

'PARTIES ARE THE ANSWER': THE ASCENT OF THE TUPPERWARE PARTY

Alison J. Clarke (1999)

By 1954 the American press described Tupperware parties as "the newest selling idea to take the country by storm."¹ *Tupperware Sparks*, the corporate in-house magazine, announced, "We're 20,000 strong!" as a network of dealers, distributors, and managers (consisting predominantly of housewives between the ages of twenty-five and forty) took the Tupperware "gospel" to the nation.²

[...]

'A PICNIC GROUND FOR DIRECT SELLING': THE CONSUMPTION SPACE OF SUBURBIA

In 1953 *Fortune* featured one of numerous editorials identifying suburbia as a key new consumer market: "Anybody who wants to sell anything to Americans, from appliances to zithers, must look closely at Suburbia."³ This "big and lush and uniform" environment offered astute marketers an abundant supply of easily targeted consumers. [...]

Throughout the 1950s the suburban home became the focus for critiques and celebrations of postwar change and national identity. This culminated in 1959 with the renowned "Kitchen Debate" between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in

Moscow. A showcase for American consumer goods and technology, the exhibit featured a fully equipped model of a ranch-style suburban home, representative of the supremacy of the U.S. average standard of living. "Thirty-one million families own their own homes," asserted Nixon in his depiction of a post-war consumer republic. "America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets and 143 million radio sets. And they buy an average of nine dresses and suits and 14 pairs of shoes per family per year."⁴ Whereas Khrushchev argued that such excessive consumption was a testament to the inferior quality of American "gadgets," Nixon flaunted free enterprise, home ownership, and the abundance of goods as a means of diffusing class conflict and creating social cohesion.⁵

In this context Tupperware dealers were, the corporate culture stressed, "privileged to have their voices heard in the world's largest auditorium – the American living room."⁶ "Direct selling," they were told by the mid-1950s, "is as American as corn on the cob. We must conduct ourselves ... in such a way that we can make our own individual communities and our country proud of the direct selling industry."⁷ As archetypal postwar developments (epitomized by Levittown, Long Island, and Park Forest, south of Chicago) differed radically from older residential and urban communities, showing none of the reassuring signs of established and immutable communities, they created their own institutions and rituals, which



Figure 41. Brownie Wise, vice president and general manager of THP [Tupperware Home Parties], demonstrates the power of charismatic dealership as she throws a liquid-filled Wonder Bowl provocatively across the room at a crowded Tupperware party, ca. 1952 in Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999, p. 97. Photo: Brownie Wise Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution. Reprinted courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

were embodied in the Tupperware party – the ideal home-based networking opportunity for a newly displaced population.

THE ‘TUPPERWARE PARTY’: SOCIALITY, MODERNITY, AND MASS CONSUMPTION

By 1951 the Tupperware party had captured the direct sales market by offering its overtly fashionable, fun-filled events. Regional distributorships with titles such as Patio Parties and Vogue Plastics spread the party plan network nationwide,

upgrading this established sales scheme by reconstituting it as a radically modern, leisurely, and convivial event. The Tupperware party promoted home shopping as a time-saving, sociable, and integral part of the modern homemaker’s life: “Tupperware Parties are fun! You ‘feel at home,’ because they’re informal and you shop relaxed.”²

As a women’s event, the Tupperware version of the hostess party acted as a celebratory and consciously feminine activity. With the “Modern Way to Shop,” a woman could combine “a neighborly visit with armchair shopping” and improve her knowledge of household economy, by benefiting from novel recipes and homemaking

tips.⁹ A Get-Acquainted Set of basic Tupperware pieces initiated novices to the social relations and commodities of the Tupperware system. For more experienced party guests the introduction of new product types ensured a sustained consumer (and dealer) interest. For example, as "the latest in modern design," a set of slim-line TV Tumblers, which made their debut in 1955 under the slogan "Christian Dior isn't the only one coming out with a 'new look' these days," drew on popular references to women's fashion. Devised as "the perfect answer to beverage serving when watching your favorite TV program," the "soft-glowing" modern tumblers, which brought together the dual concerns of fashion and television culture, came equipped with Tumblemates (12-inch [30.5 centimeter] drink stirrers) and matching wagon-wheel coasters.¹⁰

