

In a guest column in the April 14, 2008, issue of *Advertising Age*, Glenn Sacks and Richard Smaglick, men's rights advocates and founders of FathersandHusbands.org, wrote that men are routinely demeaned and ridiculed by the advertising industry. This male bashing, they argued, has prompted negative responses from a variety of public persons, including TV host Bill Maher, syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker and CBS News anchor Charles Osgood. Sacks and Smaglick wrote, "In a TV culture like ours, the fact that the only fathers one can see on TV are buffoonish (at best) does influence young people's perceptions of fathers" (2008). The authors go on to contend that commercials of the '60s were "of superb quality, seldom if ever resorting to the contempt, shame and aggressive ridicule of today's ads."

In this paper I explore Sacks and Smaglick's contention that the product of mad men of previous generations was nicer to husbands and fathers. I viewed and reviewed commercials of the '50s, '60s and '70s using three widely available video collections of vintage commercials¹ to see if the portrayal of husbands and fathers did indeed change and, if so, how. I hoped that by viewing spots from the first three decades of the TV age I might uncover the Darwinian "evolution" of fatherhood in television commercials. I comment on commercials I viewed as representative of important stages in the evolutionary process.

My interest in this topic is rooted in media literacy and media effects and inspired by Bartsch who observed that "continuous studies need to be done to examine trends in gender representation because these trends are one measure of how society views women and men" (2000). But beyond that I believe as Kaufman does that "how men are portrayed in commercials may have a profound impact

¹ "TV Commercials, the Ultimate Collection, Unforgettable Classics," St. Clair Entertainment Group, 2008; "Classic Commercials: The Early Years," Madacy Entertainment Group, Inc., 2002; "Classic TV Commercials," CATCOM Home Video, 2003.

on the way people think about gender roles and their view of themselves and others” (1999).

Furthermore, as Kang has noted, “the visual imagery provided by the media can have a powerful impact on our attitudes, values, beliefs and behavior” (1997). While examining the commercials, I reflected on the research of Kolbe and Albanese, who analyzed photographic images of men in male – audience magazines and considered both the functional and symbolic contributions of the men in the ads (1996), that is, they analyzed what the men were actually doing and what their presence or actions signified. I attempted to do the same as I viewed the television commercials from the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s with the intention of conducting further study in the future.

In analyzing and evaluating commercials from past eras, it is best to remember that advertising must be considered in light of cultural expectations (Kang 1997), and, of course, cultural expectations are not static. I viewed more than 600 commercials of widely varying quality, promoting all manner of products and have concluded that the treatment of men in general, and fathers and husbands in particular, was indeed kinder and gentler during the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s. Yes, husbands and fathers were often clumsy buffoons needing to be cleaned up by their tirelessly doting wives, but they were also often portrayed as totems, venerated symbols of manly prerogatives, or arbiters of all manner of family matters, which was in keeping with the social conventions and cultural expectations of the time.

In the earliest commercials, those from the ‘50s, I kept in mind that early television was often just radio with pictures, and so the ads were uniformly under-produced and talky (at least as compared to contemporary ads). Men, generally, were often used as pitchmen (either on camera or in voice over) – to sell automotives and other major-purchase products, excluding household appliances – but interactions between male characters and their wives or children were rare. Husbands and

fathers were frequently referred to in the spots but not always seen. Notable exceptions were men who were acting as extensions of their television program personas, among them, Desi Arnaz of *I Love Lucy* and Ozzie Nelson of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball, his wife and co-star, hawked Philip Morris cigarettes, the sponsor of the show. Capitalizing on their roles as young marrieds, even though in real life they’d been married for some time, Desi and Lucy were shown lighting up, drawing deeply on their cigarettes and then releasing puffs of smoke that drifted up into the rafters. Mmmmm. Smoking as a romantic ritual between husband and wife.

Ozzie Nelson, half of another popular television couple and, arguably, an early example of the clueless American Dads who have so agitated Sacks and Smaglick, was a pitchman for Kodak. In the spot reviewed for this study, Ozzie appeared alone on camera; family members appeared in photographs, appropriately enough. Set in Ozzie’s den, the commercial was a true reflection of the Nelsons’ scrubbed suburban domesticity. Eisenhower’s America.

These celebrity pitches contrasted sharply, both in style and substance, with a peculiar Sunbeam bread commercial from the same era that featured a doughy dad alternately making sandwiches with three slices of bread and playing in the sand with his daughter. A stray beach ball smacks dad in the snoot but he’s all better after stuffing his face with delectable Sunbeam bread. Viewed through a contemporary prism, the actor in the commercial might represent an early version of the kind of buffoonish characters to which Sacks and Smaglick object so strenuously. However, to this observer, this character was identical in mode and manner to the clownish figures in comic film shorts of the ‘30s and ‘40s that starred The Three Stooges and vaudevillian holdovers like Ed Wynn, harmless fools with wide appeal, particularly among men.

