

Cynthia Meyers, University of Mount Saint Vincent. “Dramatizing a Bar of Soap: Admen as the Showmen of Radio”

During the first decades of radio, most broadcasters sought to shift the bulk of programming development and financing to advertisers. Advertisers, with little experience in show business, often turned to their advertising agencies to oversee their radio programming. Consequently, many advertising agencies suddenly found themselves in a new business. Not only did they have to adapt their print advertising strategies to an aural medium, they also had to expand into entertainment. Major advertising agencies, such as J. Walter Thompson, Barton Batten Durstine & Osborn, Benton & Bowles, and others became top radio program producers, overseeing hours of prime time entertainment.

Drawing on the NBC Records at the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well as trade press and other archival sources, I discuss why the advertising industry claimed expertise in radio “showmanship” despite little direct experience in show business. Admen insisted that their skills in advertising were transferable to entertainment: admen “are the chaps who have spent years dramatizing a bar of soap.” Advertising, according to one adman, was “a certain kind of showmanship,” though in print; radio simply offered admen a platform for extending those skills.

Having showmanship skills became paramount in the radio era as broadcasters, advertisers, and agencies competed for radio audiences. Admen’s claims they had showmanship skills were necessary for convincing advertisers that admen were better qualified than people in the theater, music, vaudeville, and broadcasting industries to oversee sponsored programming—programming that had to serve as a sales vehicle as well as entertainment. Only admen could balance the goals of both salesmanship and showmanship. As their business in producing radio programs expanded, advertising agencies recruited employees from traditional show business fields, consequently blurring the line between adman and showman. By the late 1940s, an adman/scriptwriter for *Kraft Music Hall* would claim, “National advertisers and their agents, do, today, exercise about 90 percent of the showmanship in radio.” Whether or not admen in radio practiced superior showmanship, their claims to showmanship skills were central to building and maintaining their importance in radio.

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