

2. Accidental Behavioral Scientists

“Advertising is salesmanship in print. An ad should say in print precisely what a good salesman would say face to face.”

– John E. Kennedy to Albert Lasker¹

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, advertising agencies were primarily intermediaries who bought newspaper space in bulk and resold it to clients, often providing no creative services. If you sold a carriage, you listed the wood type and the price. You assumed the reader was a rational actor with a specific need.

This changed with a new breed of advertising professionals who viewed the industry not as an art, but as a science rooted in data and psychology. Advertising pioneers like Albert Lasker, Claude Hopkins and Howard Gossage were “*proto-behavioral scientists*” who discovered through trial and error what researchers like Daniel Kahneman, Robert Cialdini, and Richard Thaler would later codify in academia.

1. Math Men and Mad Men

In 1904, Albert Lasker, then a young partner at Lord & Thomas, received a note from a stranger in the lobby named John E. Kennedy. Kennedy, a former Canadian mounted policeman, claimed he could define advertising in three words. Intrigued, Lasker met him. Kennedy’s definition was simple: “*Salesmanship in print*”.

Kennedy’s insights required a new approach, a “*reason why*” the consumer should part with their money. Listing the attributes and prices of products rather than attempting to persuade consumers was no longer enough: an ad should simulate the argument a salesperson would make to a customer face-to-face.

This philosophy became the bedrock of the Lord & Thomas direct-response approach, moving the advertising industry away from artistic prose toward persuasive copy designed to trigger an immediate transaction.

From Fruit to Fluid

In the early 1900s, the California Fruit Growers Exchange, later known as Sunkist, approached Lord & Thomas for help. They were facing an excess production of oranges and needed a strategy to boost sales. A rational approach might have been to advertise the virtues of Vitamin C, to highlight the delicious taste, or to emphasize its health benefits.

Albert Lasker challenged this approach and shifted how people saw oranges, from a seasonal luxury item to a daily health necessity, with the *Drink an Orange*

campaign and a simple, yet revolutionary concept at the time: encouraging people to drink orange juice instead of just eating oranges.

Why weren't people drinking orange juice?

Eating an orange was easy. Extracting juice required a tool, effort, and cleanup. In the busy American household, this slight inconvenience was enough to prevent a widespread shift in consumption habits.

Albert Lasker saw the problem: friction. His solution was a foreshadowing of choice architecture. He didn't just advertise oranges; he removed the friction.

His agency, Lord & Thomas, began manufacturing and distributing inexpensive glass juicers, selling them for a mere 10 cents. By positioning the practical tool into consumers' hands, the physical barrier to the desired behavior was removed. With the friction of squeezing now gone, a glass of fresh orange juice became more easily available.

The result? A significant increase in orange consumption, transforming a seasonal fruit into a year-round beverage, and establishing orange juice as a staple of the American breakfast table. Drinking orange juice, now an American ritual, was born from removing a tiny, overlooked obstacle.²

Albert Lasker continued transforming ads from simple announcements to persuasive salesmanship in print, creating iconic campaigns for Lucky Strike, Pepso-dent, and Kotex before Foote, Cone & Belding (FCB) took over Lord & Thomas in 1942.

Almost a century after Lasker, I started my advertising career working with Edson Athayde at FCB³, now part of Omnicom holding company.⁴

The Science of Ads

In his 1923 manifesto, *Scientific Advertising*, Claude Hopkins treated the newspaper ad not as a canvas, but as a laboratory. He rejected the idea that customers were fickle or mysterious.

To Hopkins, human behavior was a physics problem waiting to be solved. He introduced the *coupon* not just as a discount, but as a tracking device. If headline A generated 4,000 returned coupons and Headline B generated only 2,000, Headline B was cut. There was no room for artistic ego.

Hopkins was the first to realize that human desire could be quantified. He was the grandfather of the A/B test, with a legacy that is alive and kicking on analytics and UX reports.

When the Schlitz company hired him to sell beer, it was languishing in fifth place. Their competitors screamed about "*Purity*" in giant, vague letters. Hopkins ignored the slogans and went to the brewery. He saw the plate-glass rooms where

beer dripped over pipes; he saw the white wood pulp filters; he saw the machines that washed every bottle four times in live steam. Management, however, saw nothing remarkable in their daily operations, just generic protocols employed by every competitor.

Hopkins didn't care. He wrote ads that detailed the "*Live Steam*" and the "*Filtered Air*". He didn't claim Schlitz was the *only* one doing it; he just claimed it first. By framing a standard industrial process as a unique virtue, Hopkins conjured an image of pristine cleanliness and modern efficiency, detailing it with vivid descriptions in "Washed with Live Steam" ads.⁵

When other breweries attempted to highlight their own cleaning processes, they risked being labeled copycats. This tactic was decades before Daniel Kahneman's theoretical work on cognitive biases, specifically the anchoring and availability biases.⁶ The Schlitz campaign showed a core principle of behavioral economics: people aren't rational processors of information; they're emotional interpreters.