Tupperware parties animated the product range using detailed description and highly tactile, even sensual, displays. Women were encouraged to touch and handle products. Party game sessions, in which miniature Tupperware trinkets were awarded for performance, broke down inhibitions and countered the passivity of the captured audience. With titles such as "Clothes Pin," "Waist Measurement" (best avoided if "expecting mothers are present," warned a corporate booklet), "Game of Gossip," and "Chatter," the games celebrated overtly feminine issues. Games such as "Elastic Relay," "Partner Balloon Burst," and "Grab Bag" required physical contact between party guests. Other games played at these sessions were vaguely subversive (and according to oral histories, immensely memorable), such as "Hubby," in which guests were asked to write hypothetical newspaper advertisements to sell their unwanted partners, and then they were told to swap ads and read them aloud to the group. One, for example, read: "One husband for sale. Balding, often cranky, stomach requiring considerable attention!"¹¹

In addition to serving as a highly rarefied sales form, the party acted as a ritual ceremony that, while focusing on Tupperware products, was filled

with social significance among maker, buyer, and user. The structure of the party plan system blurred the theoretical boundaries of several identifying categories such as domesticity and commerce, work and leisure, friend and colleague, consumer and employee. "It was developed," according to the trade journal *Specialty Salesman*, "to appeal to women who wanted to earn extra money but were too timid to use pressure or endure rebuffs in conventional selling. In party selling you never have to ring the doorbell of a dark house ... guests will be coming where the party is scheduled. Every time you have a party, you earn money."¹²

Gifts and commodities abounded as the hostess offered the intimacy of her home and the range of her social relations with other women (relatives, friends, and neighbors) to the Tupperware dealer in exchange for a nonmonetary reward. The dealer, overseen by an area distributor, used the space to set up a display of products and recruit further hostesses from among the guests, benefiting from commission accrued on sales and the potential for further party reservations.

Dorothy Dealer's Dating Diary, a full-color cartoon booklet issued to potential dealers, outlined strategies of informal salesmanship, networking and "friend finding." Women were dissuaded from adopting a corporate image and encouraged to use their own social skills to "create incentive or change excuses into a positive party date." A typical scenario read:

Potential hostess: Oh, but Janice I just can't have a party ... I'm right in the middle of redecorating.

Dealer: But wouldn't that be a wonderful chance for your friends to see your newly decorated home?¹³

Other scenarios included reluctant husbands less than keen on "allowing" their wives to act as hostesses to an event that would fill their home with neighborhood women and plastic pots. The *Dorothy Dealer* remedy to this problem revolved around a woman's rational appeal to her husband,

reassuring him that the gifts accrued by hosting a party and the savings made through Tupperware food storage far outweighed the inconvenience.

The booklet described the benefits of “prospecting” among a wide range of people and situations (for example, the single working woman, the widow, the urban apartment dweller) and suburbia formed the focus of its attentions. The “Check List for Party Dating,” asking dealers “Whom do you know?” proceeded to map out the social relations of suburbia with suggestions ranging from “Your Real Estate Agent” to “Your Neighbors, Church Members and Club Members.”¹⁴ Suburban communities were offered the Club Plan and Round Robin schemes, whereby Tupperware parties could be used to supplement the treasury funds of charitable organizations.¹⁵ Dealers were advised, “[W]atch the society page in *your* paper and contact an officer in every club in *your* community!” and they were encouraged with proclamations such as “[I]n every block of homes, in every city and every town, in this wonderful United States of America, there are parties waiting for you.”¹⁶

Although increased community activity provided the Tupperware home party plan with the ultimate arena, the social gathering of women had a historical precedent in the traditional American sewing circle and quilting bee, which appear inextricably bound to the concept of the Tupperware party. Middle-class leisured women gathered to sew together for charity, even if they had seamstresses and servants, within the afternoon sewing circles. It provided a legitimated focal point for a social activity and female companionship. Working-class women had less opportunity to sew on a casual basis but regularly joined the formalized gathering of the quilting bee, which according to historian Susan Strasser was well established in the 1820s as an important women’s social activity.¹⁷ Here women across the generations could exchange ideas, hints and methods in sewing and broader aspects of life, while their small children could be attended communally by the quilting party. A nineteenth-century contemporary

account provided by Frances Trollope describes these affairs as “quilting frolics,” noting that “they are always solemnized with much good cheer and festivity.”¹⁸

