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Competition and Combative Advertising: An Historical Analysis

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Abstract

This historical study contributes to the research literature on advertising and competition by exploring professional thought and economic theory as explanations for why advertisers might choose to compete in advertising and how combatively. Primary and secondary sources consist of articles published in historic and contemporary advertising trade journals, such as *Printers' Ink* and *Advertising Age*. The findings reveal that during the first half of the twentieth century, statements and beliefs in favor of avoiding competition were often consistent with both the *informative* economic view and the symbiotic competition associated with expanding markets. During the past fifty to sixty years, however, findings show that the majority advocating more combative advertising predominantly associated it with zero-sum competitive situations and described the use of advertising consistent with the *persuasive* school of economic thought. Other findings support recent theory and research on combative advertising and both micro- and macroeconomic causes and consequences of competition.

Keywords

combative advertising, competition, comparative advertising, advertising history

A 1999 survey of 1800 U.S. corporate executives conducted by the American Advertising Federation found that 83 percent agreed advertising provides a competitive edge, with 29 percent agreeing strongly. As Ulrich Doraszelski and Sarit Markovich (2007, 557) observe, regarding this finding: "Practitioners, it seems, presume that advertising is capable of giving them a sustainable competitive advantage over their rivals."

Some historians, however, argue that neither advertisers nor industry observers have always been so confident about the role advertising plays in competition nor how combatively to compete with it. As businessmen surveyed the marketing landscape at the turn of the last century, at least three fundamental problems presented themselves. First, they noticed their advertising often increased competitors' sales as well as their own (Rowsome 1970). Advertisers had discovered the difference between primary and selective demand and the competitive "free-rider effect" (Krishnamurthy 2000).

Historian Daniel Pope (1983, 202) implies a second fundamental problem: "Winning public acceptance of advertising demanded that advertising men deal truthfully with potential customers. At the same time, the increasing importance of demand-creating national advertising and the ambivalent attitudes of national advertisers toward competition made proper treatment of competitors a matter of great concern." Similar to the other "strategies of enticement" (Leach 1994, 37) employed by early merchandisers—elaborate window displays, color advertising trade cards, electrical outdoor signage, and expanded forms of customer service—most also seemed to favor constructive rather than combative advertising, the latter of which identifies products but fails to expand markets (Marshall, as cited in Chen et al. 2009). As Pope (1983, 201) concludes, "Support for the idea of competition remained, but it was defined as competition *through* advertising, not rivalry *in* advertisements or attempts to undersell."

A third problem, related to the second, was the extent to which competitors should be dealt with, or even acknowledged. Many early businessmen and advertising professionals condemned comparative, or what they called "knocking," advertising. Although the use of comparative advertising was infrequent during the first half of the twentieth century, it was not completely absent. Richard Pollay (1985, 36), who content-analyzed 2000 ads published in U.S. magazines from 1900 to 1980, found an average of 2 percent, when comparative ads were operationalized as those including "clues" to the identity of specific competitors . . . ." Pollay found none in the 1920s and 1930s and the most (at a mere 4 percent) in the 1970s.

Other research confirms the use of comparative advertising in the United States expanded greatly in the 1960s and 1970s (Beard and Nye, IN PRESS); it may be one of today's most

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frequently employed tactics. Estimates of comparative advertising use suggest it may be as high as 30 percent to 40 percent of all ads (Donthu 1992; Koten 1984; Neiman 1987; Stewart and Furse 1986). Although there have been no recent content analyses of comparative advertising, some observers suggest a steady increase during the first decade of the twenty-first century (York 2009).

As mass marketing and modern advertising emerged during the late nineteenth century—almost entirely as a result of large increases in production made possible by continuous-process manufacturing (Chandler 1977)—and continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century, professional thought also evolved in response to professional, social, economic, and regulatory contexts. These contexts suggest explanations for why businessmen might choose to avoid or engage in aggressively combative advertising.

Historians report that during the final decades of the nineteenth century, many businessmen remained skeptical as to the value of advertising (Hower 1949; Laird 1998; Marchand 1985; Schudson 1989). Consequently, advertising agents promoted its use through their trade journals, trade associations, and clubs, as well as by expanding agency services to include copy and art (McGovern 2006; Schudson 1989). At the same time, many manufacturers of mass-produced consumer goods were seeking to create national markets and wrest control of their distribution channels from jobbers and merchants. These exigencies also suggest why, when manufacturers and merchandisers began employing mass advertising, their preference would be for constructive rather than combative forms of it.

Professional thought regarding the purpose and attributes of effective advertising might also influence beliefs regarding the efficacy of combative advertising. Some historians suggest many advertisers at the turn of the last century favored a descriptive and emphatically rational approach due, in part, to embarrassment over the frequently dishonest "bombast and ballyhoo" and patent medicine advertising of the nineteenth century (Beard 2004; Laird 1998; Rowsome 1970). The "Truth Well Told" motto of the H.K. McCann Company, founded in 1911 (Alter 1995), clearly expresses such a philosophy. Moreover, this period would not be the last time advertisers would confront and respond to public criticism and advocates of consumerism (Hower 1949; McGovern 2006). Beard and Nye (IN PRESS) report that industry calls for the reform and regulation of especially aggressive comparative advertising peaked during two periods of pervasive consumerism—the 1930s (Fox 1984) and the 1970s (Pope 1983).

As the announcement advertising of the late nineteenth century gave way to the belief advertising should persuade (Hower 1949; Laird 1998), the professional debate turned to the most appropriate way to accomplish it. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many advertisers favored selling directly by informing prospects about mainly tangible features and benefits (Beard 2004). The informative school of thought—or what is often called the "hard sell"—is evident in the "salesmanship-in-print" of John E. Kennedy, the "reason-why" of Albert Lasker, the "USP" of Rosser Reeves, and characterizes much direct-response advertising of present day (Beard 2004).

Yet the "soft sell," with its emotional appeals and transformational consumer orientation, coexisted with the hard sell throughout the twentieth century. It is evident in the influential "atmospheric" style of Theodore F. MacManus, the image-based approach of Ernest E. Calkins, Leo Burnett's "Inherent Drama," the "advertising-as-art-versus-science" philosophy inspired by Bill Bernbach, and what was called "mood" or "image" advertising in the 1980s (Beard 2004). However, the fear appeals employed during WWI and advertisers' exploitation of social taboos and personal anxieties in the 1930s (Laird 1998; Marchand 1985; McGovern 2006; Rowsome 1970) demonstrate that, by then, the use of emotional appeals was clearly no longer inconsistent with the hard sell. Beard (2004) reports that the debate between hard and soft sell proponents continued throughout the twentieth century and that advertisers consistently argued the superiority of the hard sell during difficult economic times.