Hopkins understood consumers weren't primarily concerned with the technical details of beer production. They were seeking reassurance, a sense of quality, trustworthiness, and modernity. Hopkins weaponized a standard process. He claimed 'Live Steam' first. He didn't need to be better; he just needed to be first. It's a technique that resonates even today, in fields ranging from product design to political messaging.

Hopkins engineered persuasion, assuming people bought beer for the steam-cleaning. He had a blind spot: they bought it because the story made them *feel* safe.

2. The post-war irrational consumer

By the 1950s, Hopkins' scientific advertising model was cracking. Post-war America was flooded with products that were functionally identical. Logic could no longer distinguish one brand from another: soap was soap; gasoline was gasoline. But cake mix was not only cake mix. When General Mills launched their instant mix, it was a marvel of efficiency: just add water, stir, and bake. It was rational. It was easy. And it flopped.

Enter Ernest Dichter, a Viennese psychologist who brought Freud to Madison Avenue. Dichter realized that Hopkins' "*Reason Why*" was irrelevant because people didn't know *why* they did anything. We were not rational actors; we were bundles of subconscious attitudes and feelings. Marketing was now becoming more about selling the promise, not the product.

Applying his motivational research to General Mills cake mix, Dichter conducted focus groups, a novel technique at the time, and diagnosed a hidden psychological barrier: guilt. The mix was *too* easy. The post-war housewife, already

feeling pressure to be the perfect homemaker, felt that “*just adding water*” was cheating. She wasn’t baking a cake; she was assembling a factory product. She felt no ownership.

Dichter’s solution was counter-intuitive: make it harder. He told General Mills to remove the powdered eggs from the mix. Now, the customer had to crack a fresh egg, beat it, and stir it in. It was a tiny increase in labor, but it was enough. Cracking the egg was a ritual of creation. It allowed the baker to claim the cake as “mine.” Sales skyrocketed.

DIY Motivation

A few years later, Howard Gossage was tasked with boosting readership for *Scientific American*. The magazine was struggling, and Gossage needed a way to connect with their audience on a deeper level. His solution? A paper airplane contest. Readers were invited to design and build their own paper airplanes, then fly them for a chance to win prizes.⁷

Gossage tapped into the same principle applied by Bichter. It isn’t just about assembling materials; it’s about building a connection, a sense of ownership, a feeling of investment. It’s as if the paper airplane wasn’t just a piece of paper; it was *their* creation. The brilliance of Gossage’s strategy is that he transformed passive readers into active participants. He wasn’t just selling a magazine; he was offering an experience – a chance to contribute, to build, to *own* a piece of the *Scientific American* brand.

You know that satisfaction when you finally assemble that pack of IKEA furniture, feeling accomplished despite a few drops of sweat? That’s the IKEA Effect, and it goes far beyond assembling a bookshelf or baking a cake. Dichter was a precursor of a powerful psychological principle that reveals why we often assign extraordinary value to things we’ve built, even in the smallest way.

Whether it’s baking a cake or creating a paper airplane, this deeper level of engagement, increases our psychological investment, a phenomenon later explored by Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler, who coined the term endowment effect, the tendency to value something more simply because we own it.⁸

The IKEA Effect isn’t just about cakes or paper airplanes, of course. It manifests in countless ways. Consider the DIY movement, the surge in personalized products, or even the passionate curation of Spotify playlists. These built experiences create a sense of belonging and investment, strengthening brand loyalty and driving customer advocacy. As Chip Heath and Dan Heath argue in *Made to Stick*, simple, engaging experiences are far more memorable and persuasive than complex marketing messages.⁹

The post-war period laid the groundwork for later models showing that adver-

tising works covertly by delivering messages alongside emotional triggers, acting as a subconscious gatekeeper to rational decisions, influencing behavior without the consumer ever knowing.

This shift to tactics employed by Gossage and other Madison Avenue Mad Men was the primary target of Vance Packard's 1957 *exposé*, *The Hidden Persuaders*. Packard warned advertisers were no longer selling products, "they were deeply involved in depth probing", with "the most famed of these depth probers" being Ernest Dichter.¹⁰ They were selling emotional security to the insecure and reassurance of worth to the downtrodden. Packard saw this as a terrifying invasion of privacy.

Although later debunked, Packard's reference to alleged experiments involving subliminal messages (like "Drink Coke" flashed at high speed) galvanized public fear about the ethics of being influenced beneath conscious perception.¹¹

3. Digital is persuading the world

Vance Packard had no idea what was coming. The internet did not just digitize the billboard and newspaper ad; it fundamentally altered the physics of persuasion.

We have moved from the age of the *Mad Men*, who relied on intuition and three-martini lunches, to the age of the *New Math Men*. If Claude Hopkins treated the ad as a scientific instrument in 1923, by the end of the century Stanford researcher B.J. Fogg, often seen as the father of Persuasive Technology,¹² turned the entire internet into a laboratory.

While Madison Avenue was still buying TV spots based on demographics, Fogg and his students, who would go on to build apps and systems for Instagram and Facebook, realized that high motivation is useless if the product is hard to use (low Ability) or that a notification (a beep, a buzz, a red dot) is useless if the user isn't motivated.