Similarly, Tupperware parties were incorporated into the time and labor of everyday domestic economy. Morning events demanded an informal approach indicative of the kaffeeklatsch culture of suburban society, during which light refreshments, “just coffee and doughnuts or sweet rolls,” were served. Tupperware parties preempted the daily habits of women as mothers and homemakers. The “second cup of coffee,” for example, taken “when the younger set is finally off to school,” made a splendid opportunity. Tupperware brochures reiterated, “to enjoy the company of your neighbors by inviting them over for a Tupperware Party.” A Tupperware party at “a bake sale, a white elephant sale, a rummage sale or bazaar” contributed to a broader aspect of community life and informal economy.¹⁹ Evening parties – more formal occasions requiring make-up and stylish attire – sanctioned all-female gatherings under the auspices of homemaking duties and offered a welcome escape from homebound activities. The Tupperware bridal shower party solved the potentially hazardous prospect of gift giving: “each guest contribut[ing] toward the Tupperware gift set,” instead of debating “what to buy? Or making costly mistakes.”²⁰ Similarly, the Tupperware housewarming party, organized by the local dealer and aimed in particular at newlyweds, offered “every new homeowner” the opportunity to enhance the household with the pastel, jewel-tone colors and modern designs of Tupperware. The significance of Tupperware, “so new in design and principle,” as an appropriate, contemporary, feminine gift pervaded corporate literature: “When it comes to gift giving ... you may be ... sure that it is something she will cherish.”²¹

In 1954 top-achieving party dealers working under distributorships such as Par-T-Wise Sales in Chicago, Partying Around in Connecticut, Party Progress in Detroit, and Poly Sales in Los

Angeles made weekly turnovers of between \$533 and \$629, with an average party attendance of twelve guests. *Tupperware Sparks* told of women grossing \$200 with their first party event and achieving multiple party profits of \$431 during one week.²² Sustaining such sales figures proved more difficult as neighborhoods became saturated with the party plan. Ideally the Tupperware party operated as a serial rather than singular occasion: as gestures of reciprocity, party guests honored their hostess's hospitality by agreeing to host their own future event, thus extending the sales network. Corporate literature revealed how women might use a round of parties to amass their collection of Tupperware: "Many people attend six or seven parties without getting all the Tupperware they need and want ... for after a while, almost everyone feels that they need a great deal more!"²³

Tupperware items, from Jell-O molds to flour sifters, expanded as well as consolidated established forms of kitchen culture. Items such as Ice-Tups – do-it-yourself Popsicle molds – proved highly successful, circumventing the need for the commercial equivalents. Although aimed at mothers catering to their children's needs and desire, these products elicit highly personal and intimate memories for many women: "I'd make up the strongest daiquiri mix, you know, and freeze them up in my Tupperware and get through the whole lot of them doing my chores; oh yes, I used to stand there pressing a shirt, happily sucking on one of my Tupperware ices!"²⁴

The dealer's practical demonstrations, some of which amounted to performances fusing entertainment and information, introduced unfamiliar products and reiterated the value of tried and tested favorites. Charismatic demonstration was an imperative. "We can turn a casual desire," advised the corporate literature, "into actual need by making a sale on an active visual demonstration. By demonstrating effectively we actually CREATE the need."²⁵

The "Tupperware burp" (the technique of pushing the center of the seal to fully engage the lip with the edge of the bowl, creating an airtight

seal) formed the focal point of all demonstrations. "I put my finger here – we call this Tupperware's magic button – press down and just 'wink' the edge of the seal. Hear that?" the dealer would ask rhetorically.²⁶ Elaborations included bounding a sealed Wonder Bowl full of liquid across a nervous hostess's living room or standing one-legged on an upturned canister to reveal its outstanding durability. As well as emphasizing the airtight qualities of the product, features such as the Tupperware burp justified the mode of sales. "We have chosen to sell Tupperware on the popular Home Party Plan," read a party brochure, "because we know that you will derive greater benefits from its use after you have seen its varied and distinctive features demonstrated and explained."²⁷ Tupperware required a currency of vocabulary to maintain its consumer vogue: party initiators showed their familiarity with the product range by deciphering an often obscure product language: Scrub-E-Z, Serve-n-Save, Hang-It-All, Fly-Bye-Swat, Square Round.

Although demonstrations and brochures suggested conventional product use, internal corporate literature aimed at dealers also acknowledged consumer appropriations and re-interpretations of the Tupperware design. Dealers used anecdotes gathered from women at parties to espouse the product's tried and tested versatility. A typical testament read, "This canister is one of the most useful storage items ever designed ... my next door neighbor uses it for her crochet thread ... and pulls the end of the thread out through the small opening[;] then her thread never gets soiled ... and it doesn't get tangled up."²⁸

[...]

NOTES

Extracted from Clarke, A. J., *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999, pp. 101–12. Reprinted by permission of Smithsonian Books.

