

## "HONEST ADVERTISING WON'T SELL GOODS."\*

BY LYMAN F. KEBLER, M.D.

As a sort of a hold-over of a once active Vigilance Committee<sup>1</sup> of the Retail Merchants' Association of Washington, D. C., and as an exponent of "Truth in Advertising," I have been assisting several of the local newspapers in keeping certain unfair advertising out of their columns. No definite plan of procedure was followed, excepting the general principle adopted by a medical sub-committee of the above Vigilance Committee, that no exceptions would be taken to a clean, honest advertisement of an honest product, provided the article was of such a character as not to bring injury to the public, either directly or indirectly. The reasons for this position are obvious. The sub-committee believed unfair methods were unnecessary to sell honest goods; that dishonest goods could not make their way by honest advertising, and that it was against public policy to aid in promoting an unclean or injurious article. In one case the management invited criticism of any unfair advertising, or the advertising of products that might bring injury to the public. In the second instance advance copies for insertion were submitted for review.

Fifteen years ago, with few exceptions, newspapers, magazines, periodicals and other media of publicity carried not only untruthful, but vile, salacious and even vicious advertisements. During recent years all of the high-grade periodicals, magazines and newspapers have eliminated most of the repugnant matter, but many still carry advertisements that the publishers know are unfair to the public or, by a little investigation, can easily ascertain their untruthfulness. The trend of business generally is toward fair dealing, but it must be admitted that much skepticism comes into one's mind when advised of the large sums of money accumulated by falsely advertising worthless products, or products that have a suggestion of value and thus give the promoter a talking point, or suggest some slight semblance of honesty.

As a pure fraud may be mentioned an alleged fat or weight producer, consisting of tablets containing small amounts of the several hypophosphites; a trace of lecithin, very much less than the amount contained in a single egg; a small dose of extract of nux vomica, and of sabal. This mixture was represented as a concentrated food, and the endorsement of reputable physicians and prominent food experts was claimed for it. As a matter of fact, the tablets did not possess either fat-producing or weight-making ingredients; neither were they endorsed by prominent food experts, nor reputable physicians. One of the widely advertised physicians who, it was claimed, had endorsed the product was a myth, pure and simple. The tablets were evolved by a druggist and an advertising promoter.

During the time the case was in Court, awaiting trial for about a year, the company extracted, through the use of the mails, from the unsuspecting public, approximately \$500,000. The tablets contained in the \$1.00 treatment cost less than 2½ cents. The scheme was found by jury trial to be executed in violation of the Federal Criminal Statutes and the Court fined the promoters \$30,000.

\* Read before the Section on Commercial Interests, A. Ph. A., City of Washington meeting, 1920.

<sup>1</sup> JOUR. A. PH. A., 8, 201 (1919).

Another is an Eye Water Scheme consisting of a watery solution of 2.5 per cent each of salt and sugar. By the dropping of this mixture into the eyes of the afflicted, it was claimed that remarkable cures of divers and serious diseases were effected. Among the ailments advertised as being cured by this means were asthma, bladder troubles, blindness, catarrh, cataract, deafness, dropsy, eczema, a bullet wound in the thigh, epilepsy, fits, goiter, hay fever, heart trouble, kidney trouble, neuralgia, nervous prostration, sore eyes, syphilis, rupture, tumors, etc. It was established in Court that one advertising firm was paid \$175,000 in a single year for the advertising of this alleged marvelous cure.

An attractive income, until very recently, was also secured by falsely and fraudulently representing to cure cancer, Bright's disease, consumption, diphtheria, and a host of other ailments, by means of a 0.2 percent watery solution of sulphur dioxide.

These are only a few of the hundreds that have received consideration and there are still scores of alleged cures for tuberculosis, cancer, venereal diseases, Bright's disease, etc., advertised through the press.

It might be interesting to relate the events that led to the statement "Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods." One of the papers mentioned above referred some of the advance copies of advertising for criticism. Attention was called to some of the unfair features. The agency endeavoring to place the advertisements was very much incensed, and took the critic rather severely to task, bolstering up his case by substituting copies of correspondence used to successfully cow a prominent New York paper. A reply was made to this attack, calling attention to the fallacies of certain arguments presented. One contention was that medical men were prejudiced and not qualified to review medical advertisements, because they do not properly comprehend the advertising side of the business. In due time a representative of the firm made a visit to Washington to see the critic. The agent admitted at the outset that the criticism made in conjunction with the advertising matter submitted formerly was justified, but that he desired to submit another series of advertisements which were above reproach. A brief review of the revised matter showed that it contained similar misrepresentations, a little more cunningly adjusted. After reviewing most of the advertisements, attention was called to certain unfair features and at this juncture the advertising agent responded, "Doctor, Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods." He was immediately informed that if he came with any such preconceived notions, we had nothing in common, because I was convinced that it did not require untruthful advertising to sell honest merchandise, and, furthermore, it was a tacit admission that the article he was attempting to advertise had little merit.

My position brings me in contact with so much untruthful advertising that separates the public from its money, that I sometimes wonder whether the statement, "Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods," is simply a blunt form of the old slogan "Business is Business." In order to secure the ideas of others a letter was addressed to the Secretary of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World, with the request that the views of those qualified to speak on this subject be obtained. A goodly number of responses was received. Space forbids giving the replies in full, but the following extracts do not leave any doubt in the matter.

"Argument that 'HONEST ADVERTISING WON'T SELL GOODS' is simply the argument of a charlatan and one who is trying to put over a product that is as false as his advertisement.

"It may be true that dishonest advertising will create a demand for a product temporarily, the same as you can sell a beautiful package of sawdust marked 'breakfast food' once; the repeat business, however, will not amount to anything."