Two schools of economic thought or views capture both the professional debate over whether advertising should mainly inform or persuade but also offer theoretical explanations for why advertisers might choose to directly confront competitors with aggressively combative advertising. The distinction between persuasive and informative advertising can be found in the economics literature as early as the 1920s (Veblen 1923) and 1930s (Burns 1936). The *persuasive* view—later advanced in the works of Kaldor (1950), Bain (1956), and Comanor and Wilson (1967)—views advertising as a means for achieving power and avoiding competition on the basis of price or quality. It holds advertising creates "spurious" product differentiation (Chen et al. 2009, 2), brand loyalty, and barriers to entry. Conversely, the *informative* view—developed in the works of Stigler (1961), Telser (1964), and Nelson (1975)—views advertising as a strategy by which advertisers might increase demand by conveying information about price and quality. It further holds that advertising constructively encourages competition and facilitates entry.

Economic theory also suggests decisions regarding advertising and competition might be influenced by the competitive situations advertisers believe they face. For example, and as Yoo and Mandhachitara (2003, 312) observe: Zero-sum competition "is a competitive situation that most advertisers assume to be the case and on which they base their budgets. In this type of rivalry, the advertiser's gain is the competitor's loss because the size of market remains fixed." They further note that the rivalry characterizing zero-sum competition occurs most often in mature markets, where growth is static and advertisers believe they can increase sales only by stealing them from competitors. An assumption of this situation is that each competitor's advertising is inherently combative, increasing its own sales while decreasing those of others.

On the other hand, the positive-sum competition typified by "symbiotic competition" occurs "when products involve emerging technologies in new markets or when the market is not fully matured and has much room for expansion" (Yoo and

Mandhachitara 2003, 312). This situation assumes competitors benefit from each other's advertising. Two other competitive situations—the "advertiser's advantage" and the "competitor's advantage"—account for other ways in which two competitors' advertising might affect their own or each other's sales.

To summarize, professional thought as to whether advertising should mainly inform or persuade, whether the sell should be hard or soft, as well as economic theory all suggest explanations for the evolution of professional thought regarding the role of advertising in competition. Yet such explanations are absent from the advertising, business, and economics research literatures. Indeed, as Stigler (1968, 319) writes: "The sole test of the usefulness of an economic theory is the concordance between its predictions and the observable course of events." Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore professional thought and economic theory as explanations for why advertisers during the past century have chosen whether or not to compete directly in their advertising and how combatively.

Method and Topical Focus

Advertising histories (Fox 1984; Pope 1983; Presbrey 1929; Rowsome 1970) and the literatures on comparative advertising and competition were used during this study's immersion and guided entry phases. As described by Smith (1989, 319): "After immersion and consideration of the breadth of data available in a general area of interest, the researcher focuses on a more specific part of the data in a process called guided entry. . . . In the process of guided entry, the historian further delimits the data to be studied and the process of general question forming begins."

The purposes of this study and the results of the immersion and guided entry phases led to the following research questions: Why have some business managers and advertising professionals chosen to avoid competing in advertising? Why have others chosen to confront competitors combatively? While the method does not offer the assessments of validity and reliability that quantitative content analysis does, it is consistent with the methods of traditional, humanistic historical research. In other words, it is "a form of empirical inquiry that uses theoretical constructs to attempt to make true statements about the past" (Nord 1989, 292).

The collection of a database of professional thought on competition and combative advertising began with a search of the industry's foremost trade journal, *Printers' Ink*. Referred to as "The Little Schoolmaster in the Art of Advertising" by its editors and readers, the journal's contributors consisted of both participants in and firsthand observers of marketing and advertising: businessmen, marketing executives, and advertising professionals. Although the journal was published continuously from 1888 to 1972, no index was available until 1913. Thus, primary sources for the earliest period, 1900 to 1913, were located by randomly selecting and scanning one issue from each of the 60 volumes of *Printers' Ink* published during those years.

Sources for the remainder of the twentieth century through present day were then identified by means of a literature search, with the goal of collecting all trade journal articles (including those published in *Printers' Ink*) on the topics of comparative advertising (as a proxy for "combative" advertising, since that term was not used in the trade literature) and competition. This search was aided by the existence of three business periodical indices: the *Industrial Arts Index* (1913–1957), the *Business Periodicals Index* (1958–1973), and the *ABI/Inform Complete* search engine (1971–2009). The *Industrial Arts Index* is the only business periodical index available for the period it covers; it continued in 1958 as the *Business Periodicals Index*. The data consist of some 140 articles that specifically address the topic of competition, whether and how aggressively to respond to it in advertising, and why.

Findings

Findings for the two research questions are organized chronologically within each of two main sections. The second section is also organized by dominant theme and then chronologically within each theme. Representative observations and statements of primary and secondary sources in each period support dominant themes and subthemes. They are presented without rigid periodization (Hollander et al. 2005) because no rationale existed to impose it at the outset and none emerged inductively.

Avoiding Competition in Advertising

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many businessmen argued that not only should competition in advertising be avoided, competitors should be ignored. As one observed, the businessman "cannot rule the weather and the crops, but he can attack the items of neglect of business, extravagance, speculation, and incompetence. And, when these black beasts are considered beside the relatively unimportant one of competition, the average business man would better devote his time, energy, and advertising space to relentless war upon them, leaving his rivals to their own devices" ("Is It Really Worth While . . . " 1902, 36). *Printers' Ink* summarized the view concisely: "Talk success in your advertising, ignore competitors and make your offering of vital interest to the people whose trade you seek" ("Talk Success in Your Advertising . . . " 1903, 27).

The majority almost overwhelmingly agreed that competitors were helpful. A *Printers' Ink* author summarized the views of many in his description of an advertising war between steamship competitors. "It dawned upon both lines that it was work meet [i.e., suitable or fitting] for even two advertisers to educate the local public to travel more by water. The patronage was not fixed; it could be increased as the public came to understand the pleasures and the benefits of a trip by steamer" (Pickett 1910, 29). A manufacturer's comments reflect the same belief: "I never will forget how frightened many of us were when other manufacturers began to exploit the system, because we feared they would get all the business away from us. What really happened was that the advertising which all the other systems did was a great help to us" ("Competitive Advertising Helps Business for All" 1914, 49).

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, executives and industry observers who argued against competition in advertising expressed a similar and near-unanimous confidence in market expansion. This was especially true of the national marketers—the department stores, mail-order houses, and chain stores—who were replacing wholesalers and smaller retailers as the major distributors of goods in the United States (Chandler 1977). The belief advertising contributed primarily to market expansion was summarized well by the California Railroad Commission: "Modern advertising is creative; it produces demand and brings new business. . . . The great success in market expansion that has attended the advertising campaigns of cooperative farm groups, such as the raisin, citrus, prune, and peach associations, may be accepted as proof. Merely taking trade away from a competitor without developing new business is a quite negligible feature of modern advertising" (as cited in "California Power Company . . . " 1922, 80).

