

# MAD MEN, *Mad Women*

BY JOY PARKS

Sexism in advertising has long been blamed on men in the ad business. But there have been plenty of women in the ad biz, too, including feminist pioneers.

Discussions about women and advertising have been reignited thanks to the level of unapologetic sexism portrayed in the award-winning drama *Mad Men*, a television series about a 1960s advertising agency. But who really was responsible for creating those damaging gender stereotypes in advertising?

It's easy to blame it on the mad men. The first season of the hit AMC TV series received 16 Emmy nominations and was the first basic-cable show to win the coveted award for best drama—plus, it won five others. A period piece depicting the dark side of the lives of senior executives in a New York advertising agency in 1960, *Mad Men* has inspired a retro trend in designer menswear and a fascination with Lucky Strikes and cocktails. It has also unleashed much discussion and debate—online and off—about the show's depiction of the unmitigated sexism in the 1960s workplace.





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As TV critic and blogger Aaron Barnhart characterized it, it speaks to a time when “men were men and women were their secretaries.”

While there are plenty of complex female characters on the show, the men dominate with their infidelity, overt double standards and unchecked sexual harassment. In addition, the creative team at the fictional Sterling Cooper agency spend much time debating “what women want” and how to sell it them, unleashing a level of misogyny that has pulled scabs off old wounds regarding how women have been portrayed in mainstream advertising.

Feminism—for all of these reasons, and then some—has had a long-standing feud with the advertising industry. While gallons of ink has been spilled on the subject of gender stereotypes in advertising, it was Betty Friedan who fired the first shot, placing much of the blame for women’s unhappiness on America’s post-war consumer society, and especially on advertisers’ exploitation of women.

“It is their millions which blanket the land with persuasive images, flattering the American housewife, diverting her guilt and disguising her growing emptiness. They have done this so successfully, employing the techniques and concepts of modern social science, and transposing them into those deceptively simple, clever, outrageous ads and commercials, that an observer of the American scene today accepts as fact that the great majority of American women have no ambition other than to be housewives. If they are not responsible for sending women home, they are surely responsible for keeping them there.”

But were all the ad men really men?

No, says Juliann Sivulka! In her brand new book, *Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want and Buy* (Prometheus), she reveals that the ad men behind much of the advertising feminists labelled as sexist and damaging were often women.

Sivulka takes an in-depth and quite fascinating look at the history of American advertising, from the late 19th century to just a few years ago, linking evolutions in the industry to major societal upheavals in 1880, the 1920s and the 1970s. She uncovers how and why the advertising and marketing communications industry went from a handful of women employees to one in which women far outnumber men.

The trend towards female employees was in direct relation to a new understanding of the marketplace. As women began to be viewed consumers, originally the keepers of the household money and later of their own income, ad agencies and their clients recognized the value of employing women who would, it was believed, better know what would motivate a woman to buy something and, with this insider knowledge, be able to create effective advertising.

In the early 20th century, countless women received a paycheque and a certain amount of career fulfillment through their work in ad agencies—as writers, mainly, but also as media buyers, art directors and home economists who advised manufacturers on new household devices.

One of the most influential of these women was Helen Lansdowne Resor, the daughter of a divorced single mother and the very first copywriter hired at J. Walter Thompson, an agency still regarded as an international expert in gender-related marketing. Resor developed an emotional hard-sell technique that spoke to the consumer’s needs rather than the product’s features—a revolutionary approach at that time. She wrote in a friendly, advice-driven style and made use of psychology, copy-testing and sampling—elements new to an industry still in its infancy.

Resor also built the women’s editorial department to teach other women employees how to create effective advertising for women. Through this group, the J. Walter Thompson agency developed the careers of more women than any other early agency. It hired women for the very quality they were expected to subjugate in order to succeed in most other fields—their outsider perspective as women.

The women who were part of the women’s editorial department viewed their work as a feminist activity. Outside of work, they belonged to suffragette leagues, the National Women’s party—an early feminist organization founded in 1917 that fought for the passage of a constitutional amendment ensuring women’s suffrage—and the League of Women Voters; they published articles, ran magazines and spoke on feminist issues or other related causes. While doing so, they may have led lives that were very different than the housewives they were selling to. They sincerely believed they were helping to make women’s lives easier, a belief shared by the women who joined other agencies

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modelled on J. Walter Thompson’s success and who participated in creating the advertising that later feminists would criticize so vehemently.

While the advertising industry in Canada has always been much smaller, Canadians have had their own ad women who went on to contribute to progressive causes. In 1890, journalist Kathleen Blake “Kit” Coleman, along with the editors of the *Daily Mail* and a local merchant, ran a contest to discover the best way to advertise to women. Coleman’s famous weekly newspaper column in the *Mail and Empire* featured everything from advice for the lovelorn to her observations on world affairs. She also became the country’s first woman war correspondent, reporting on the Franco-American war from Cuba in 1898.

Interestingly, when *Chatelaine* initially hired Doris Anderson in 1951, it was for a marketing position. The former Eaton’s copywriter, an ad woman who predates the *Mad Men* milieu, would eventually head Canada’s most important women’s magazine, leading its evolution from service journalism into a magazine that dealt with public affairs including birth control, abortion and other women’s equality issues.

