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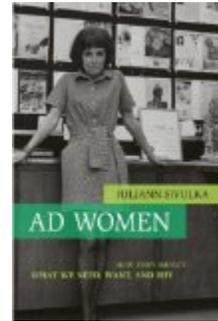
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Juliann Sivulka. *Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want, and Buy*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009. 415 pp. \$26.98 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59102-672-3.

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Published on Jhistory (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



Not “Mad Men,” but Ad Women

On the cover of Juliann Sivulka’s latest book about advertising, *Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want, and Buy*, Helen Gurley Brown, a former ad woman herself but better known as editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, leans against a counter covered with magazine page layouts. Brown seems to be attempting a provocative look in keeping with the “What do women want” sub-theme of *Ad Women*, but her far-from-provocative dress reflects the somewhat mixed message of this collective biography. But more about that message later.

Ad Women is the third volume of advertising history written by Sivulka, a Fulbright scholar in Japan when the book was published last year, but now an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina. Her earlier works are *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* and *Stronger than Dirt: A Cultural History of Advertising Personal Hygiene in America*.

The title of Sivulka’s introduction, “Women: The Body and Soul of Advertising,” is supported by her thorough examination of the role of women in advertising, as both creators and consumers. From the day in the 1870s that the widowed Mathilde C. Weil began her career buying and selling advertising space—thus earning herself the designation of “first known ad woman in America” (p. 25)—to the female advertising executives of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, women have prepared many of the advertising messages targeted to other women.

Sivulka explains that the importance of women to the advertising industry coincides with the recognition in the late nineteenth century of women as primary consumers. It was then that newspapers started adding content specifically directed toward women to please their advertisers, and Cyrus Curtis founded the *Ladies Home Journal* with the same goal in mind. As modern retailing developed its emphasis on products of interest to women, advertising as a profession grew as well, and the role of ad women grew with it.

The first advertising agents, such as Weil, were basically liaisons between advertisers and the newspapers and magazines in which the advertisements were to be placed. Gradually, agents began to provide more and more services: creating concepts and campaigns, developing artwork and writing copy for advertisers who did not want to hire their own staffs. At first, the increased level of service meant jobs only for men, but when the products to be advertised were strictly for women—cosmetics, for example—some of the men felt out of their element and agencies started hiring women. After all, what does a man know about cold cream? He’d just have to go home and ask his wife or mother about it, so why not put a woman on the project from the start? Once women were hired, they proved their worth, and each wave of them paved the way for the next generation of women to find jobs in the advertising industry.

Using the Sophia Smith Collection and Smith Archives at Smith College, Sivulka has unearthed an im-

pressive list of women in advertising. Many get just a line or two in her volume; those who were most influential receive a page or more of description of their lives and contributions. She continued her examination of the collections at Smith College with the aid of fellowships from South Carolina and Smith College.

Sivulka's goals for *Ad Women* go beyond providing a collective biography, however. She declares in the introduction that she wants to situate "the work of ad women as *cultural mediators* [her italics]" (p. 17). In this she is successful and therein lies some of the mixed message of the book. In the 1950s, a decade built on consumption and known for Mr. and Mrs. Consumer—especially Mrs. Consumer—women created many of the most famous advertising campaigns, for example, Revlon, Maidenform (the "I dreamed I did ... in my Maidenform bra" series), and Clairol hair coloring. Later, these campaigns attracted much scorn from feminists and other critics of advertising for setting women on a trajectory toward a beauty standard most now agree is impossible to meet. At the same time, the ads made the use of beauty aids such as hair coloring not only acceptable but expected.

Sivulka does not mention the television program "Mad Men," but she would surely challenge its authenticity in terms of gender in the industry. She notes that the commercial images attacked by feminists from Betty Friedan forward "as *sexualizing* American women and *stereotyping* their role in society as mothers, wives, and servants of men" cannot be laid solely at the feet of the businessman and the ad man. "[T]hese commercial images were largely created for women by women" (p. 235).

In the 1950s the already extensive range of employment for women in advertising increased to match the needs of television advertising. *Ad Women's* many illustrations include a chart compiled by ad woman Dorothy Dignam in 1949 of opportunities from A to V, from "Account Executive" to "Vice-presidency, which is high enough for any girl to aim" (p. 239), the latter comment making clear the thinking of the time. Dignam had started her advertising career in Chicago in the 1920s. A decade later she developed a campaign to sell the 1936 Ford V-8 to women, using an approach similar to that used for fashion. "Such woman-centered advertising established the Ford models as a viable choice for women," writes Sivulka.

Ford was trying to regain market share lost to other car manufacturers that had decided to target the half of the population they had earlier ignored. Recognizing that women largely rejected the Henry Ford thesis that

any color was fine for a car as long as it was black, the other car companies increased the number of styles and colors of their products, perhaps contributing to the development of the business model that has gotten today's auto industry into so much financial difficulty.

Sivulka keeps her balance as she wades through the contradictions of her story. On the one hand, it's good to see women employed, successful, and respected in a media-related career; on the other, as they mediated American culture, did these women realize what damage they were doing to future generations of women by employing the stereotypes?

The author suggests at least some may have been aware of their longer-term impact. In her section describing a number of African American women in the advertising business, she recounts how, in the 1970s, Barbara Gardner Proctor "was fired for refusing to work on a campaign she found demeaning to both women and African Americans. The campaign parodied the civil rights movement and featured protesting women running down the street and demanding that their hairdressers foam their hair" (p. 336). Proctor formed her own agency and turned away business if she thought it perpetuated negative stereotypes of blacks or women.

Still, on another hand: Did the executive titles women eventually held carry with them commensurate authority or were the men really still in charge in most agencies? If the latter, we can comfortably go back to blaming them for making us all feel guilty if we aren't built to perfection with flawless skin and glamorous hair. Sivulka suggests what the women said really mattered in the councils of the industry, but except in agencies owned by women, we can't be certain.

Readers can decide for themselves whether to be outraged at the role women played in extending the stereotypes of their sisters or merely disappointed. In any case, *Ad Women* is worth reading. Sivulka writes well and puts her characters into the context of their times. Numerous illustrations of ads, as well as of the women, complement the narrative, even though they are all in black and white. The book does for women in advertising what Marion Marzolf's *Up from the Footnote* did for women in journalism.

A small nit to pick: Given the popularity of *Sex and the City* when Sivulka's book was taking shape, she can perhaps be forgiven for renaming Sarah Josepha Hale, long-time editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Jessica Hale.

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Citation: Barbara Cloud. Review of Sivulka, Juliann, *Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want, and Buy*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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