Advertisers of the day often referred to cooperative advertising as "educational," reflecting their conviction that they were teaching people how to live better lives (Laird 1998; McGovern 2006). It was also a frequent topic of discussion in the trade literature of the 1920s; *Printers' Ink* had already described over 200 cooperative campaigns as of 1920 ("What Has Been Done . . . " 1920). Describing one such campaign, a *Printers' Ink* author argued: "If competitors can thus hurriedly get together and speak their piece so effectively, what excuse is there for holding back the many co-operative, industrial, governmental and public betterment stories?" ("Competitors Jointly Advertise . . . " 1921, 62). Indeed, as Leach (1994) reports, such cooperative relationships were common among department stores in the 1920s.

Faith in the value of cooperation among competitors was summarized well in the comments of long-time *Printers' Ink* editor C. B. Larrabee (1923, 117): "No, it is not possible to guard a sales or advertising plan from the zealous eyes of the competitor. That may seem a devastating statement but it is true, nevertheless. Since it is true the manufacturer must ask himself what is the answer. The answer, fortunately, is simple. It lies in a new attitude toward competition, a new understanding of what competition really means, a realization that competition is more apt to be constructive than destructive."

As the Depression wore on, there were signs advertisers were growing more combative. As *Printers' Ink* ("Competitive Claims" 1936, 8) pointed out: "Advertisers of a considerable list of commodities . . . seem to be outdoing each other in unfair, unethical, and even untruthful competitive claims. This sort of thing, to state the case with great restraint, is bad for the advertiser." An example from the period—a follow-up to what agency Cunningham and Walsh's President Anthony C. Chevins (1975, 34) called the "grand-daddy" of all comparative ads, Walter Chrysler's "Look at all Three!"—is shown in Figure 1.

Still, the majority argued in favor of mainly constructive and mostly noncombative advertising. One advertiser told *Printers' Ink* what happened when he abandoned a comparative campaign: " . . . we threw out all comparison and began to confine ourselves to direct statement of what our material would do. . . . Competitors have appeared—new as well as old—and they are all doing a satisfactory volume of business. Most of them are advertising. But the market has grown more rapidly than the combined output. A great deal of this is directly attributable to constructive advertising" (McGarry 1931, 28). *Printers' Ink* columnist "Groucho" (1934, 57) similarly condemned combative advertising: "Advertising is all set to leap ahead, if it can get rid of this nonsense. You've got to chum with competitors as well as customers to have good times."

Faith in a constructive role for advertising and its contribution to primary demand held steady throughout the Depression and appeared to actually grow stronger toward the end. Many such statements included criticisms of overly combative advertisers. As W. L. Rech (1935, 38), an executive with the H. E. Lesan Advertising Agency, wrote: "Too many advertising and merchandising men apparently still cling to the belief that he profits most who serves most efficiently to kick his competitors off the ladder. There are far too few in this work who realize the ultimate advantage to industrial cooperation, in plugging the whole field of which they are a unit." Larrabee (1934, 59) argued the same point: "As industry enters a period of recovery it is co-operatively important that manufacturers consider any developments which seem to retard the growth of their industries. In many cases it can be pretty clearly proved that highly competitive advertising is a retarding factor and deserves consideration along with all other similar factors."

Ralph Starr Butler, vice president of the General Foods Corporation and author of the first marketing textbook, summarized the concerns of many regarding the proliferation of comparative and excessively combative advertising and linked it to rising consumerism. He warned that it could "easily result in public disgust with advertising as a business tool;" or, worse yet, "lend emphasis to the contentions of those who want to place advertising in the hands of bureaucratic governmental control and bring about that distinctly undesirable condition" (as cited in "Calls for Showdown on Competitive Copy" 1931, 105).

Beliefs in favor of ignoring competitors and criticisms of the Depression's combative advertising continued into the 1940s and 1950s. Praising an enlightened client, Federal Advertising Agency President Robert Tinsman (1941, 64) wrote: "He ignores the quantity-value claims of his competitor as beneath his notice. . . . This is no time for destructive advertising battles. . . . There is such a thing as constructive competition—the 'life of the trade'—and advertising should be first to practice it." "Aesop Glim" (*Printers' Ink* columnist George Laflin Miller) agreed: "Old Aesop Glim believes that—more often than not—it is sound practice to ignore your competition. Omit all reference to competitive wares when writing about the features of your wares. Tell your own story—exclusively, positively—give your copy sound construction, sequence and conviction—and you'll get your share of the market" (1945, 25). J. Walter Thompson's Joseph Stone (1951, 130) spoke for many when he wrote: " . . . if you study the record you'll find that many an

Figure 1. "You're Right, Mr. Chrysler!" 1932. Source: *The New York Times*, April 20, 1932, 10. (Dodge is a registered trademark of Chrysler LLC.)

advertiser who turned from quality in favor of black, dirty headlines and throat cutting policies came to rue the day."

The belief competitors should be ignored almost disappeared from the literature in the second half of the twentieth century. When it was mentioned, it was almost always linked to an advertiser's superior market position. As Lawrence Light, a vp-director of research for agency BBDO, told *Advertising Age* ("Unsolicited Ad Idea Problems . . . " 1975, 3): "We know of no psychological theory that suggests that a leader will benefit from naming a competitor." Brock Luther (1982, 93), a *Direct Marketing* columnist, summarized this view: "Here's what I've discovered about tackling the competition in direct mail. . . . If you're the leader by a large margin, forget your competition exists." A differing statement, however, was offered to explain a spate of attack advertising among business publications. As W. Donald Larson, director of communications for *Forbes*, told *Advertising Age*: "*Business Week* carries more ads than anyone else, and when you are No. 1, you have to find somewhere to grow" (Emmrich 1982, M1).

Competing in Advertising

Consistent with the widespread belief during the first decade of the twentieth century that competitors should be ignored, not a single source during the same period argued they should be confronted combatively. Beginning with the 1920s, however, the data reveal several competitive contingencies that involved combative advertising. Some of these episodes occurred in expanding markets. However, when sources discussed or advocated competing aggressively in advertising, the majority, by far, described markets characterized by zero-sum competition.

"The Substitution Menace." Even as most markets expanded during the first two decades of the twentieth century, advertisers still faced the free-rider problem *Printers' Ink* dubbed "The Substitution Menace." After building primary demand, advertisers would discover often-inferior brands substituted for theirs—sometimes inadvertently, but often purposely—by jobbers and retailers. A sample from *Printers' Ink's* lengthy war on substitution is shown in Figure 2.