COLUMBIA GRAPHOPHONE COMPANY,

G. W. HOPKINS, *General Sales Manager.*

"The advertising agency man who said 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods' is sadly in error."

H. J. KENNER, *Secretary,*

National Vigilance Committee, Associated Advertising Clubs.

"I have been requested to express an opinion to you on the subject, 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods.'

"I would like to get a good look at the advertising man who made such a statement as that, and I would like to know something about his past history. I would then like to put him out of his misery and have him mounted for exhibition purposes in the Smithsonian Institution.

"I would like to have him discuss with the newspapers of this city, who have given considerable attention to the matter of honesty in advertising, and ask them to show him the list of notoriously dishonest advertisers who have gone out of business in Detroit in the past ten years simply because the public refused to believe anything they said in the paper.

"As a matter of fact, such a statement as that, 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods,' is so utterly asinine that it should not be given serious consideration."

H. C. DART, *Advertising Manager,*

Paige Detroit Motor Car Company.

"It is most surprising that a man in the advertising business, particularly if he be in any way conscientious, should be guilty of making the statement, 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods.' If this is his honest judgment, however, certainly it should be corrected.

"When we wish to symbolize all hazard in trade, we refer to horse trading, an exchange honeycombed with suspicion and duplicity. And to-day practically all states have specific laws giving relief to the victimized purchaser of a horse. Many people speak disparagingly of Patent medicines, and public sentiment, long credulous to the dishonest advertising of *some* proprietaries, largely condemns all such remedies as a class. If evidence were wanted as to the moral danger of dishonest advertising, the history of proprietaries advertised to the public would provide striking facts."

NOBLE T. PRAIGG, *Advisory Counsel,*

United Typothetae of America.

"Mr. H. J. Kenner tells me that some alleged advertising man has made the statement to you that 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods.' Of course you cannot take a crooked plan or a near-great product and put it over in truth, but certainly the service or merchandise that confesses that it must go into partnership with falsehood in order to succeed is better deposited among the failures from everybody's viewpoint.

"The man who made the statement to you is not entitled to serious consideration."

THE NEW ORLEANS ITEM,

A. G. NEWMAYER.

"'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods.' It is incredible to me that in this day and age any competent advertising man could make such a remark.

"If it were true that honest advertising would not sell goods, I think I know myself well enough to say that I should not be in the business, nor would most of the advertising men whom I know."

GRAFTON H. PERKINS, *Advertising Director,*

William R. Warner & Company, Manufacturing Pharmacutists.

"If you are referring to the building up of a permanent business whose foundation rests upon the good will of the public, then there can be but one answer to this question—honesty.

"If our leaders of business and industry are to continue to put vast sums of money each year into advertising, then they have the right to demand from newspaper and magazine publishers that the confidence of the public in advertising be conserved. Unless that is done, neither honest nor dishonest advertising will pay."

A. B. KIRSCHBAUM CO.,

DAVID KIRSCHBAUM, Philadelphia.

"With me it's a conviction that honest advertising is the only kind of advertising that will continuously and successfully sell goods. It is possible that the 'quack medicine' field is an exception to this, as dishonest advertising would probably best fit it with dishonest goods. And personally,—and I know of very many advertising men that will agree with me,—it is my belief that under-statement rather than over-statement is most effective in advertising."

L. B. JONES, *Advertising Manager*,  
Eastman Kodak Company.

"Honest advertising is the only kind that will sell goods more than once. It is perfectly true and probably he has experienced the result of selling goods by misleading advertising, but once a customer is misled, he not only is disappointed, but distrusts all advertising.

"The boy who cried 'Wolf' was able at first to get assistance, but after he had deceived his protector several times, the third time he was destroyed by the wolf, and that is true of misleading advertising—it will eventually destroy the advertiser."

ROWE STEWART, *Vice-President*,  
Associated Advertising Clubs, *Philadelphia Record*.

"The advertising columns of *The New York Times* demonstrate that 'honesty is the best policy' in advertising as well as in everything else.

"Despite the complaints of advertisers that their copy is weakened by the elimination of unwarranted, sometimes misleading and often exaggerated statements, the results from the publication of the revised advertisements in the *Times* are very profitable and the advertising space is in great demand."

T. WILEY, *Business Manager*, *New York Times*.

"In every business there are some men who make statements which are radical and who, because of their prominence in the business, do irreparable harm to the industry with which they are connected.

"The advertising agency that told you that 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods' is in the class with the man who says that all religion is wrong because some minister has committed a crime or gotten into trouble.

"The truth in advertising movement has been one of the greatest forces in business and every legitimate business man who uses advertising realizes this fact.

"The day will come when all business will use advertising and this great tendency is not promised on a dishonest basis in the advertising of to-day. The man who says it is, is merely trying to ease his conscience in a way that is nothing short of a perversion of facts."

JOHN RING, *President*,  
John Ring Advertising Company, St. Louis.

"The man who contends that 'Honest Advertising Won't Sell Goods' is either a knave or a fool. This is a strong indictment, but for the life of me I cannot see how anybody engaged in business would have the nerve to make such a statement. I stand squarely on the statement that he is clean out of harmony with the trend of the times and he had better go hammering horse-shoes than try his hand at the manufacturing business, with the aid of dishonest advertising."

W. C. D'ARCY,  
D'Arcy Advertising Company, St. Louis.

The above quotations contain some severe indictments. The representative of a well-known advertising agency is characterized as a charlatan, a knave and a fool. Let it be said, however, that he may be all these and more, but the facts are that the same untruthful advertisements that provoked the title of this article are being carried in some of our apparently high-class newspapers. "Horsetrading" and "quack medicines" are stigmatized as representing the lowest strata of unfair dealing with the public. With the great changes that have been brought about during the past decade in advertising, we feel, with the poet, confident that "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again."

---