1. William G. Samroth, "How to Find, Hire, Train, Keep the All-Women Direct Sales Force," *Sales Management*, 1 May 1954.
2. "We're 20,000 Strong!" *Tupperware Sparks* 3, nos. 21–22 (October–November 1954), front cover.
3. "The Lush New Suburban Market," *Fortune*, November 1953, 129.
4. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 163.
5. Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, upon visiting the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 (which featured a model home and numerous household appliances), entered into a lengthy debate focusing on access to mass consumer goods as an indicator of true democracy. See "Nixon in Moscow: Appliances, Affluence and Americanism," in Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996, and "The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home," in Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*.
6. *Tupperware Sparks* 2, no. 3 (March 1952): 1.
7. Brownie Wise, "Welcome," rough draft of speech given at the 1955 Homecoming Jubilee, Orlando Fla., NMAH [Archives Center of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.] 509, series 2.
8. *Tupperware: The Nicest Thing That Could Happen to Your Kitchen*, product catalog (Orlando, Fla.: THP [Tupperware Home Parties], ca. 1958), 1.
9. *Tupperware – A Household Word in Homes Everywhere!*, product catalog (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1957), 3.
10. *Tupperware Sparks* 4, nos. 3–4 (March–April 1955): 4.
11. *Tupperware Party Games* (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1956).
12. *Speciality Salesman*, March 1960, 7.
13. *Dorothy Dealer's Dating Diary* (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1959).
14. "Check List: Whom Do You Know?," ca. 1951, NMAH 509, series 2.
15. The "Tupperware Club Plan" (all members present) and "Round Robin" (parties conducted individually with group members) used demonstrations as the focal point of charitable meetings and gave the dealer access to a high percentage of potential party recruits.
16. Gary McDonald, *A Timely Reminder*, THP pamphlet, 11 June 1952, and "Prospecting and Previewing," transcription from 1953 second managerial convention, NMAH 509, series 2.
17. Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 133.
18. Donald Smalley and Frances Trollope, eds., *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Vintage, 1960), 281–82.
19. *Tupperware – A Household Word*, 24.
20. *Ibid.*, 23.
21. *Know-How* (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1955), 44.
22. *Tupperware Sparks* 3, nos. 12–13 (January–February 1954): 6.
23. *Will You Be My Gold Key Hostess?* (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1955), 1.
24. Anonymous "mall-walker," one of a group of retirees interviewed by the author, 18 November 1989, in a shopping mall in Osceola, Fla., that local walkers frequent for their early morning exercise.
25. *Tupperware Sparks* 2, nos. 6–7 (June–July 1952): 3.
26. *Market Basket Demonstration*, brochure (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1956), 2.
27. *The Tupperware Story – A Story of Opportunity* (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1956), 4.
28. *Dealer Guide to Demonstration* (Orlando, Fla.: THP, 1951), 8.

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE MARKETED: AMERICAN CORPORATIONS AND BLACK CONSUMERS DURING THE 1960s

Robert E. Weems, Jr. (1994)

The Black Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s captured the attention of millions. Yet, the African-American experience during this period include more than boycotts, "sit-ins," "freedom rides," and massive protest marches. With the wartime and postwar migration from the South, African-Americans were transformed from a predominately rural people into a predominately urban people by 1960. As African-Americans streamed into American cities, or what American corporations call "major markets," U.S. businesses sought to influence the consumption patterns of these increasingly important black consumers. [...]

Before the 1960s, American corporations generally ignored African-American consumers. Most black-oriented radio stations, for example, experienced difficulties attracting advertising from large corporations; most had to demonstrate to prospective corporate advertisers the potential profitability of advertising aimed at black consumers. The establishment of the National Negro Network, Inc. (NNN) in 1954 represented one such effort.¹ The NNN was a nationwide consortium of forty two black-oriented radio stations formed to attract "blue-chip" corporate advertising. To assist this campaign, the NNN produced a daytime serial entitled "Ruby Valentine" that aired on the network's affiliates. In promoting "Ruby Valentine" to potential corporate advertisers, the NNN's promotional material declared:

Now ... for the first time in advertising history ... a singly coordinated program can take you to the heart of the 16 billion dollar American Negro market. This new selling concept offers an advertiser a rich sales frontier virtually uncultivated by national advertising.²

By the early sixties, as African-Americans proliferated in U.S. cities, American corporations no longer had to be convinced of the profitability of seeking black customers. This is borne out by such advertising trade journals as *Sponsor*, *Advertising Age*, and *Broadcasting*, all of which began featuring articles about the "Negro Market" and its growing importance to corporate marketers.³ [...]