One advertiser, writing anonymously (1925, 113) in *Printers' Ink*, blamed advertising for his substitution problem: "Our hope of large future growth, general distribution through national advertising, volume production, and lowered manufacturing costs is based on the home market. How are we to reach that market effectively with consumer advertising, when advertising attracts cheap competition which takes our market away from us about as rapidly as we create it?"

The majority, however, proposed advertising was the solution for substitution. As *Printers' Ink* contributor H. E. Agnew (1920, 154) wrote: " . . . the better the product is known, and the more confidence the public has in the manufacturer because it knows his advertising and his goods, the more difficult it is for the competition to break into the field." Editor Larrabee (1923, 112) agreed: "When you get a new idea broadcast it. In this way you steal a march on your competitors and put it up to them to stamp

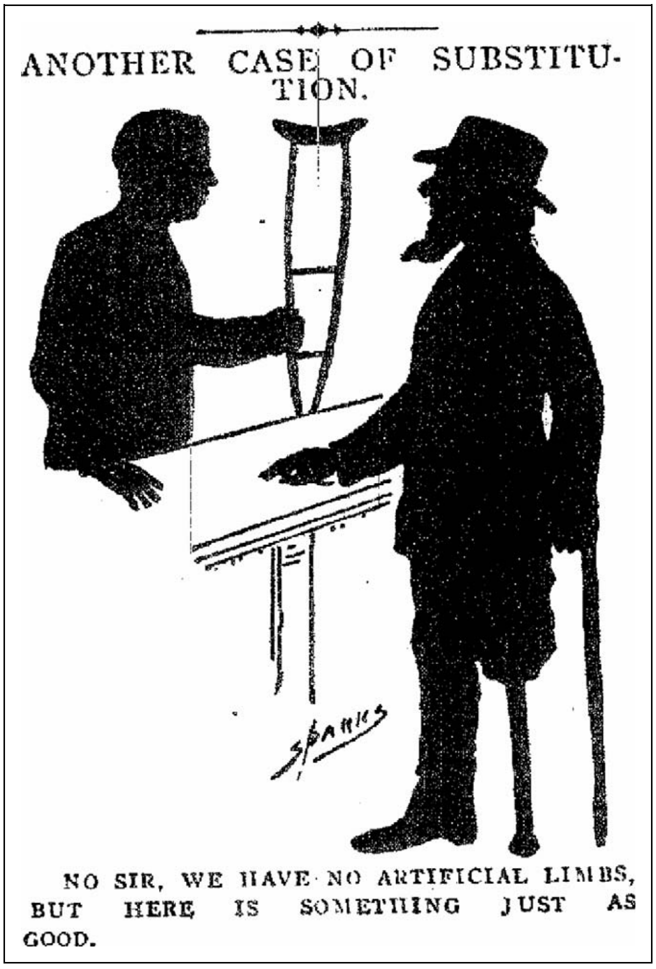

Figure 2. "Another Case of Substitution." Source: *Printers' Ink*, 1902, 42 (9): 20.

themselves as imitators." Kraft Cheese Co.'s John H. Kraft (1927, 142) advocated brand-building advertising: "We avoided saying 'Insist on the Kraft label' or 'Beware of Substitutes.' We felt that the buying public had been surfeited with that sort of tarnished warning until it had lost its force. So we try in our copy to lead the reader into realizing what our name on a package of cheese stands for."

The New Competition. Along with the expanding markets and cooperative advertising campaigns of the 1920s, a new role for combative advertising emerged. Dubbed "The New Competition" by American Tobacco's George Washington Hill, F. J. Rose (1924, 10) summarized the idea in a *Printers' Ink* piece: "Competition today takes on broader dimensions to those manufacturers and retailers who look below the surface. It doesn't do the house furnishing store any good if a family spends more than it needs to at the grocers and less than it ought to at the house furnishing store." *Printers' Ink* ("The Real Battle of the Century" 1928, 118) offered a description four years later: "The wise future pickers in advertising have, for some time, been predicting that the great competitive struggle in advertising is to be shifted; that when an industry is selling to consumer capacity, instead of competition between members of that industry, we shall see the whole industry competing with other industries for a still greater market."

George Washington Hill, in fact, attributed his highly successful and controversial "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet" campaign to The New Competition. "Anyone who does not recognize that our campaign merely acknowledges that competition today is industry against industry, quite as much, or more than, within industries, is not up on the trend of modern advertising. Examples of this competition are shown by the radio and the phonograph; the motor bus and the railroads; mechanical refrigeration and the ice-box . . . " (as cited in Pharo 1928, 83).

Progress and product quality. A steady stream of new and improved products during the early twentieth century led some advertisers to conclude that competition, and, in some cases, combative advertising, were inevitable. As one *Printers' Ink* contributor observed: "No one will deny the right of the maker of an improved article to call very special attention to the addition which puts his product in a class by itself. Such advertising is really another form of 'competition'" (Leach 1924, 137–138). Industry leader Joel Benton (1932, 53) similarly argued: "When a mechanical advance is made in a product there is no reason why the advertiser should not make the most of it, compared with the old-fashioned way. That's the kind of competition we want; it gives life to advertising—makes it very helpful to the consumer. . . . You cannot abolish competitive advertising without abolishing advertising itself; it is the most efficacious kind."

Similar statements linking competitive advertising and product quality appeared in later decades. As Stanley Tannenbaum (1976a, 28), chairman of agency Kenyon & Eckhardt, wrote: "I hail comparative advertising as our industry's own brand of consumerism, when properly executed. . . . Moreover, it serves as an incentive for advertisers to produce better products." Dwight Davis, a vp-creative director at Kenyon & Eckhardt and contestant in the combative auto industry of the 1980s, argued the same point: "It motivates the advertiser to improve his products or suffer a bad comparison" (as cited in McClain 1983, M1).

Competition in expanding markets. Sources describe several outbreaks of combative advertising in rapidly growing markets. For instance, despite a steady increase in cigarette consumption during the 1920s, R. J. Reynolds, Liggett & Myers, American Tobacco, and P. Lorillard fought damaging advertising and price wars. Historically, cigarette marketing had always been advertising-intensive because high volume and low prices meant there was little room for price-cutting (Chandler 1977). As described by *Sales Management* ("How the 'Big Four' Cigarette Advertisers Stand . . . " 1929, 592): "The scramble for increasing shares of the rich cigarette lode has been attended by great advertising campaigns and a retail price war of exceptional sharpness." Some linked the hostility to P. Lorillard's attempt to enter the market with Old Golds and steal sales from the big three brands (one of these combative ads is shown in Figure 3). Consistent with other views from the 1920s, some were critical: "The real explanation of the price cut is rather to be found in that same ill, which today besets so many of our great industries in acute form: excessive competition" (Beecher 1928, 114).