#### ***Did they or didn’t they?***

Despite what *Mad Men* would have you believe, in the late 1950s and early 1960s several of the most powerful people in the New York advertising world were women—three of the better known being Mary Wells Lawrence, Shirley Polykoff and Jane Trahey. Wells’ agency, Wells, Rich & Greene, was responsible, in 1971, for the justifiably loathed I’m Cheryl, Fly Me ads for the now defunct National Airlines, a campaign often touted as a classic example of sexism in advertising. Polykoff, working for Foote, Cone and Belding, created the long-running Does She or Doesn’t She hair colour ads for Clairol. While they now seem dated, condescending and ageist, originally they were meant to encourage women’s self-expression.

Of the three, only Trahey demonstrated any feminist sensibility. The owner of Trahey and Co, she rose from a small Chicago in-house agency to eventually become chief of copy at Niemen Marcus in Dallas, then returned to New

York to open her own shop. In addition to award-winning ad copy, several books and plays, including the 1962 novel *The Trouble With Angels*, which became a major motion picture, she also penned *Jane Trahey on Women and Power* in 1978. While it, too, seems dated now—since competing with men is considered passé by current feminist standards—this was practical feminism, a how-to book that used humour and insider grit to help women navigate the sexism of the business world. As she wrote in the introduction: “I don’t think there’s any point in hashing over the sociological, economic, psychological reasons why women don’t have any more power in the world than they do. We’ve been told a hundred times what’s keeping us down. What we need are ways to change the situation.”

#### ***The New Women’s Market***

While it may be hard to believe, there remain legions of researchers today concerned with the still-elusive women’s market. According to Andrea Gardner, author of *The 30-Second Seduction*, the mother market alone has five behavioural groups and marketing experts Carol Osborne and Mary Brown claim there are three different kinds of women baby boomers. Women are still viewed as the primary consumer, and women baby boomers in particular are unique because they are the first generation to have their own incomes in significant numbers. Like previous generations of women, they control household spending, but also have significant personal money. According to experts, women directly or indirectly initiate or influence 80 percent of all consumer spending.

In business, money talks. Advertisers want a financial return on their investment, which means the sheer number of baby boomer women and their significant consumer clout should have the power to force changes in how marketing portrays them. But that isn’t happening.

#### ***Fewer Women Today***

With all this information on who women are, what they want and what they have to spend, one would expect advertising directed at them to be less sexist, more diverse and less youth-oriented. But the majority of it isn’t. That’s

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because—unlike the earlier part of the past century, when agencies recognized the usefulness of having women craft sales messages for women—most of the decision-makers and creative people in agencies today are men in their 20s and early 30s. In fact, it's getting harder to find women in upper creative positions.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity committee in 2003 noted that women far outnumber men in agencies, at 65.8 percent of jobs. But their status recedes with rank. Women hold 76.7 of clerical positions, 58.2 percent of all professional positions and 47 percent of upper management positions. But on the creative side, where messaging decisions get made, they don't even come close to the early 1920s numbers, or even those of the 1960s *Mad Men* era. Of *Adweek's* 33 top agencies, only four have women as their senior creative director.

In November 2007, the *Globe and Mail*, in an interview with Lorraine Tao and Elspeth Lynn, founding partners of the ad agency Zig, referred to their firm as having a “fun, pop-feminist sensibility.” The women had been creative partners at other agencies and their own small Canadian shop was boasting like clients Molson, Ikea, Best Buy, Virgin Mobile and Unilever.

Notably, the duo produced a commercial for Kellogg's Special K cereal that depicted average men deriding aspects of their bodies using classic female scripts. It delivered a strong message about advertising and women's insecurities about body image.

#### ***Buying into a better future***

There have been a few ad campaigns in recent years to get it right. Dove's Real Beauty campaign, shot by legendary photographer Annie Leibovitz, featured real women with real rolls, cellulite and wrinkles. The Real Beauty campaign, created by Ogilvy & Mather, also included the YouTube ad Evolution, which used time-lapse photography to demonstrate how ordinary women are made to look perfectly fake for ads. The campaign also saw the company set up a Self-esteem Fund to support programs designed to encourage young girls to develop a healthy body image.

In 2006, the company commissioned a report in nine

countries, including Canada, asking nearly 1,500 mature women what was wrong with the advertising directed to them. According to Sharon MacLeod, brand building director for Dove, “75 percent of women over 50 report that anti-aging ads often portray unrealistic images of women over 50. Women are regularly confronted with messages that they should minimize, reduce, eliminate or defy the natural signs of aging.”

Ironically, the body-image-positive Dove ads were at the centre of a boycott by the American Family Association for their over-sexualization of women. Leave it to the radical right to turn women's words against them.

Still, Unilever received far more kudos than criticism for Dove's marketing. But will the trend continue? According to media and gender issues expert Jean Kilbourne, author of *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* and producer of the award-winning documentary *Killing Us Softly*, “It all depends on how much soap the ads sell.”

#### ***What If Women Mattered?***

What will it take to change how advertisers often portray women? One positive sign is that consumers are complaining. According to the Advertising Standards Council's 2007 annual report, depicting women in a derogatory manner was one of four prime issues cited in the 1,445 complaints the council received, a 40 percent increase compared to 2006. The self-regulating council found that 5.7 percent of the ads cited in 2007 complaints contravened the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards. Those advertisers were asked to amend or withdraw their advertisements.

Women must continue to demand more realistic, more intelligent messages, or simply refuse to buy products by advertisers who create messages that offend them. As Andrea Gardner, author of *The 30-Second Seduction*, writes: “In the end, the ones who have the power to create that shift are today's powerful female consumers, the ones who buy from companies that treasure them.” ❖

*Joy Parks made her living as an advertising copywriter for nearly 20 years.*