This significant black migration to northern, southern, and western cities represented not only a change of address for the migrants, but a distinct improvement in their occupational status. Between 1940 and 1960, the percentage of African-Americans in (relatively low-paying) southern agriculture work declined dramatically. Moreover, as fewer and fewer blacks worked in agriculture, the larger society – especially corporate America – slowly began to change its perception of African-Americans. By the early 1960s, blacks, once viewed as poor, rural workers with a minimum of disposable income, were seen as a market whose annual purchasing power exceeded that of Canada.⁴

Although 1960 census data demonstrated African-American gains in income and their strategic proliferation in major markets,⁵ many corporations, who had previously ignored the African-American consumer market, were at a loss as to how to reach black shoppers. Consequently, advertising trade journals throughout the 1960s assisted these corporations by featuring numerous "how-to" articles concerning selling to African-Americans. [...]

Armed with insights about the psyche of black Americans, and market research data that demonstrated that blacks listened to radio more frequently than whites,⁶ corporate marketers increasingly used radio advertising to reach African-American consumers. Between 1961 and 1966, American corporations, according to *Broadcasting* (another advertising trade journal), increased their advertising budget for black-oriented radio stations three-fold.⁷ American corporations maximized their advertising campaigns on black-oriented radio stations by encouraging African-American radio personalities (disc jockeys) to directly market their products.⁸ Because black disc jockeys were celebrities in their own right, they were ideal potential allies for white-owned businesses seeking to make inroads in a new market.

[...]

While national, regional, and local white business were accelerating their use of black-oriented radio to reach black consumers, these same companies sought as much information as possible concerning the nuances of the "Negro Market." But American racism and the legacy of racial segregation left most white businesspersons ill-equipped to understand African-American life. Consequently, many white companies had to rely upon the services of black consultants, the most influential being John H. Johnson, publisher of *Ebony* magazine, and D. Parke Gibson, president of D. Parke Gibson Associates, Inc.


Johnson had long been interested in making corporate America aware of the potential profits associated with black consumers. As early as 1947, Johnson's *Ebony* asserted that major corporations were missing lucrative opportunities by ignoring the African-American market.⁹ It should be noted, however, that Johnson's observations were based upon self-interest. From the moment of its founding in 1945, *Ebony* failed to secure substantial advertising from large corporations.¹⁰

Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, *Ebony* had established itself as a major American magazine and John H. Johnson stood as one of the country's top executives. Moreover, Johnson's success as a publisher appeared to have been based upon his ability to gauge the mood and interests of his readers.¹¹ Consequently, to white corporate leaders seeking insights about black consumers, Johnson appeared to be an ideal ally. In his autobiography, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, Johnson described his consulting role to corporate America as follows:

In the decade of the long hot summers, I held the unofficial position of special ambassador to American Whites ... Enlightened self-interest: that was my theme. I asked corporate leaders to act not for Blacks, not for civil rights, but for their corporations and themselves. For it was true then and it's true now that if you increase the income of Blacks and Hispanics and poor Whites, you increase the profits of corporate America. And if you decrease the income of the disadvantaged, you decrease income and potential income of American corporations. What it all boiled down to was that equal opportunity was good business.¹²

Johnson's advice to corporate America deserves closer examination. His theme of "enlightened self-interest" suggest a major reinterpretation of the 1960s. If corporate leaders took Johnson's message to heart, it can plausibly be argued that some of the gains associated with the Civil Rights

THE 3 DISC-TEERS



'JOLTIN' Joe Howard **'SENATOR'** Bristoe Bryant **'FRANTIC'** Ernie Durham


- These 3 Dee Jays contribute mightily to make **WJLB** the number one Negro station in the Detroit area.

WJLB LEADS IN NEGRO APPEAL PROGRAMMING

- 88-1/2 weekly broadcast hours beamed at an approximate 600,000 audience with an annual aggregate income of \$700,000,000 makes **WJLB** a "must buy" for Negro directed advertising.

FOR 21 YEARS and particularly in the last decade, **WJLB** has racked up sales for the knowing advertiser who wants to capitalize on the rich potential Negro market.

Let the 3 Disc-A-Teers — 'Senator' Bryant, 'Joltin' Joe and 'Frantic' Ernie plus WJLB's other superb talent do the telling and the selling to a huge audience that LISTEN IN to **WJLB** because they LOOK UP to **WJLB**



WJLB
3100 DAVID BRODERICK TOWER • DETROIT 26, MICH.

NEW YORK REPRESENTATIVE: BERNARD HOWARD COMPANY
20 East 46 Street, New York 17, N. Y. Phone OX 7-3750

Sponsor Negro Issue (9 October 1961), 25. Courtesy of Walter Williams Library, School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia.