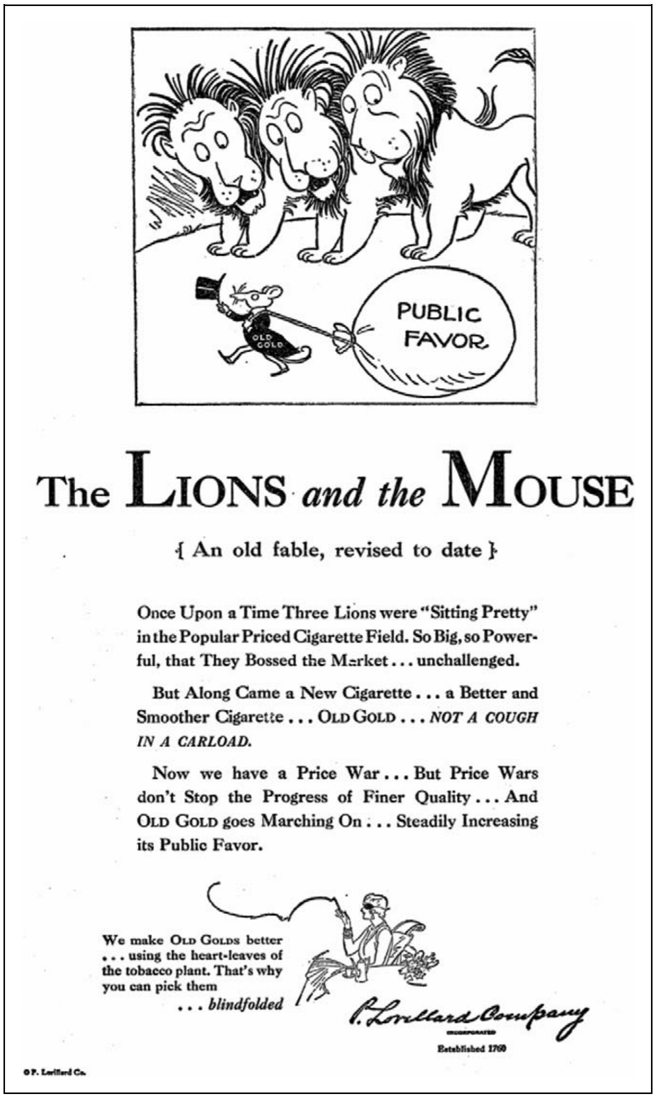

Figure 3. Old Gold Lions. Source: *The New York Times*, May 28, 1928, 20. (Old Gold Cigarettes is a registered trademark of Lorillard Licensing Company, LLC.).

A similar episode occurred in the 1970s. As overall wine sales grew, Coca-Cola Co. employed a combative campaign for Taylor California Cellars. As *Business Week* ("Creating a Mass Market for Wine" 1982) noted, the U.S. wine market at the time was dominated, like the cigarette industry of forty years earlier, by a few large competitors. The campaign more than doubled sales from 1,500,000 cases in 1979 to 3,800,000 in 1980—an outcome two industry observers referred to as "unheard of performance for a new brand" (Shanken and Drum 1981, S-38). However, within a few years, the damage caused by the campaign had become obvious: "The resulting marketing war proved expensive and drove down the profits

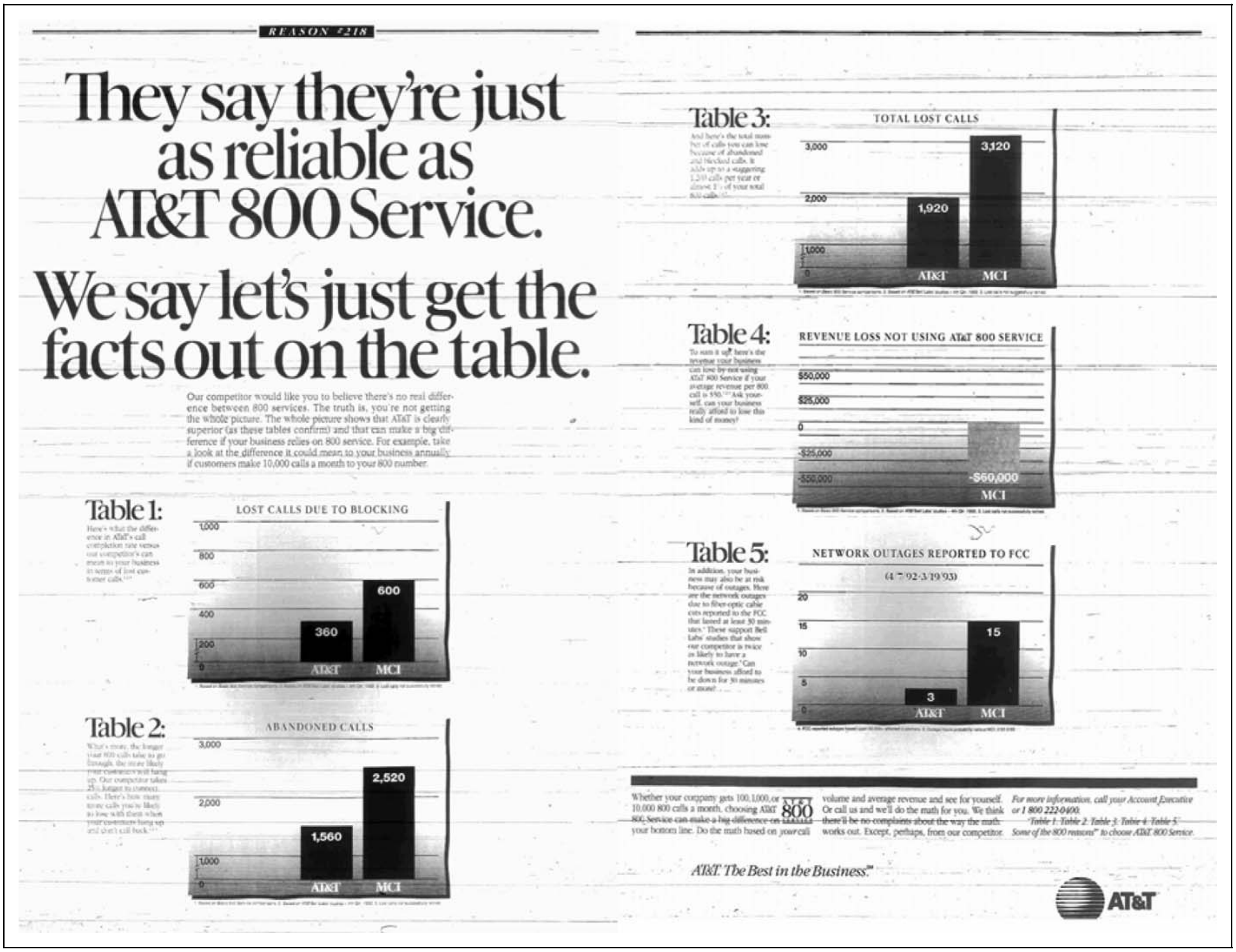

Figure 4. AT&T Attack. Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1993, B8-B9 (AT&T is a registered trademark of AT&T INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY II, L.P.).

of everyone competing in the premium jug wine segment—including Coca-Cola which spent lavishly to become the third largest wine marketer in the industry . . . " (Stroud 1985, 17).