They didn't look at consumers as mysterious souls to be seduced by poetry. Like Hopkins before him, Fogg saw a formula. He posited that behavior (B) happens only when three things converge at the same moment: Motivation (M), Ability (A), and a Trigger (T). Or: $B = MAT$.

In the analog world, gathering data to solve Fogg's formula was expensive and slow. In the digital economy, collecting data costs almost nothing. We now generate "the oil" of the modern economy simply by living online. This shift allows companies to measure effectiveness with a concrete precision that would have made Hopkins weep with joy.

Unlike a newspaper ad that sits static on a page for everyone to see, technologies now track users as they browse, profiling their interests to deliver messages at the exact moment they are most relevant,¹³ aligning more with previous models like the Elaboration Likelihood Model¹⁴ (ELM): when a message feels personally

relevant, our brain pays closer attention, increasing the probability of persuasion.

The frontier of this technology goes beyond mere demographics. Algorithms now customize messages based on psychological traits, with studies showing that a persuasive appeal is significantly more effective when framed to match the recipient's personality. An algorithm might sell the same vacation package to two different people using two different psychological hooks: promoting novel, exciting experiences to a user with "*high openness*", while highlighting safety and tradition to a user with "*low openness*".¹⁵

This precision comes at a psychological cost. Unlike the general skepticism developed toward TV commercials highlighted by Packard, personalized digital ads introduce a scarier risk: the "*creepiness factor*". When an ad knows *too* much about you, it triggers a feeling of vulnerability. Consumers perform an instant, often unconscious privacy calculus, weighing the perceived benefits of the ad against the cost of the intrusion.¹⁶

To bypass this defense, some practitioners employ *dark patterns* and craft interfaces to coerce behavior. Not to facilitate choice, not to help users, but to exploit their cognitive biases for commercial gain.

Ultimately, the shift from mass media to algorithms is not a break with advertising history, but a synthesis of it. The modern algorithm is the intellectual child of the two warring parents of advertising: the *Rational Salesman* (Claude Hopkins) and the *Hidden Persuader* (Ernest Dichter).

Claude Hopkins demanded "*salesmanship in print,*" driven by rational arguments and measurable results. He treated the ad as a scientific instrument. By the 1950s, Ernest Dichter and the Motivational Researchers discovered the flaw in Hopkins's logic: consumers are not rational, they act emotionally and compulsively.

Albert Lasker needed a glass juicer to remove friction. Today, personalized algorithms don't need a glass; they remove the friction before we even know it's there. The juicer is now invisible, and it is squeezing *us*.

Notes

1. Jeffrey L. Cruikshank and Arthur W. Schultz, *The Man Who Sold America: The Amazing (but True!) Story of Albert D. Lasker and the Creation of the Advertising Century* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2010). ↩

2. Juice News Jan, "Albert Lasker: The Man Who Added Oranges to America's Breakfast," in *Juice News*, <https://juicenews.com/p/albert-lasker-orange-sunkist-breakfast>, 2025. ↩

3. Edson Athayde is one of the most awarded advertisers in Portugal, including

Cannes (11 Lions), NYF, Eurobest, Epica, London, Cresta, Clio, El Ojo, FIAP, Montreux, One Show, ADC New York, among many others. He collaborated over 4 decades with agencies such as Young & Rubicam, Ogilvy, and FCB in Portugal and Spain throughout his career. Since 2014, he has been the CEO & Creative Director of FCB Lisboa. ↩

4. Bradley Johnson, *The End of FCB—a Look Back at the “Never Finished” Agency’s Legacy*, <https://adage.com/agencies/aa-looking-back-at-fcb/>, 2025. ↩

5. Claude C. Hopkins, *Scientific Advertising*, Unabridged edition (Merchant Books, 2014). ↩

6. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases: Biases in Judgments Reveal Some Heuristics of Thinking Under Uncertainty.” *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1124–31, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.185.4157.1124>. ↩

7. Jerry Mander et al., *The Great International Paper Airplane Book* (Simon and Schuster, 1967). ↩

8. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). ↩

9. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, A Random House Trade Paperback (Random House, 2010). ↩

10. Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (D. McKay Co., 1957), 23. ↩

11. Robert Heath, *Seducing the Subconscious: The Psychology of Emotional Influence in Advertising* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). ↩

12. B. J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do*, The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Interactive Technologies (Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003). ↩

13. Sophie C. Boerman et al., “Online Behavioral Advertising: A Literature Review and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Advertising* 46, no. 3 (2017): 363–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1339368>. ↩

14. Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, “The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 19 (Elsevier, 1986), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60214-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2). ↩

15. Stephan Winter et al., “The Effects of Trait-Based Personalization in Social Media Advertising,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 114 (January 2021): 106525, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106525>. ↩

16. Pamela L Alreck and Robert B Settle, “Consumer Reactions to Online Behavioural Tracking and Targeting,” *Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management* 15, no. 1 (2007): 11–23, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.dbm.3250069>. ↩