



A Short History Of British Television Advertising

Television advertising in Britain began on 22 September 1955. "Coincidentally", the BBC chose the same evening to kill off Grace Archer in its long-running radio soap, *The Archers*, thus stealing the next day's newspaper headlines. It was extraordinary that the BBC felt the need to go to such lengths when most commentary had given the new ITV station little chance of success. ITV's detractors claimed commercial television would be too American, the British public would not want their programmes interrupted by adverts, and it would never be as good as the BBC.

Early commercials were rather different from those we are familiar with today. Most noticeable of course is that they are in black-and-white, but they are also much longer than today's adverts, the lighting is harsh and the pace stilted. They had white middle-class actors, values and accents and their message was spelt out with agonising slowness. In effect, they were moving newspaper adverts. In part, this was a result of the lack of experience in television advertising in Britain. The new TV medium initially borrowed the familiar forms and techniques of print ads. Stylistically, this was desirable because the television industry wanted to distinguish itself from American-style commercialism.

The first commercial was for Gibbs SR toothpaste. It featured a tube of toothpaste, a block of ice and a commentary about its "tingling fresh" qualities. Its style is jerky and uncertain. Typical of the early adverts, any single frame could have been used with a written caption as a newspaper advert. The first Persil adverts were actually adapted from their familiar posters, with dancers and sailors in different shades of white and the announcer reassuring us that "Persil washes whiter. That means cleaner".

The morning after the first commercials appeared, journalist Bernard Levin wrote in the *Manchester Guardian*: "I feel neither depraved nor uplifted by what I have seen... certainly the advertising has been entirely innocuous. I have already forgotten the name of the toothpaste".

The presenter-based commercial was a standard form arrived at very quickly. The presenter was often a

personality with whom the viewers would be familiar, from popular programmes or the theatre. He or she would appear using the product and extolling its virtues perhaps with the aid of a chart or "scientific" demonstration. At the end, an off-screen announcer's sincere disembodied voice would recap on why that presenter had chosen the product. It was a popular easy-to-write form that could be produced with minimal sets and therefore was cheap to make. Even so, many of the early presenters seemed to confuse shouting with communicating.

There were also experiments in the no-man's land between advertisement and editorial, when two new forms called "time spots" and "ad mags" appeared. In time spots the advertiser booked the station clock and tied in his product with the time announcement. "Time to light a red-and-white" claimed one cigarette manufacturer. Other punctual advertisers were Ever-rite watches, Saxa Salt, Burberry and Aspro. The regulatory Independent Television Authority (ITA) regarded the time spots as annoying and had them abolished in December 1960.

The advertising magazine ran for a few more years until 1963 when it too met its end. Created to encourage small advertisers who could not afford their own ad slot, they had a loose story format and each episode featured a selection of products. The most famous was *Jim's Inn* set in a pub with Jimmy and Maggie Hanley as the publicans.

Jim's Inn first appeared in spring 1957 and ran for 300 editions. It relied on a strong and believable story line, recognisable characters and the warm personality of the landlord. Wide ranges of products, from the familiar to the outlandish were skilfully woven together each week. After the demise of the ad mag format, Jimmy Hanley appeared with Maggie running Jim's stores in a series of adverts for Daz, continuing the successful mix of popular proprietor and "good" advice.

Until the 1970s the advertisers' standard approach was to tell the viewer directly why they should use a product. This spoken word message was an established form derived from the earlier medium of radio. The style changed in the 1970s, with viewers being invited to share in the lifestyles

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and values of the characters using the product on screen. Adverts in the 1970s were noticeably different from went before, partly as a result of increasingly realistic television images, colour, and the advent of remote control, spurring ad makers on to new heights of creativity. Viewers were also changing, becoming more television literate and visually predisposed and demanding higher production values.

The products advertised on television have changed over the years. In the 1950s advertising was dominated by the soap powder manufacturers and food advertising. Into the 1960s there was little car advertising (due to a secret cartel agreement between the manufacturers) and virtually no spirits advertising, for the same reason. The car manufacturer Datsun arrived from Japan in the 1970s and broke the cosy agreement between Ford, Vauxhall, Chrysler and British Leyland not to advertise.

The 1970s brought us the Smash Martians, the Heineken lager campaign and the Hamlet cigar adverts. Old favourites remained on the screen often with a new twist to liven up a familiar product: thus Katie was sent to America with her family, letting her explain all about Oxo to her new American friends while giving an added gloss to a familiar product.

Newspapers started to use television. Prompted by the successful re-launch of *The Sun* with its enormous expenditure on live commercials *The Mirror* followed suit.

Towards the end of the 1970s, corporate advertising began to appear. ICI were the first with "The Pathfinders" and "Ideas in Action" campaigns, adverts which used potent symbols of progress like Concorde to enhance their image.

In the 1980s advertising changed again. New outlets for the message arrived in the form of Channel 4 and Breakfast television. But there were also cultural changes brought about by Thatcherism. The possibility of advertising on the BBC replacing the licence fee was strongly recommended by the Adam Smith Institute, a UK-based organisation dedicated to free-market policies. It declared that moves must be made "away from the licence fee to other forms of

finance... there can be little future for a system which discriminates against the paying viewer in favour of the decisions of the bureaucrat". The report went on to recommend that cigarette advertising, banned in 1965, should be reinstated and that the ban on advertising of betting and other prohibited categories (e.g. undertakers, charities, religious institutions) be removed. The BBC still does not carry advertising and the ban on tobacco advertising remains in place, however previously controversial subjects for adverts became acceptable. The first advert for an undertaker appeared on 8 November 1993 during an early evening episode of *You take the High Road*. Since then, charities and even The Church of England have used television adverts to promote their cause.

Interactive adverts started to appear in the late 1980s. The first was an advert for Mazda cars. In this, viewers were instructed to video record the ad and play it back frame by frame. On doing so they were able to take part in a competition to win a Mazda car. First Direct Bank also ran interactive adverts, which appeared simultaneously on ITV and Channel 4. By switching between the two channels, viewers could see either a positive or a negative conclusion of the story. Both these examples were not very interactive but they did encourage viewers to become more involved.

Television advertising has come a long way since 1955. Many products have disappeared from the screens and have been replaced by ones undreamt of forty years ago. But the great adverts live on in the viewers' memories: Solvite's flying man, Everest Double Glazing's falling feather, Fiat's Robots. So too do their slogans: "The Esso sign means happy motoring", "Don't forget the Fruit Gums, Mum" and "Beanz, Meanz, Heinz".

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Additional sources of information

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- Campaign* (specialist weekly newspaper, often available in public libraries)