Figure 42. *Sponsor Negro Issue (9 October 1961), 25. Reprinted from Robert E. Weems, Jr., 'The Revolution Will Be Marketed: American Corporations and Black Consumers during the 1960s,' Radical History Review, 59 (Spring 1994), pp. 94-107.*

Movement were based upon “conservative,” rather than “liberal” impulses.

For example, during the sixties, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) stood in the forefront of the movement to force American corporations to use African-American models in their print and television advertising. To CORE and other civil rights organizations, this was a “social” issue.¹³ However, when U.S. businesses realized that using black models increased black purchases of their products without alienating white consumers,¹⁴ corporations gladly utilized black models in print media and on television. Johnson’s concern about the “enlightened self-interest” (profits) of large white corporations appeared intimately connected with his concern about *Ebony’s* financial well-being. Once he convinced corporate leaders that it was “good business” to reach more black consumers, these same corporations had to find a vehicle to do just that. Although Johnson’s autobiography claims that he did not directly approach white corporate leaders about advertising in *Ebony* during the 1960s,¹⁵ *Ebony’s* advertising revenue nearly tripled between 1962 and 1969.

While Johnson urged corporate America to take a greater interest in selling to African-American consumers, D. Parke Gibson advised corporate America on how to most effectively reach black consumers. Gibson’s company, established in 1960, specialized in market research and public relations consulting.¹⁶ Gibson and his associates subsequently offered their services to a myriad of companies, including Avon Products, Inc., Coca Cola USA, Columbia Pictures, Greyhound, and the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco company.¹⁷ Moreover, Gibson published two books about the African-American consumer market, *The \$30 Billion Dollar Negro* (1969), and *\$70 Billion In the Black* (1978).

An example of the advice Gibson’s company gave its corporate clients appeared in the 25 July 1966 issue of *Sponsor*. Elsie Archer, director of the company’s Women’s Interest Bureau, published a brief article entitled “How To Sell Today’s Negro Woman.” Among other things, Archer offered

the following insights about the black female consumer:

She wants advertising and marketing people to understand that her needs and desires are often different. For example, she does not want a blue-eyed suburban housewife telling her to use a particular product when she is faced with urban living. Particularly in the area of personal care products, advertisers should use extreme caution to avoid pricking the high sensitivity of the Negro woman ... One last word – never, never, under any circumstances refer to the Negro woman as “Negress or Negressess,” a phrase guaranteed to produce an unfavorable reaction.¹⁸

About the same time Archer instructed corporate America on how to best reach African-American female consumers, the black community was in the throes of a dramatic shift in political orientation. Despite corporate America’s increasing recognition of black consumers, as well as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Act of 1965, a significant proportion of African-Americans remained frustrated and angry about continuing racial injustice in the United States. The Watts Rebellion of 1965, along with the immediate popularity of the term “Black Power” in 1966, reflected a growing militancy toward, and mistrust of, white society.

The appearance of overt black nationalist sentiment during the mid 1960s initially confused corporate executives. During the early 1960s, they had been led to believe that African-Americans were preoccupied with trying to assimilate into mainstream U.S. society. For example, the 4 October 1963 issue of *Sales Management* featured an article entitled “The Negro Market: Growing, Changing, Challenging,” which not only surveyed what the author believed were the basic characteristics of black consumers, but sought to project their activities into the immediate future. Considering what *actually* happened, the following prognostication turned out to be way off the

mark: "Negroes will de-emphasize race consciousness and differences, and focus attention on social and cultural similarities compatible with the concept and practice of an integrated society."¹⁹

Despite their initial confusion, corporate markets quickly adjusted their marketing campaigns aimed at African-American consumers. Early 1960s' ad campaigns that sought to promote the image of an integrated society²⁰ were replaced with attempts to exploit blacks' growing sense of racial pride. The development of the "soul market" illustrates corporate America's attempt to adapt to African-American consumers' political and cultural reorientation. Corporate marketers co-opted growing black pride by extolling the virtues of African-American life and culture. Moreover, such things as "Soul Music" and "Soul Food" were promoted for both black and white consumption. From a business point of view, the "soul market" appeared to be especially profitable. Not only would corporate America reach African-Americans, but also faddish whites wanting to be viewed as "hip."

[...]

About the same time corporate America desired to make its existing products attractive to "soul brother and sisters," some white-owned companies sought to expand their black customer base by developing consumer items exclusively for African-Americans. This trend centered around the production of black personal care products. During the "Jim Crow" era, African-American entrepreneurs had monopolized the production of hair and skin products for blacks. An examination of advertisements in black newspapers during the early to mid twentieth century reveals myriad such products.²¹ White corporations, because of their general disregard for black consumers, had little interest in getting a share of the black personal care products market. However, as the African-American standard of living rose during the 1960s, and as market research revealed that blacks spent a significant proportion of money

on personal care products, some white-owned companies made a concerted effort to produce these goods.²²

[...]

