choices did the advertiser make?

Since advertising costs are usually higher for larger, more elaborate, or longer ads, all advertisers have to make choices about how much they plan to spend on the ad and how they will convey their message through it. For large display ads, what stands out to you when you first look at the ad? Which words are printed in bigger, flashier, or more colorful type? Are certain slogans, words or phrases given added emphasis and, if so, what purpose might that serve? Are images used to convey information about what is being advertised? Why do you think the advertiser chose those specific images? What specific information does the ad convey, and what does it leave out? What is the overall impression of the ad? What kind of person do you think the advertiser was trying to reach with this ad and what do they want that person to do as a result of seeing this ad?

For classifieds, the advertiser probably had more limited choices, but still had choices to make such as how many words or lines to use, what information to include and exclude, whether to use bold type or a box around the ad or other visual cues, and how to phrase the information. It might be worth asking yourself how else the ad could have been worded and what other information might have been included but was not.

What is the overall impact of the ad?

Do you think the advertisement is effective in conveying its intended message to its intended audience? If so, how did the advertisement work to make its appeal? Did it try to connect the product to positive emotions? Use a celebrity endorsement? Stress the quality of the product? Make a visual appeal through bright colors and attractive images? Catch the reader's attention through humor? Figuring out how the advertiser tried to gain the reader's attention and influence his or her behavior can give you insights into not only the advertiser's goals and strategies, but also the cultural environment in which the advertisement was produced. When looking at advertisements from previous eras, for example, you will probably notice that ads in the past used different strategies from modern ads, in part because the ads were aimed at people in a different culture with different expectations and assumptions.

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