An animated commercial from the '50s for Carling Black Label beer ~ one that I suspect was originally produced for radio ~ is an extended jingle that features a working stiff coming home from the office and reclining in his hammock while his wife does yard chores and schleps beer out to him. In this ad, hubby is a totem, a venerated symbol of the American male, his pipe and mellow baritone lending him a Bing Crosby-esque air. The wife is young and perky and attentive, keeping his favorite brand of beer on ice. This is textbook product promotion. As Kang observed, “(Ads) ... naturalize people and things in such a way as to maximize demand by defining social relations in terms of the consumption of goods and services” (1997). For the most part, this spot adhered to the social conventions and cultural expectations of the day in its assignment of gender roles, that is, the wife is subordinate to her husband. But I found curious the section of the commercial that depicted the “little woman” cutting grass, trimming hedges and fixing a broken window. Without the visual elements ~ that is, if the commercial were heard on the radio ~ the listener would undoubtedly assume the chores were being done by the husband and that his “reward” was a cold beer. In the animated commercial, however, the wife is a dynamo who does everything around the house while also catering to her husband. A twist clearly played for humorous effect.

A late-50s Chevrolet celebrity commercial featured a husband and father taking the back seat to his wife, literally. In this ad, Dad, Mom and Junior are walking to the car with their shopping. Mom, played by the then well-known television actress Polly Bergen, is carrying a single bag of groceries (woman’s work) and Dad is toting pruning shears (man’s work).² Junior stops to goof around in the window of an auto dealer, watching another family as they check out the '59 Chevrolet

² Coltrane found that during this period, only 52 percent of Americans reported that husbands and wives should share household tasks according to individual interests and abilities (rather than according to “men’s work” and “women’s work” but that percentage jumped to 89 by 1978 and rose to 94 percent by 1996 This cultural expectation would be reflected in television commercials.

Station Wagon. Dad comes back to collect Junior, sees the car, and calls over Mom, who’s having trouble shutting the door of their old clunker. She watches as the door of the new ’59 Chevy closes solidly, and she is sold. Bergen, who had been appearing on television since its earliest days, was front and center in this ad, supplanting the male character as the decision-maker in a narrative that was clearly written for her or another famous female personality. The final scene in the ad shows Mom in the driver’s seat, the salesman in the passenger seat, and Dad and Junior in the back. I found this an odd array and I suspect because it did not conform to the social conventions or the cultural expectations of the day that it was surprising, though perhaps not startling, to viewers of the late ’50s, as well. I would argue that in this instance celebrity trumped gender.

The commercials of the ’60s viewed for this study depicted the changing social conventions that were suggested, albeit unintentionally, in the ’59 Chevy commercial just discussed. Women were not always subordinate to men during this decade, though they often were. In their study of print advertisements in the ’60s, Belkaoui and Belkaoui found gender roles to be conventional and well-defined, that is, women taking care of their homes and their personal appearance with predominately household and beauty-related buying decisions and husbands and fathers making decisions about the big stuff (1976). My viewing supported their findings. Products were still promoted by television stars, among them, Andy Griffith (one of the most enduring father figures as Sheriff Andy Taylor) pitching Post Toasties. Edgar Buchanan as Uncle Joe, Bea Benadaret as his sister Kate and Jeannine Riley as niece Billie Jo of *Petticoat Junction* reveled in the skin-softening properties of Ivory Liquid dish detergent and joked about husbands doing dishes. *As if*. Often these commercial narratives for household and personal care products featured the wife or mother framing the purchase decision in the terms of what would please or displease the husband or father. Most

notoriously, perhaps, was the Folgers coffee series that featured desperate housewives being berated by their loutish husbands over the wife’s undrinkable brew. I’ve contended that the series, which often included the wise counsel of Mrs. Olsen or some other Nordic sage, were actually intended to be viewed as campy parodies of the “domestic bliss” television programs that were popular during the late ‘50s and ‘60s. Still, contemporary critics would likely argue that the boorish men in these ads skewed viewers’ perception of spousal relations, placing the pleasure of the husband / father above the feelings of the wife / mother.

