The Idea Man

by Larry Johnson

“Advertising is based on one thing—happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of the road that screams reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay.”

H all of us into the first episode of the first season of the hit television series Mad Men. After the show’s protagonist, dapper Don Draper, cures his perpetually cliquish clients by explaining to them why they hired his firm to sell their products. The show is a runaway success due to its small part in the magic-window-waving way Draper and his fellow “creative” produce advertising in early 1960s New York.

The characters are composite but Marion Harper could well have been the model for Don Draper. Harper essentially invented modern advertising. Born in Oklahoma City in 1906, he attended Classen High before graduating from Yale with a degree in psychology. In 1939 he took a job in the mailroom at the prestigious McCann-Erickson advertising firm in New York and by the age of 32 became president. Harper had a brilliant, innovative mind and he shook up Madison Avenue by applying modern psychological principles to the creation of ads.

As a junior executive in the 1940s he pioneered the use of consumer research and hired VanDeusen psychologist Hori Haring to produce experts for him (there’s a scene in the same episode where Draper dumps a report from the Telesco bra tests in his wastebasket). But after his ascension to the top spot in 1949 Harper, too, dumped scientific research and traditional into the field of semantics.

Compare Draper’s monologue to a real-life quote from Harper: “Of all businesses, this is the business of ideas. Always has been. Always must be. Ideas are what people buy. Ideas are what line the shelves of our pantries. Ideas are what we brush our teeth with, drive with, battle with, and dies in. Ideas are what we eat and when our children go to college. An idea is when you marry, where you live, what you do for a career, what people buy—the ideas are what sells us.”

Before Harper, ad told consumers what products would do for them (yours good, folks, same headache). Harper saw that as too limited and used semantics to open the ads to multiple meanings. For example, Coke’s old dog was “the pause that refreshes,” but a consumer wouldn’t buy a Coke if she didn’t need refreshing. However, by using “Things Go Better with Coke,” Harper’s firm moved Coke from selling soft drinks to selling a lifestyle—you might not need refreshing, but who wouldn’t want things to go better? For nearly 20 years Marion Harper was the king of the advertising world. Decorated at being named by his board in 1967, he lived in seclusion in Oklahoma City until his death in 1969. Nearly all of his brilliant ideas are in use today.

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