By the beginning of the 1970s, African-Americans were recognized as an increasingly important consumer market. Indeed, American corporations took the advice offered by trade journals and black consultants, and actively wooed prospective African-American customers. Yet, continuing racial strife clearly indicates that blacks, while desired as shoppers, are often less desired by whites as classmates, co-workers, and neighbors. Moreover, African-Americans' current annual collective spending power of between \$250-300 billion has not halted the steady decline of urban black America. These ongoing problems suggest that black consumers, despite their recognized importance to the U.S. economy, cannot buy substantive respect and power from American corporations.²³

NOTES

Extracted from Weems, R. E., Jr., 'The Revolution Will Be Marketed: American Corporations and Black Consumers during the 1960s,' *Radical History Review* 59 (Spring 1994), pp. 94-107. Copyright, 1994, MARHO: The Radical Historians Organization, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher, Duke University Press.

1. "NNN: Negro Radio's Network," *Sponsor* (20 September 1954), 54. It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of these black-oriented radio stations were owned by white entrepreneurs. See William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio" in *Split Image: African-Americans In The Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), 209, 214.

2. "NNN: Negro Radio's Network," *Sponsor* (20 September 1954), 46.
3. A cross-section of such articles included: C.H. Hall, "Advertisers' Guide To Marketing, 1960 Negro Market," *Printer's Ink* (30 October 1959), 246-47; "Marketing To The Negro Consumer; Special Report," *Sales Management* (4 March 1960), 36-44; "Tapping The Negro Market: Association Formed To Promote Its Value," *Broadcasting* (8 August 1960), 52; "Know-How Is Key To Selling Negro Market Today," *Sponsor Negro Issue* (9 October 1961), 9-10; H.C. Russell, "Ads Alone Won't Win Negro Market," *Advertising Age* (21 October 1963), 3; "Is There a U.S. Negro Market? Yes Can It Be Reached As Easily As Any Other Market? No", *Sponsor* (17 August 1964), 32.
4. "Know-How Is Key To Selling Negro Today," *Sponsor Negro Issue* (9 October 1961), 9.
5. "Past Decade Saw the Market Zoom," *Sponsor Negro Issue* (9 October 1961), 11-12, 33, 37.
6. "Negro Radio's Prosperous Market," *Sponsor Negro Issue*, (26 September 1960), 47; "Radio: Major Medium For Reaching Negroes," *Sponsor* (17 August 1964), 37.
7. "Advertiser Interest In Negroes Zooms," *Broadcasting* (7 November 199), 76.
8. "Know-How Is Key to Selling Negro Today," *Sponsor Negro Issue* (9 October 1961), 27; "Is There a U.S. Negro Market Today? Yes Can It Be Reached As Easily As Any Other Market? No," *Sponsor* (17 August 1964), 32; "Negro Radio's 1965-Style New Sound," *Sponsor* (26 July 1965), 57.
9. John H. Johnson and Lerone Bennet Jr., *Succeeding Against The Odds* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), 229.
10. *Ibid.*, 173, 179-80.
11. *Ibid.*, 156-57, 287.
12. *Ibid.*, 277-80.
13. Maurine Christopher, "CORE Seeks More Integrated Ads; Core Invites 14 Major Advertisers To Discuss Using Negroes In Ads," *Advertising Age* (9 September 1963), 1, 128; Maurine Christopher, "CORE Intensifies Drive For Negroes In Ads; Zeroes In On Pepsi-Cola Co.," *Advertising Age* (9 November 1964), 3, 71; "Boycott By Negroes?" *Printer's Ink* (23 August 1963), 5-6.
14. "Same Ad, Intelligently Done, Can Sell To Both Whites, Negroes: Bullock" *Advertising Age* (12 June 1961), 23; "Integrated Ads Not Offensive To Whites, Dallas Group Told," *Advertising Age* (14 October 1968), 31; "Use of Negro Models In Ads Won't Reduce Sales To Whites, Johnson Advises Workshop," *Advertising Age* (9 December 1968), 24; "Use of Black Models In Ads Doesn't Alter Sales Patterns, BofA [Bureau of Advertising] Reports," *Advertising Age* (9 November 1970), 52; Lester Guest, "How Negro Models Affect Company Image," *Journal of Advertising Research* (10 April 1970): 29-33.
15. Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 27.
16. D. Parke Gibson, "Advertising and The Dual Society: Challenge Of The Seventies," *Media-scope* 13 (August 1969): 63.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Elsie Archer, "How To Sell Today's Negro Woman," *Sponsor* (25 July 1966), 49.
19. Lawrence E. Black, "The Negro Market: Growing, Changing, Challenging," *Sales Management* (4 October 1963), 46.
20. Black advisors to American corporations appeared partially responsible for this development. See "Don't Contrive Integrated Ads, (John H.) Johnson Advises," *Advertising Age* (23 September 1963), 1, 111; "Help Negro In Image Effort Via Ads, [Roy] Wilkens Asks," *Advertising Age* (11 November 1963), 1, 112.
21. *The Chicago Defender*, among other African-American newspapers, featured a vast number of advertisements for personal care products (hair and skin) during this period. Most of the companies providing these products were small black-owned firms.
22. "Negro Radio's Prosperous Market," *Sponsor* (26 September 1960), 9; Raymond A. Bauer and Scott M. Cunningham, "The Negro Market," *Journal of Advertising Research* 10 (April, 1970): 10-11.