In a similar commercial from the same period, a mother confesses to her daughter that the mother's unmanageable hair renders her unworthy to accompany husband / father out that evening. The wise daughter, understanding inherently the wifely imperative to always look your best, recommends Lustre-Crème cream shampoo. After using the magic goop, the mother’s hair is, predictably, *lustrous* and she receives the well-earned affirmation from her husband, albeit backhandedly: “New hairdresser, dear?” (What’s he saying here? “You usually look like hell. What’s new?”) The husbands / fathers in the Lustre-Crème ads were not nearly as unpleasant as the dolts in the Folgers commercials, to be sure. The Lustre-Crème men were arbiters of family matters while the Folgers men were the coffee Gestapo. Still, in the end, shampoo saved the evening and, by implication, the marriage.

In an odd reflection of shifting cultural expectations, a tire manufacturer made a pitch to women but centered the purchase decision on the *absence of men*. The commercial’s slogan, “When there’s no man around, Goodyear should be,” accompanied a narrative that presented a lone woman in a disabled vehicle on a dark, rain-slicked road. She was at a loss for what to do with the flat and looked about helplessly as a car pulled up threateningly. Cleverly, the commercial acknowledged

that the working girls of the '60s, the decade of Steinem and Friedan, would be out on their own but reminded them that they were not men and were actually endangering themselves by not taking the precautions needed to compensate for their lack of testes. An over-reach? Perhaps. But it was an effective appeal that was not isolated to the '60s. (Remember the Michelin ad series featuring the baby? ~ *Because there's so much riding on your tires.*)

Of course, during the '60s, lone men were portrayed much more frequently in ads, suggesting that this was a more natural condition for men than women. Arguably, the most iconic male figure from this period was the Marlboro Man. "Come to where the flavor is" ~ and the women aren't ~ "Come to Marlboro Country." Though other cigarette brands would frame smoking as a kind of romantic ritual, *ala* Desi and Lucy, smoking a Marlboro was a singular experience for the single man. Smoking as onanism.

The commercials of the '70s viewed for this study were less rooted in social conventions and traditional cultural expectations than those of the previous two decades, even though most ads for household and beauty-related products were still pitched to and by women and those for high-ticket items were pitched to and by men ~ as is generally the practice to this day. With increasing regularity, husbands and fathers were incorporated into commercial narratives featuring families, occasionally as foils for impatient spouses or children. (Perhaps this was payback for all of that coffee bashing in those Folgers commercials.) But men were also beginning to pitch products they hadn't in the past.

"Messy male" commercials for laundry detergents, paper towels and soap were quite common during this decade. In TV land, wives and moms were constantly cleaning up spills left by husbands

and children. In the "wash your hands, Roger" commercial for Lava soap, a freckled-face lad comes home from playing baseball, hands grimy. Mom, Granny and Sis all pester him with the refrain "wash your hands, Roger." When Roger's done, he comes to the table for inspection. Dad, a prototypical HRG [horned-rimmed glasses] guy, gives the kid's hands the once over and declares them the cleanest they've ever been. This is the old familiar Dad as arbiter over all manner of family matters, even though, as we're told in the voice over, Roger's spotlessness is because of Mom's wise product purchase. Perhaps as a result of changing cultural expectations, another Lava spot featured Dad being scolded by Mom for having dirty hands, even after he's gotten on the kids for being poorly scrubbed. All manner of fathers were living in TV land.

Procter & Gamble's "one cavity" campaign of the '70s was representative of a significant change in the portrayal of fathers. In this series, Dads at work were interrupted by their eager offspring with news that that day's dental checkup had revealed just one cavity. After a moment of celebration, Dad tells those around how the stellar checkup was achieved ~ "we brush with Crest." This series suggests that TV Dads had evolved (morphed?) into characters that displayed qualities traditionally found in TV Moms ~ household-product wisdom ~ while retaining fathers' traditional arbitrator qualities. Few of the commercials from the '70s I viewed promoted father's old school manly prerogatives. Dads were beginning to show their feminine sides.

In 2007, Glenn Sacks quoted a mother of two boys in a guest column in *Adweek*: "What kind of world are we creating for our boys when all they see on TV are irresponsible, immature men incapable of being good husbands and good fathers?" Even though the context of the mother's remarks is not clear, perhaps intentionally, and hyperbole seems so often to be the province of the disgruntled and outraged, perception is reality. Sacks and Smaglick have tapped a nerve with the

criticism of the advertising industry's handling of male characters, particularly husbands and fathers, in recent years. I don't agree that good husbands and fathers must always be wise and decisive, mature and responsible. I would wager that commercial narratives that include husbands and fathers dealing with their wives and children with unwavering decisiveness and maturity might be as distasteful and off-putting as a badly brewed cup of coffee.

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