Advertising Through the Ages:
The Evolution of Print Advertising from the 19th- to the 21st Century

**Grades:** 4-8  
**Subjects:** American History, Oregon History, Economics, Social Studies  
**Suggested Time Allotment:** 1-2 Class Periods

**Overview:**

Students will utilize the [Historic Oregon Newspapers](#) website to study print advertisements from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Contemporary advertisements from current newspapers will also be examined in order to compare and contrast the development of advertising styles, content, and strategy across history. Through this activity, students will be made more aware of advertising methods and critical thinking skills will be fostered.

Prior to this lesson, students should be given the homework assignment of finding and bringing in to the next class an advertisement from a recent newspaper or magazine that they find appealing. Begin class with a “show and tell” of these student-selected ads. Discussion should center on why the students believe the ads are effective: What drew you to this particular ad? What strategies have the advertising professionals who made the ad used to capture your attention and convince you to buy the product? How accurately does it represent the product it was intended to sell? How much does this matter?

*Next, provide your students with some historical background on advertising:*

Far from being a “modern” development, advertising has been an important part of the American economy from its earliest days. Newspaper and magazine publishers have long used the sale of advertising space in their pages in order to help make their ventures profitable. Businesses that make products and professionals who provide services to the community have always relied on some form of advertising to attract customers, and consumers have used ads to help them decide how to spend their money.

The class will then be tasked with exploring past issues of periodical publications on [Historic Oregon Newspapers](#) in order to study their advertising content. You may choose to have the entire class look in their local or regional newspaper, or individual students may be assigned different papers from throughout the state. Instruct the class that they will need to examine issues of the paper from two different eras: 1870 and 1920. The aim will be to compare the ways that print advertising style and strategy remained unchanged over this fifty-year period, and also to contrast the ways that ads evolved and changed between 1870 and 1920.
This research can be guided by the following activity sheet / questionnaire:

For both 1870 and 1920, locate an ad for each of the following products or services:

a) A mode of transportation
b) An article of clothing
c) A type of medicine
d) An household appliance or tool
e) The services of a professional (Doctor, Lawyer, Accountant, Tailor, Mechanic, etc.)
f) A form of public entertainment (theater, musical performance, sporting event, etc.)

Compare and contrast each pair of ads in order to answer the following questions:

1. Between 1870 and 1920, does the size of the printed advertisements change?
2. Between 1870 and 1920, do the ads use more or less numbers of words to convey their messages?
3. Between 1870 and 1920, do the ads feature fewer or more pictures of the products advertised? What types of images are used in the ads?
4. Between 1870 and 1920, what changes can you see in the advertised products themselves? What factors do you believe brought about these changes?
5. What are some things that the ads can teach us about how people lived in the years 1870 and 1920?

Reserve time at the end of the class period for share-back and discussion of your students’ discoveries. Students may be asked to share with the class any particularly surprising or unusual ads they found, and each of the questions on the questionnaire can be addressed in discussion by the group.

As a follow-up / homework assignment, tell students to locate a recent issue of the local paper or The Oregonian. They should use this journal to identify contemporary examples of each of the six types of advertisements from the questionnaire above (transportation, clothing, medicine, etc.), then answer the same five “compare and contrast” questions to help identify how advertising has continued to evolve between 1920 and the present day.

When this homework assignment is completed, hold a wrap-up discussion in class. Ask questions such as:

Were you surprised by the nature and quality of ads from yesteryear? How do they look to our modern eyes? How do you think they looked to people living back then? What are the major ways that current advertisements have changed from those of the past? How has the invention of modern communications technologies such as radio, television and the Internet changed advertising? What are the differ-
ences between a “good” and a “bad” advertisement? Can you think of any “sneaky” ways that products get advertised without most people even realizing it? How do you think advertising affects your life?