23. David H. Swinton, "The Economic Status of African-Americans: Permanent Poverty and Inequality," in *The State of Black America*, 1991 (New York: National Urban League inc., 1991), 28.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

The diverse articles in *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (1995), edited by Daniel Miller, and *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (2001), edited by Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton, reflect a range of methodologies on design topics from the French Revolution to the late twentieth century, demonstrating that the history of consumption is a wide-reaching field, which, like design history, necessarily is drawn from sociology, anthropology and studies of sign systems.

In 'Coming Up For Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective', in *Consumption and the World of Goods* (1993), edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter, Jean-Christophe Agnew provides an insightful overview of the first critiques of consumption during the prosperous period of industrialization in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, including those by Karl Marx and Thomas Carlyle among others. Section 1 of the *Reader* concludes with John Styles's 'Manufacturing, Consumption and Design in Eighteenth-century England' from that same volume, which extended studies of design to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Influential studies of consumption in the early modern and industrial periods include Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England* (1982); Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (1983); and Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987). Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (1988), draws on these works as well as on histories of nineteenth-century world's fairs, advertising, fashion and the rise of the department store: Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869–1920* (1981); Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Nineteenth Century France* (1982); Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (1967; translated 1983); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (1994).

From a sociological perspective, early twentieth century writings by Max Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1904–5), Werner Sombart (*Der Moderne Kapitalismus*, 1902), and Georg Simmel ('The Philosophy of Money', 1900, 1907) have been influential, especially for studies of modernism, such as in Frederic Schwartz's *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War* (1996). After the Second World War, historical studies of material culture were led by Fernand Braudel, among others. Braudel was editor of the French journal *Annales*, and his book *Capitalism and Material Life 1400–1800* (1973) focuses on the early modern period of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, before the onset of industrialization. Braudel's work has connections to that of German sociologist Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process*, 1939, 1969), as well as to his contemporary, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose prolific writings on culture informed a generation of structural theorists. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Historical Perspective* (1986), a collection of essays edited by Arjun Appadurai, challenges the presumption that objects, or 'things'

are only activated by human agency, arguing rather that objects can be invested with a power of their own – an idea noted by Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*, first published in essay form in 1923–4, and later in English translation as a book (1954), as well as by Marx in his description of the 'commodity fetish'.

Marxist critiques of consumption have been enduring, from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), to Jean Baudrillard's post-Marxist essays *The System of Objects* (1968) and *The Consumer Society* (1970). In her article 'Tu: A Cosmetic Case Study', Kathy Myers combines Marxist theories of consumption with psychoanalytic and semiotic methods, producing a reading of a British cosmetic marketing campaign that attributes as much to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as it does to Roland Barthes's demonstration that fashion exists in the realm of the written word. In their collection of essays *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (1996), Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds) demonstrate a variety of design methodologies. Adam Arvidsson's 'From Counterculture to Consumer Culture: Vespa and the Italian Youth Market, 1958–78' (2001) makes for an instructive comparison with the very different analysis of the Italian motor scooter provided by Dick Hebdige, and extracted in section 8 of this *Reader*. Joann d'Aliser's 'I ♥ Islam: Popular Religious Commodities, Sites of Inscription, and Transnational Sierra Leonean Identity' (2001) and John Harvey's 'Seen to Be Remembered: Presentation, Representation and Recollection in British Evangelical Culture since the Late 1970s' (2004) both examine design and consumption from the point of view of religion, a topic that was also treated by Jean Burks in her study of Shaker furniture in section 8 of this *Reader*.