In the 1990s, a Pepsi-Lipton Tea Partnership targeted Snapple Beverage Corp. with a combative campaign. A beverage industry observer reported: "At stake is one of the fastest-growing segments in the overall sluggish soft-drink market. When all the yearend numbers are tallied, *Beverage Marketing* predicts, iced tea sales will have grown 80% to a $900 million segment at wholesale" (Magiera 1993, 48). At the same time, telecommunications companies were also waging war over expanding markets. As one source explained: "Telecommunications usage is exploding worldwide, via new usage surging for telephone lines carrying voice, data, facsimile, cellular and wireless signals" (Fitzgerald 1993, 12). These combatants would also ultimately conclude the war was futile, at least as far as long-distance services were concerned. Efforts to differentiate parity offerings merely created what *Brandweek* described as " . . . 'the spinner,' something of a hybrid of a switcher and a price buyer that changes long-distance carriers as often as every three months" (Koprowski 1995, 22). Two ads from this period, which were published on the same day in major U.S. newspapers, are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Recession, slow-growth markets, and zero-sum competition. Although the data reveal some instances in which advertising was used combatively in expanding markets, the majority who spoke and wrote about advertising and competition referenced situations characterized by zero-sum competition. The first appeared in 1939. Charles Luckman (1939, 18), vice president and general manager of the Pepsodent Company, described the zero-sum competition he perceived among toothpastes: "Years ago when there was very little competition in the dentifrice field, Pepsodent's advertising could be more general. At that time Pepsodent meant 'toothpaste.' Now, the advertising must make Pepsodent mean a specific kind of toothpaste with features not possessed by other brands . . . . Our advertising, therefore, necessarily must be competitive. . . . Every time one

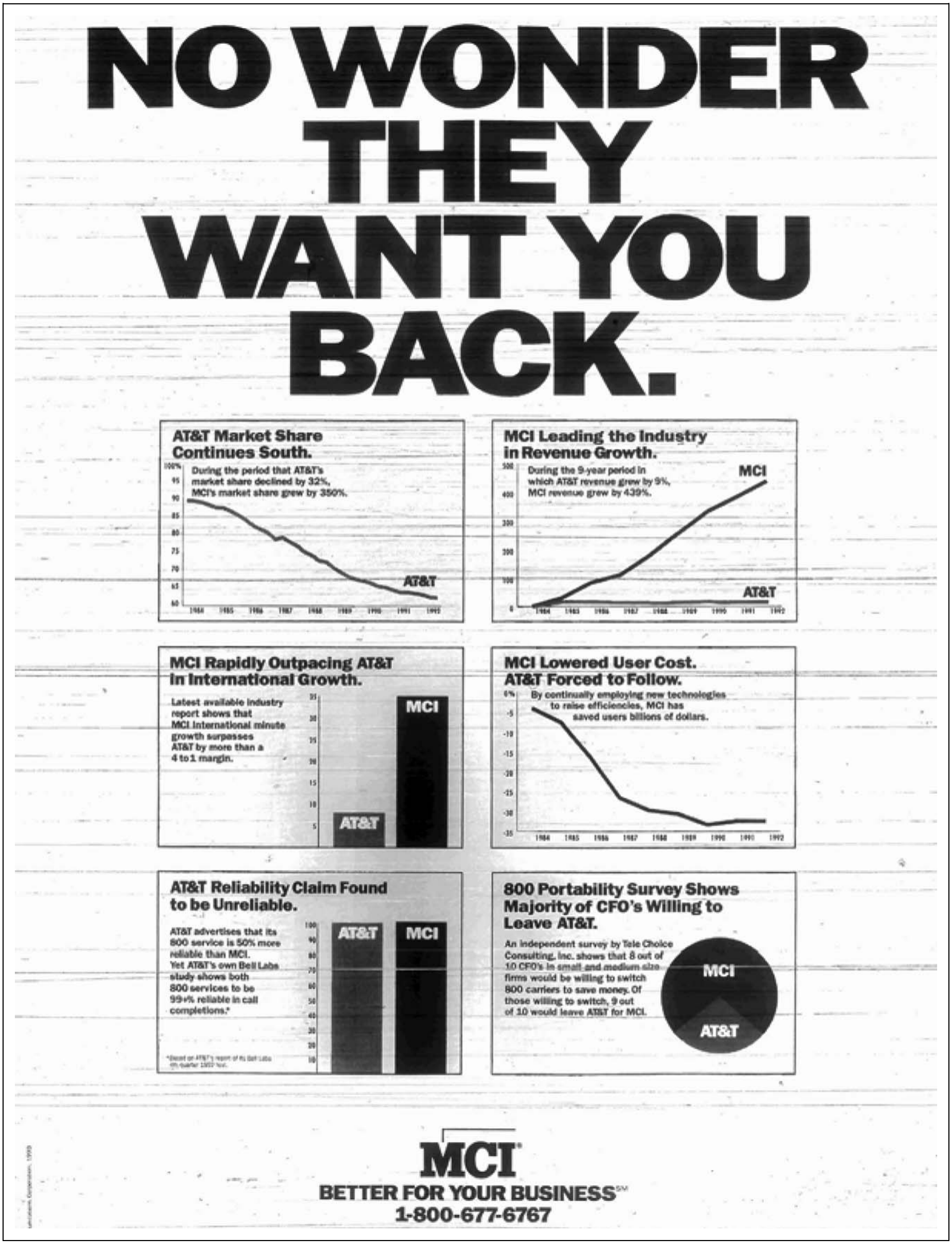

Figure 5. MCI Attack. Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1993, B3 (MCI is a registered trademark of MCI Communications Corporation.).

brand of dentifrice shows a gain some other brand shows losses."

