

*Advertising: Then & Now*

## CONNECT

Advertisements are a type of **primary source** that actively engage people of all ages in rich discussions. They conveniently provide both historical context as well as STEM and history content. As more labor saving devices became available to folks in the 19th century, competition between companies increased and soon customers could order all sorts of goods from washers to seed planters. Rhonda Ratner (2000) from the **Smithsonian Library** wrote about the evolution of the

trade catalog [which] developed as a result of and along with the industrial revolution... [T]he growing factory system enabled workers to do twice to ten times the work of a single individual. Production rose, leading manufacturers to substantially increase their market territory to stimulate demand. The trade catalog became a critical means by which the resulting demand was met.

Trade catalogs (see sample on next page) were a means for companies to get their messages out to their customers. The **Duke University John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History** website highlights the first advertising agency, which opened in 1841 in Philadelphia; by 1861 there were twenty ad agencies in New York City alone.

**Advertising: Then & Now** was designed to help students develop a sense of media literacy, a way of objectively “reading” and deconstructing ads and uncover the obvious and hidden meaning and messages. We will be using work from a group called the **Media Literacy Project** which has developed tools that help individuals become “media consumers and engaged media justice advocates who deconstruct media, inform media policy, and create media that reflect their lived experience” (medialiteracyproject.org).

## WONDER

We will be investigating a series of 19th century advertisements and apply the **Media Literacy Project's** techniques to uncover the explicit and hidden meaning and messages in ads from the past. The following questions are intended to launch the lesson for students as they grapple with decoding ads on their own or in small groups.

1. What types of innovations were being advertised for people to buy?
2. In which ways were modern day “tools of persuasion” used when advertising first started in the mid 1800s?
3. How useful were the new products; did any of them have unintended consequences (stated or not)?

## INVESTIGATE

As a whole class, study the 19th century advertisement and apply the questions from the **Media Literacy Project's Language of Persuasion** (both on the pages following) to the “Home Comfort Ranges” image. Work together to investigate the ten “tools of persuasion” and see how they apply to the sample 1800s advertisement. (Note: For more ad samples visit the **Missouri Historical Museum** at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mohistory/sets/72157615805114179/with/4359799650/> or the **Library of Congress** at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/advertising/> or our own website at <http://www.historicalforensics.com/19th-century-advertising.html>). Once everyone has experienced deconstructing an advertisement, divide the students into small groups to apply **Language of Persuasion** questions to the remaining ads. Use the **19th Century Advertisements: Constructing Meaning** grid in the following section to record and discuss possible interpretations for the audience, text, and subtext. Share ideas about which persuasive tools are most applicable for your advertisement.

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### Media Literacy Project's *Language of Persuasion*

1. Who do you think created or paid for the advertisement?
2. Who is the “target audience”? What is their age, ethnicity, class, profession, interests, etc.? What words, images or sounds suggest this?
3. What is the “text” of the message? (What we actually see and/or hear: written or spoken words, photos, drawings, logos, design, music, sounds, etc.)
4. What is the “subtext” of the message? (What do you think is the hidden or unstated meaning?)
5. What “tools of persuasion” are used? The following is a list of techniques adapted from the **Media Literacy Project** that are used in modern day advertisements. Can any of these techniques be seen in the 19th century ads?

- **ASSOCIATION:** This persuasion technique tries to link a product, service, or idea with something already liked or desired by the target audience, such as fun, pleasure, beauty, security, intimacy, success, wealth, etc. The media message doesn't make explicit claims that you'll get these things; the association is implied. Association can be a very powerful technique. A good ad can create a strong emotional response and then associate that feeling with a brand (family = Coke, victory = Nike). This process is known as emotional transfer. Several of the persuasion techniques below, like Beautiful people, Warm & fuzzy, Symbols and Nostalgia, are specific types of association.
- **BANDWAGON:** Many ads show lots of people using the product, implying that “everyone is doing it” (or at least, “all the cool people are doing it”). No one likes to be left out or left behind, and these ads urge us to “jump on the bandwagon.” Politicians use the same technique when they say, “The American people want...” How do they know?



