

From Oral Health to Perfect Smiles: Advertising and Children's Oral Health

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Like other areas of public health education, dental health advocates were strongly influenced by the advertising and entertainment industries. Conversely, advertisements for oral hygiene products reflected shifts in the public health messages promoted by dental health professionals (Marchand, 1985). Therefore, an analysis of advertisements for dental products can be used as a window into major trends in the messages about children's oral health that were transmitted to the American public since the early twentieth century.

During the Progressive Era (1890-1920), toothpaste advertisements reinforced the dental profession's claim that good oral hygiene was essential to good overall health. Poor dental hygiene was seen as the root of other diseases, and cultivation of health teeth was an integral part of this period's larger public health agenda (Tomes, 1998). One can see this integration of dental hygiene with overall health in the following advertisement: **"Nine Out of Ten Children" (1919) Ad # BH2412.**

As the advertisement argues, many physicians and dentists at this time believed that "without good teeth, perfect health is not possible." Not only did poor teeth spoil one's appearance, bad oral hygiene caused serious health ailments both in children and later in life. This advertisement also illustrates how health advice was disseminated to children at this time. Public schools were the most common vehicle for teaching children good health habits. Teachers gave lessons on personal hygiene in the classroom, and distributed health "report cards" to children, who could earn points for brushing their teeth, and other good health habits such as hand-washing before meals, drinking milk, and getting plenty of sleep (Meckel, 1990; Tomes, 1998).

The cultivation of good health habits was closely tied with American identity at this time. Public schools disseminated health advice not only to improve the well-being of children, but also to encourage immigrant children and their families to adopt American standards of personal hygiene. Americans believed that their health system was the best in the world, and that good personal hygiene was the hallmark of being a good American citizen (Hoy, 1995; Tomes, 1998). Good health, particularly oral health, was a source of national pride and a way of marking the cultural superiority of American society, as demonstrated in the following advertisement: **"American Teeth Impress our British Allies" (1918) Ad # BH2407**

The article from the British newspaper The Daily Mail observes that healthy, white teeth were "a distinctive mark of the American -- as distinctive as his uniform or his slang." In contrast to the British, "The 'Yank' is taught to take care of his teeth. He has 'tooth drill' thrice daily and visits his dentist at fixed periods, say every three or four months." As a result, "our United States cousins, besides adding to their appearance, gain in health by having good, clean teeth, and when war came very few men were turned down by the American military authorities for having decayed teeth." The advertisement does misrepresent the facts somewhat: a significant number of American men were in fact turned down for military service because of poor oral health as well as other medical problems. Indeed, a desire to improve the strength of

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the American military provided additional support for public health programs, especially for the nation's children and youth (Meckel, 1990). Nevertheless, the advertisement does illustrate how good oral health was intimately linked with American values at this time.

Of course, toothpaste manufacturers did realize that points on a health report card would not motivate every child to brush. Therefore, manufacturers designed toothpaste that tasted good and was fun to use. This strategy is demonstrated by the following advertisement: **"You Don't Have to Coax Them to Use It." (1918) Ad # BH2402**

Although the advertisement does emphasize how fun it is to brush one's teeth, the health message is still clear: Children can avoid later ills by brushing their teeth now.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the link between oral health and the health of the rest of the body gradually disappeared from public health messages disseminated to lay audiences through advertising, and was replaced by a growing emphasis on creating "perfect smiles." This focus on the appearance of the teeth rather than oral hygiene was fed by two trends: the growing popularity of motion pictures, and psychological theories about the link between physical appearance and self-esteem. Movie stars embodied high standards of physical attractiveness, and endorsed specific personal hygiene products that promised to impart beauty and glamour to the masses (Peiss, 1998). The psychologist Alfred Adler popularized the idea of the inferiority complex, the notion that those who did not appear "normal" suffered from intense feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem. Advertisements for personal hygiene products capitalized on this concept, and warned consumers that even the most minor physical imperfection could interfere with a person's success in life. This trend is illustrated by the following advertisement: **"Shall They Suffer" (1922) Ad # BH2338**

Notice that the "suffering" to which the advertisement refers is not the suffering caused by unhealthy teeth, but rather unattractive teeth. The health message has not entirely disappeared, since the advertisement does refer to gum disease and other "serious troubles" but it is clear that the emphasis is on beauty, not health.

The link between physical appearance and success became even stronger during the 1930s, as jobs became scarce, and employers preferred to hire workers who were young, healthy and fit. Advertisers used shocking headlines to grab the attention of consumers, as illustrated by the following advertisement: **"Society Girl Robbed" (1934) Ad # BH2168**

The advertisement demonstrates that no one was immune from the problem of yellow teeth: even society girls could be "robbed" of a nice smile because of slow-acting toothpaste, and cheated out of the social status that went along with a perfect smile.

During the 1940s and 1950s, this emphasis on perfect smiles continued. At the same time, advances in dental science reduced the incidence of dental hygiene problems. Before World War II, the exact cause of dental caries was not known, and it was common for even well-off Americans to lose many of their teeth by middle-age. By the late 1940s, scientists had identified the bacteria that caused tooth decay and gum disease, and demonstrated that regular dental visits and fluoridation of public water supplies could dramatically reduce the incidence of cavities and other dental hygiene problems (NIDCR and Smithsonian Institute, 1997). The reduction in oral disease led to an even greater emphasis on the appearance of the teeth and mouth, as illustrated by the following advertisement for Pepsodent toothpaste: **"She's Everybody's Babysitter . . . But Nobody's Baby" (1951) Ad # BH2376**

This advertisement is an example of direct marketing to teenagers, which became increasingly common after World War II, as advertisers capitalized on the growing spending power of the nation's "baby boomers" (Prescott, 1998). Advertisers appealed to young people's interests and fears by showing how use of their product would make their lives more fun, and more importantly, increase their popularity with peers. At the same time, medical specialties such as orthodontics, plastic surgery, and dermatology, built practices on teenagers' desire for physical perfection (Brumberg, 1997; Haiken, 1997; Prescott, 1998).

Dental health professionals did continue to promote messages of good dental hygiene, but it was advertisers' association of "perfect smiles" with personal success that made the most impression on lay audiences. Indeed, even dentists found themselves emphasizing how healthy teeth contributed to self-esteem and physical attractiveness. This strategy was double-edged: on the one hand, it helped sell regular dental check-ups and good oral hygiene to a middle-class public obsessed with physical appearance and its link with popularity and professional success. On the other hand, the emphasis on self-esteem and appearance made regular dental care appear to be a "luxury," that did not need to be covered by private or public health insurance, nor did it need to be a priority for those concerned with bettering the public health. This has had made it difficult to justify federal programs that would give access to dental care to all Americans regardless of the ability to pay. Those who wish to improve the face of the child need to take a lesson from the past, and promote the idea that oral health is not just a route to a perfect smile, but to perfect health as well.

Credits:

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