Untruth in Advertising

A Nineteenth Century Patent Medicine Trade Card Collection

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Example from the Laupus purchase but NOT a patent medicine:
Rat-poison: **Rough on Rats**
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20792

Abstract

Objective
To increase awareness about methods used to inform the public about health and drugs in 19th century America through the use of objects from the History Collections of the Laupus Health Sciences Library at East Carolina University.

Methods
The Library purchased a collection of late nineteenth century patent medicine trade cards. The cards were arranged alphabetically by the proprietary drug company name and then by drug name. They were digitized by the University's academic library, Joyner. Metadata added included drug name, company name and location, a description of the card's picture, the diseases the drug purported to cure, the other company drugs listed, and appropriate MeSH and LCSH subject headings. The trade cards also provide a view of advertising, art, and popular culture in late nineteenth century America.

Results
The trade cards are frequently viewed. Some have been used in class papers in this and other universities. Several requests have been received to use them in publications.

Conclusions
The trade cards are visually striking; students who have seen a few of the actual cards want to see more. They illustrate the importance of truth in advertising. The Library will continue to collect in this and related areas (e.g. ink blotter advertisements) and has already received a donation from someone who saw the collection online.

Drug Manufacturing Companies in the Late 19th Century

Some manufacturers increasingly used trade cards to advertise their products to physicians

- "Ethical" pharmaceuticals (later called "brand name")
- Became known for scientific research and quality control
- Burroughs Wellcome in U.K. (now GlaxoSmithKline)
- Parke-Davis in U.S. (now Pfizer)

Other manufacturers often advertised with huge (often newspaper) campaigns

- Manufactured only "patent medicines" but very few actually patented
- "Proprietary" more accurate description (now "over the counter")
- Often promoted as "cure-alls" for many parts of the body
- Ingredients listed (if any) often inaccurate

Scovill's Sarsaparilla (undated)
Cure-all
Early dynamic design: unfolded shows sad women, folded shows happy women
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20769

Merchant's Gargling Oil: A liniment for man & beast (undated)
"Yellow for Animal and White for Human Flesh" - cure-all for both
Ad for new shoe store on back
Appears to have been pasted somewhere – probably in an album
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20783

Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills (2 cards)
Comstock's Dead Shot Pellets for Worms
3 cards (all undated), 2 drugs, 2 pictures
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20703
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20648

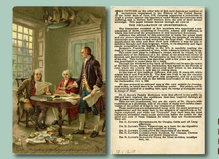
Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906

- Attempts to pass the law began in the 19th century
- Limited to medicines crossing state lines (interstate commerce)
- Required label list 10 ingredients such as alcohol, morphine, opium, cocaine, heroin, and chloroform
- 1912 amendment required labels accurately state diseases treated
- Publicity before and after the law and its amendment (including by the "muckrakers") plus later federal laws ended manufacturing of most patent medicines with their inaccurate ingredient lists and therapeutic claims

Trade Cards

- Sort of like today's baseball cards
- 19th – early 20th centuries
- "Trade" in the sense of commerce
- May be full color, part color, or black and white
- Used by many types of businesses as advertising
- Free; often displayed on business counters
- Ephemera
- Many discarded
- Some put in albums

Cutavaco, Dr. Abbey's Great Specific for Skin Diseases (1884)
Besides treating skin disease, it's a cure-all
Selling 1 book: "The Sexual System and Its Derangements" by Dr. E. C. Abbey
Toll gate puzzles – back has list of hidden pictures
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20771



Dr. D. Jayne's Family Medicines (1909)
List of medicines from the same company
Historical: Drafting of the Declaration of Independence
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20805

Patent Medicine Trade Cards (PMTC)

Distributed by druggists, general stores, etc.

Pictures:
- Pretty women, children, animals
- Everyday life, landscapes, exotic locations
- Usually rectangular but some cut in shapes, e.g. flowers

Text:
- Back may be blank
- Lists of other drugs by the same company
- Some stamped with name of local druggist & sometimes also address
- Ad for a store other than a druggist

Merchant's Oil (undated)
Cure-all
Magenta color registration is off
Exotic location: desert with palm trees
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20996

Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound (undated)
"[C]ure for all those painful complaints and weaknesses so common in our best female population."
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20853

Laupus Library Collection of PMTC

- Local distributors stamped on back from: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New York, Minnesota, Tennessee
- Mostly rectangular and from circa 2 x 3.5 inches to 5.5 x 6.5 inches
- We arranged them alphabetically by company & then by drug name
- Early digitization project as visually appealing and expected would be used

Boschee's German Syrup and Green's August Flower (1883)
Two products on a double card
1883 calendar
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20904

Vaseline (undated)
Still produced today
List of Vaseline products
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20766

Mitchell's Rheumatic Plasters (undated)
Modern technology: telephone
Blank back
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20693

Burdock Blood Bitters (undated)
Testimonials
Cure-all
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/20878

Bibliography

Crellin, John K. *A Social History of Medicines in the Twentieth Century: To Be Taken Three Times a Day*. New York: Pharmaceutical Products Press, 2004.

Kremers and Urdang's History of Pharmacy. 4th ed. Madison, Wisconsin: American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, 1986.

Patent Medicine Trade Cards at Laupus Library, East Carolina University
https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/search.aspx?q=collection:Patent%20Medicine%20Trade%20Cards

Credits

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