Other examples appeared in the literature from the 1940s and 1950s. When the World War II rationing of meat, fats, and cheese went into effect, for instance, creating an artificial zero-sum competitive situation, *Printers' Ink Monthly* ("Meat, Fat and Cheese Firms Compete . . . ." 1943, 58) reported: "Now the controls of rationing cause competitive selling among brands and types of products to be in order again." Similarly, as post–World War II consumer spending began to level off, J. Walter Thompson's Joseph Stone (1951, 81) observed: "But now that business is back to the normal condition of a buyer's market, the old cry is heard again: 'Let's make our ads more competitive.'"

In the 1950s, a major scandal occurred over false comparative price advertising. Comparative advertising also became a strident issue in the trade press of the 1960s and, especially, the 1970s, after the U.S. Federal Trade Commission persuaded TV networks to implement a one-year trial. However, with one exception, advertisers never linked their use of combative or comparative advertising with the competitive situations they believed they faced. The exception was Kenyon & Eckhardt's Stanley Tannenbaum. Noting that "consumerism" often "manifests itself as a result of the economic dislocation, when prices rise and incomes go down for a significant proportion of the population," he pointed to the desirability of comparative advertising. "There are innumerable marketing and advertising techniques to capitalize on this 'show' me attitude which has developed among information-hungry consumers . . . . One of the best ways is to provide information for which consumers are searching and to keep in step with consumerism through the use of comparative advertising" (1976b, 1).

However, throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the majority repeatedly linked both combative and comparative advertising with zero-sum competition. As combative advertising broke out in the beverage, fast food, and automotive industries in the early 1980s, sources time and again referenced recession and static demand. Describing a Burger King comparative campaign, two observers noted: "Like soft-drink companies, fast-food marketers are dealing with a slow-growth industry, where market share gains are the driving force behind any expansion" (Kreisman and Marshall 1982, 1). William M. Lane, a J. Walter Thompson vp-creative director responsible for the Ford Motor Co. account, similarly observed: "Each of the companies is fighting for a bigger share of a smaller pie. The key word is 'fighting.' If a customer is not going to buy our car, he's going to buy someone else's" (as cited in McClain 1983, M1). Indeed, automotive advertising at the time was so combative, the makers of a Toyota TV spot featuring "the blowing up of a generic American station wagon" (Serafin 1985, 76) missed what would appear to be a fairly obvious thematic connection to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

During this period, several subthemes emerged: a growing prevalence of "me-too" products, a subsequent need for product differentiation, and the perceived failure of brand-building image advertising. An analyst with an investment banking firm specializing in the fast-food industry summarized these themes: "Both Burger King and No. 3-ranked Wendy's dutifully tried image-building campaigns recently. . . . As menus increasingly collide with those of their competitors, it's more difficult to establish product differentiation via the product itself. You have to establish it through advertising and promotion" (as cited in Winters 1986, 3).

In the 1990s, combative advertising was prevalent in many product categories. In almost every instance, sources described intensely competitive markets characterized by their perception of zero-sum competition. The view was summarized well by BBDO/LA CEO Steve Hayden: "In a recession year, with everyone in a blackened mood, we'll see harsher competition because everyone's struggling for market position" (as cited in Jaben 1992, 36). Another observer of the technology industry similarly noted: "Stuck with lookalike products and facing an industry shakeout, personal computer marketers are wont to run comparison advertising, often with nasty jabs at rivals to accentuate any differences in product, price or service" (Johnson 1993, 1).

During the 2000s, sources consistently linked combative and comparative advertising to recession, parity products, brand differentiation, and the failure of image campaigns. Describing a return to combative advertising among technology marketers, Chris Wall, a creative director with agency Ogilvy & Mather, told *Advertising Age*: "There's always this sense of softness, like branding is somehow soft . . . In hard times, the units get smaller and the ads get shriller" (as cited in Wasserman 2001, 8). Jack Trout, coauthor of *Positioning* and president of Trout & Partners, similarly noted: "When hard times hit, the singing, dancing and emotional ads go out the window, and clients say, 'How do I nail my competitor?'" (as cited in Vranica 2008). And describing a campaign challenging Walmart on its technology prices and expertise, Best Buy's chief marketing officer Barry Judge told *Advertising Age*: "If you can't grow as easily because the markets are not necessarily going up, you've got to play for share, and when people are playing for share, they're getting more aggressive in their messaging" (as cited in Zmuda 2009).

Desperation. Although often, but not always, linked with zero-sum competitive situations, combative advertising was frequently associated with a desperate need to stall declining sales or a competitor's success. For instance, VW's popularity in the 1960s made the automaker a frequent target. As an *Advertising Age* contributor explained, "Everybody in the foreign car market is trying to cut Volkswagen down to size. . . . The reason for this blasé reaction is seen in the fact that two-thirds of the more than 500,000 foreign cars sold in this country last year were Volkswagens" (Meyers 1966, 4). The war against VW produced a unique ad on behalf of a Texas AMC dealer group (see Figure 6). As *Advertising Age* ("Texas Rambler Dealer Strikes Back at VW . . . " 1968, 14) described it: "Tongue-in-cheek copy (all in German except for one small paragraph) suggests 'Der Amerikanische Wagen' has appeal to

Figure 6. Texas Rambler Dealers. Source: *The Dallas Times-Herald*, August 22, 1968.

Germans for the same reasons that some imports appeal to Americans—outstanding engineering, and dependable and economic transportation. The paragraph in English says, 'If you lived in Germany you would probably be charmed.'"

In later decades, sources describing combative and comparative campaigns also consistently linked them with sales declines or the success of a competitor. Describing the Burger Wars of the 1980s, two observers noted: "Desperate to resuscitate its growth momentum, Burger King Corp. is hitching its company fortunes to a massive comparative marketing campaign, replete with 'Pepsi challenge'-style taste-test research, that takes on both industry-leader McDonald's and Wendy's International" (Kreisman and Marshall 1982, 1). Judann Dagnoli (1989, 4), *Advertising Age* contributor and observer of a war between rival spaghetti sauces, similarly reported: "Lurking behind Ragu Foods' complaints about Campbell Soup Co.'s comparative ads for Prego spaghetti sauce is a slow but sure drop in Ragu's market share."

The same theme was evident in many other product categories. Describing Miller Brewing's decision, once again, to abandon brand-building image campaigns in favor of more combative ones, a contributor to *Advertising Age* noted: "Miller Brewing is trying to discover its inner Pepsi as it plans to resume its anti-Bud approach to marketing in the hope of regaining sales and share momentum" (Mullman 2006, 3). As soup advertising turned combative again in 2008, an industry observer described the cause of a Campbell's attack on Progresso: "General Mills' Progresso Light soups were a big hit in 2007, in part because of a Weight Watchers endorsement that gave the line a zero-point rating (that's good). . . . Now, at the beginning of soup season, Campbell is on the attack" (Wong 2008). In 2009, Mead Johnson Nutrition was ordered by a federal court to pay $13.5 million in damages to competitor PBM Products for misleading consumers with a comparative ad campaign. Citing U.S. District Court Judge James Spencer, *Advertising Age* reported that "the outcome of the case was the result of Mead Johnson choosing to run an attack ad campaign due to waning sales" (Parekh 2009).

