

[Back to index](#)**PAMELA WALKER LAIRD****Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing
(Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998).**

by

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Advertising agents have never been renowned for their modesty. Those that Pamela Walker Laird has chosen to examine in the first specialist agencies of turn-of-the-century America were no exception. From the 1890s onwards, advertising experts proclaimed their creative and even determining role in the 'progress' of the new mass consumer capitalist modernity. As Senator Hiram W. Johnson explained to the Associated Advertising Clubs in 1917: 'You of the advertising world are the pioneers in the development of business, you are in the vanguard of progress, discovering new fields of endeavour.' Emphasising the simplicity of the message, the 'system' of planning an advertising campaign, the targeting of a market, the importance of understanding human psychology and the 'science' and 'art' of creating an eye-catching image and persuasive copy, the advertising agents of the J. Walter Thompson Company and the George P. Rowell Agency, Laird argues, deliberately set out to 'create consumers' rather than 'inform customers'.

All such developments were couched in a rhetoric of 'progress', but it was a progress which Laird convincingly demonstrates to have been distinct from the progress of the advertisements of the owner-manager firms of the 1870s and 1880s. Intertwining business and cultural history, Laird traces the origins of modern printing, lithographic and advertising techniques to show how manufacturers legitimated the 'Victorian compromise' between spiritual moralism and commercial materialism by using images of the factory, the machine, the smokestack and the abundant personal wealth of the proprietor to root business in a wider culture. These advertisements took little account of the consumer, serving only to make informed customers aware of a product and trademark. But they also reflected the need of the manufacturer to justify the purpose of industry and they utilised typical nineteenth-century cultural references to demonstrate the 'progress' they brought to the nation.

At this stage, advertising agents were principally either space brokers for periodicals or printing 'jobbers' for posters and trade cards. From the 1890s, however, the impact of mass production technologies encouraged specialisms which reduced the direct influence of the owner-manager's world-view on his products' advertisements. Using a wealth of archival material, Laird details the developments in the advertising industry which saw the eventual dominance of the independent agency by the 1910s. Here, the account becomes a little internalist in its history of business as Laird does not interweave the narrative between business and culture quite as successfully as she does for the earlier period. She does not, for instance, provide a similarly detailed analysis of the advertisements themselves, though in part the work and arguments of advertising historians such as Roland Marchand have more than adequately preceded her. Instead, the reader is given a comprehensive history of the seemingly endless ability of the new advertisers to proclaim in forever self-congratulatory fashion that they themselves were leading the new consumer-oriented progressive modernity.

The strength of this book lies in the depth of evidence Laird offers which supports and confirms the models already provided by a range of scholars who have studied the creation of the American mass market. She demonstrates the inseparability of business and cultural history as she details how the values and ideals of countless 'businesspeople' shaped the particular direction of consumerism, mediated as this was by equally well-observed economic, technological and organisational changes. Perhaps her plentiful material for the period from the 1890s weighs down her analysis as she struggles to find an independent voice amidst what has recently become an overcrowded historiography of US advertising. In consequence, what might be fruitful now, is an application of her ideas and research methods to the European context to test the singularity of the American creation of the progressive 'modernity' of the mass market.

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