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- **BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE:** Beautiful people uses good-looking models (who may also be celebrities) to attract our attention. This technique is extremely common in ads, which may also imply (but never promise!) that we'll look like the models if we use the product.
- **BRIBERY:** This technique tries to persuade us to buy a product by promising to give us something else, like a discount, a rebate, a coupon, or a "free gift." Sales, special offers, contests, and sweepstakes are all forms of bribery. Unfortunately, we don't really get something for free--part of the sales price covers the cost of the bribe.
- **FEAR:** This is the opposite of the Association technique. It uses something disliked or feared by the intended audience (like bad breath, failure, high taxes, or terrorism) to promote a "solution". Ads use fear to sell us products that claim to prevent or fix the problem. Politicians and advocacy groups stoke our fears to get elected or to gain support.
- **HUMOR:** Many ads use humor because it grabs our attention and it's a powerful persuasion technique. When we laugh, we feel good. Advertisers make us laugh and then show us their product or logo because they're trying to connect that good feeling to their product. They hope that when we see their product in a store, we'll subtly reexperience that good feeling and select their product. Advocacy messages (and news) rarely use humor because it can undermine their credibility; an exception is political satire.
- **INTENSITY:** The language of ads is full of intensifiers, including superlatives (greatest, best, most, fastest, lowest prices), comparatives (more, better than, improved, increased, fewer calories), hyperbole (amazing, incredible, forever), exaggeration, and many other ways to hype the product.
- **TESTIMONIALS:** Media messages often show people testifying about the value or quality of a product, or endorsing an idea. They can be experts, celebrities, or plain folks. We tend to believe them because they appear to be a neutral third party (a pop star, for example, not the lipstick maker, or a community member instead of the politician running for office.) This technique works best when it seems like the person "testifying" is doing so because they genuinely like the product or agree with the idea. Some testimonials may be less effective when we recognize that the person is getting paid to endorse the product.
- **WARM & FUZZY:** This technique uses sentimental images (especially of families, kids and animals) to stimulate feelings of pleasure, comfort, and delight. It may also include the use of soothing music, pleasant voices, and evocative words like "cozy" or "cuddly". The Warm & Fuzzy technique is another form of Association. It works well with some audiences, but not with others, who may find it too corny.
- **NEW:** We love new things and new ideas, because we tend to believe they're better than old things and old ideas. That's because the dominant culture in the United States (and many other countries) places great faith in technology and progress. But sometimes, new products and new ideas lead to new and more difficult problems.

HISTORICAL FORENSICS  
*Investigating Untold Stories From 19th Century New England  
Through Primary Sources*

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**19th Century Advertisements: *Constructing Meaning***

Record and discuss possible interpretations for the audience, text, and subtext in the **historical advertisements**. Share ideas about which persuasive tools are most applicable for your advertisement.

<b>Product Being Advertised</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Subtext</b>	<b>Persuasive Tool</b>

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**EXPRESS**

Have the students discuss the following questions with their group or the whole class:

1. Which persuasive tools were most commonly used in the eight ads presented in this activity?
2. What types of innovations were being advertised for people to buy in the mid to late 1800s?
3. Were all of these new products useful or might there have been a negative consequence related to any of these innovations?

Consider, for example, the cotton gin. That innovation allowed people to separate the cotton fibers from the seeds much more quickly than doing so by hand. However, it also led to an increase in the production of cotton because it had become so much easier to process. Once cotton was easier and quicker to process, plantation owners wanted to grow more of it, which led to a rise in slavery on southern plantations.

**REFLECT**

**Comparing 19th Century Advertisements: *Then & Now***

Look at some modern-day advertisements from current magazines. What persuasive tools are used in advertisements that you see in your modern day life? How do they compare and contrast to the 19th century ads that you analyzed?

<b>THEN: 1800s (contrast)</b>	<b>Both (compare)</b>	<b>NOW: 2000s (contrast)</b>

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**REFLECT, Cont.**

Choose two of the 19th century ads and 2 modern day ads and answer the following questions through writing, charts, diagrams, or a visual image.

1. Why was this considered “innovative”?
2. How may it have helped a person/family? Who in the family would it have helped?
3. Were all of these new products useful or did any of them have negative consequences associated with them?
4. What personal reactions do you have to these ads? Make references to specific aspects of the ads.
5. How do you feel about advertisements that are aimed toward children? Elders? Is it fair to target advertisements toward these audiences? Why or Why not?
6. People can invent all kinds of objects. Simply because something new can be invented, does that automatically mean that it should be used? Give an example of an invention that you personally think should not have been used. Explain the problems you think might have been caused by that product or object.

**REFERENCES**

The development of these materials were sponsored in part by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Eastern Region Program, coordinated by Waynesburg University. Be sure check out the Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) website and newsletter by visiting: [www.loc.gov/teachers/tps](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps)

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