Discussion and Conclusions

This study's findings support an overall conclusion that the beliefs of business executives and advertising professionals regarding why they chose to avoid or confront competitors combatively often reflected both professional thought regarding message strategy and outcomes predictable from economic theory. During much of the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, professional thought in favor of avoiding competition was clearly a response to the symbiotic competition associated with expanding markets. It is also substantially consistent with the belief that effective and persuasive advertising predominantly informs.

Beliefs and practices during this period are also mostly consistent with outcomes predicted by the *informative* view. Advertising was often described as a means for constructively and cooperatively growing markets and conveying information about the attributes of products and, especially, improvements in quality. Time and again, advertisers acknowledged and even expressed satisfaction with the ease of entry available to competitors, as long as their products were not notably inferior. It seems especially striking that such beliefs remained prevalent during the Great Depression. On the other hand, the belief manufacturers could successfully combat "The Substitution Menace" by differentiating their brands and creating barriers to entry are consistent with outcomes based on the *persuasive* view. The same could be said for the frequent, and much criticized, exploitation of the emotional hard sell during the Depression.

During the past fifty to sixty years, findings reveal that those who advocated, or at least admitted to, a combative role for advertising consistently referenced zero-sum competitive situations. Advertisers also described becoming increasingly combative during periods of recession. This finding supports Yoo and Mandhachitara's (2003) conclusion that most advertisers assume they are facing a zero-sum competitive situation.

Beliefs and practices during this latter period, however, are predominantly consistent with the hard sell (with both rational and emotional appeals) and outcomes predictable from the *persuasive* view. Advertisers repeatedly described advertising as a means for differentiating products and brands, maintaining brand loyalty, and stealing sales from competitors. They also consistently advocated abandoning brand-image advertising (i.e., the soft sell) and launching combative campaigns, instead, when competition intensified. This finding is in line with those of Beard (2004, 2010), who found that advertisers frequently favor the hard sell during difficult economic times and that comparative advertising wars often break out during periods of intense competition. Indeed, the findings of this study support an overall conclusion that aggressively combative advertising is likely perceived by advertisers to be the hardest sell of all.

These broad findings and other more specific ones support some of the most recent contributions to the literature on advertising and competition. For example, advocates of cooperative and constructive campaigns during the first three decades of the twentieth century reflect the well-established view that generic advertising is especially effective early in the product life cycle. A related finding, that the majority of advertisers during the same period advocated responding to the free-rider substitution problem with noncombative advertising emphasizing mainly product quality, is consistent with the findings of a recent study of free-riding in generic advertising. As Frank Bass and his colleagues (2005, 565) conclude: "...although there is free-riding, the stronger firm is better off tolerating this free-riding because this does not affect its long-term profitability greatly." Such a finding is also consistent with the widely held belief that market leaders should rarely, if ever, attack smaller competitors (Beard 2008).

Frequent criticisms of aggressive competition and combative advertising are consistent with other recent studies. Yuxin Chen and his colleagues (2009) analyzed the effects of combative advertising on market power and concluded that it can, as predicted by the *persuasive* view, reduce price competition to benefit competing firms. However, they also concluded that if combative advertising leads to indifferent consumers, rather than partisan ones (e.g., one of the outcomes of the long-distance war of the early 1990s), it could also lead to procompetitive outcomes where both firms become collectively worse off. This outcome certainly explains why sources later in the twentieth century and during the first decade of the twenty-first century often expressed regret that they abandoned more constructive brand-building image campaigns and disappointment in the factors that led to it. It is also consistent with Beard's (2010) finding that advertising wars often produce mutually damaging consequences and that advertisers who engage in them often regret it.

Perhaps most important, another finding supports recent theoretical work on "ruinous competition" and its micro- and macroeconomic effects. Nina Shapiro (2005) argues that while perfect competition can lead to welfare benefits such as lower prices, it can also cause higher costs, lower wages, job cuts, industry consolidations, and bankruptcies. As she further argues: "It will reduce aggregate demand, as will the disruption of the industry investment, and instead of stimulating the economy, the competition of the industry could bring on a downturn, with the fall in the wage bill of the industry decreasing the sales of other industries, and the fall in their sales pressing prices down and thus reducing their wages and employment. A ruinous competition could become a 'ruinous' deflation" (543). Criticisms of combative advertising during and immediately after the Depression and beliefs in favor of constructive advertising suggest businessmen recognized a causal link between demand and profitability for individual firms at the microeconomic level and aggregate demand and employment at the macroeconomic level.

Future historical research on competition in advertising could helpfully replicate and extend this study's findings by comparing them to other primary and secondary sources, such as works written by prominent advertising professionals (e.g., Bates 1896; Calkins 1922; Cone 1969; Reeves 1961; Young 1944), biographies of relevant business leaders (e.g., Curcio 2000; Durden 2003), and industry-specific historical works (e.g., Dregni and Miller 1996; Pennock 2007; Walsh 2000). In addition, this study revealed the occasional use of combative and comparative advertising in expanding markets, but little explanation for it. Understanding how prevalent this phenomenon is would extend this study's findings in a useful direction, especially since it appears that such combative campaigns may often have particularly detrimental consequences. Finally, future research could explore at greater depth what business executives and advertising professionals hoped to accomplish with aggressive comparative advertising. This study's findings, as well as Beard's (2010), show advertisers often criticized combative advertising, while simultaneously engaging in it. When and for what purposes did they believe it would be effective? Did these beliefs change over time? Moreover, are they consistent with the findings reported in the substantial body of empirical research on comparative advertising?

Study Limitations

The findings and conclusions of this study are limited in several ways. As noted earlier, although the method is consistent with traditional historical research, it lacks the means for establishing the validity and reliability of, for instance, quantitative content analysis. This study is also limited by its sources. Advertising trade journals—including, especially, *Printers' Ink*—have proven valuable for previous important historical research (e.g., Curti 1967). However, there is no doubt a disparity between what advertisers say and what they actually do. This study revealed at least one example of such a disparity regarding the apparent frequent use of combative advertising during the Depression and the almost universal condemnation of it. In addition, sources for some periods are somewhat limited, mainly in that the statements of some advertisers were inevitably filtered by the reporters who cited them.

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