
Introduction

Charles Coolidge Parlin gathered the notes for his speech, strode to the lectern, and looked out at the crowd of colleagues who had gathered in his honor. Three hundred fifty people from businesses and universities across the country had crowded into the Benjamin Franklin Hotel in Philadelphia that night—June 5, 1936—to pay tribute to the man they considered the founder of market research. Parlin, the manager of the Division of Commercial Research for Curtis Publishing Company since 1911, was hailed that evening as a visionary, a pioneer, an originator of the concepts and ideas of market research. Frank R. Coutant, president of the American Marketing Society, called Parlin “the daddy of all marketing research, whom we all recognize as the man who gave us most of the principles on which we work.” Joseph H. Willets, dean of the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania, led the group in toasting the man with the “penetrating mind” and the “prophetic insight.” And Walter Fuller, president of Curtis Publishing Company, said that Parlin’s work “has grown in reputation, it has grown in importance, and it

has grown in the respect and appreciation of our company. That could not happen . . . if the results had not been very great.”¹

The accolades had not always flowed so freely. When Parlin began his work at Curtis Publishing, he was greeted with skepticism by many inside and outside the company. His mission was vague. Cyrus H. K. Curtis, the founder and longtime president of the company that bore his name, had given Parlin freedom to decide what needed to be studied and how he should go about his work, just as he had his fabled editors, Edward Bok of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and George Horace Lorimer of the *Saturday Evening Post*. That meant, though, that Parlin had little to guide him. He was new to the magazine industry and to the world of business. Partly because of that, the validity and integrity of his projects were difficult to prove, and the division he led provided no direct income or other tangible benefit to the company—not immediately anyway. “You have got a lot of figures,” one man told him after completion of one of his early studies of department stores, “but how do I know they are good for anything?” Parlin had devoted many months to collecting and interpreting reams of information, but at one point he wondered whether he would have been better off “throwing pebbles into the sea.”²

Those early, dreary days stuck with Parlin, and when it came his turn to speak at the banquet in 1936, he did so humbly. He reminded the group that he had been a high school principal in Wisconsin when he was hired by Curtis Publishing’s Advertising Department to start the then-nebulous task of researching nationwide markets. He also reminded them that starting the Division of Commercial Research had been the idea of Stanley Latshaw, manager of Curtis’s Boston advertising office. Parlin said he had simply taken Latshaw’s idea and given it shape. He said his achievements had been possible only because Cyrus Curtis had been patient and had been willing to take a chance on something that someone else eventually would have tried and made successful. “If Columbus had not discovered America when he did,” Parlin said, “someone else would, before long, because an age of adventure had already dawned.

And if the Curtis Publishing Company had not started Commercial Research when they did, sooner or later somebody else would have done so.”³

It was Parlin, though, who was honored that night and who was lauded again and again for his pioneering work in market research. The Philadelphia chapter of the American Marketing Association established the Charles Coolidge Parlin Memorial Award in 1945, and Parlin was elected posthumously to the Advertising Hall of Fame in 1953. During his twenty-six years at Curtis Publishing, Parlin played a part in dozens of national and regional research projects, conducting much of the research himself by traveling the country and interviewing thousands of people as he shaped the early ideas of Curtis Publishing’s market research. His second study, on department stores and the merchandising of textiles, was ranked by marketing scholars in the 1940s as among the most influential early works in the field. His later work was used by hundreds of companies in guiding sales of their consumer products. He forged friendships with early marketing instructors, exchanging ideas and even lecturing to classes himself. And many of the people who worked with him went on to lead market research departments of their own, further spreading the ideas and work that Parlin developed in the 1910s and 1920s.⁴

Despite such accolades and testimonials, we know relatively little about Parlin, the development of Commercial Research, or the thinking behind it.⁵ His work has been widely noted by those in marketing,⁶ but it has received only scant attention for its role in the development of advertising, media, or business, or in the rise of a consumer society. That is surprising because Parlin’s employer, Curtis Publishing Company, has been widely noted for its importance in American journalism. The company’s *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* dominated the magazine market in both circulation and advertising revenue from the turn of the twentieth century until the 1930s. John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman call the *Post* “the bible of middle-class America” in the early twentieth century. Frank Luther Mott calls Cyrus Curtis, the founder and

business force behind the publishing company, a “bold and brilliant advertiser and promoter” and credits Curtis’s willingness to advertise for much of the circulation success of his magazines.⁷ Because Curtis magazines were so widely read, their content has also been the subject of numerous studies, often relating to portrayals of women,⁸ and more recently their role in a consumer culture.⁹ Likewise, Edward Bok, who edited the *Journal*, George Horace Lorimer, who edited the *Post*, and Cyrus Curtis have been the subject of several biographical studies.¹⁰ Other researchers have looked at the financial problems Curtis Publishing faced in the television age.¹¹ We know far less, though, about Curtis Publishing as a company, about its corporate thinking or its business strategies during its heyday. And, despite its importance in the company’s financial success, we know little about the workings of its Advertising Department. Curtis was among the first publishers to slash subscription rates below costs in the late 1800s and to rely on advertising revenues to make up the difference.¹² Because of that, the role of the Advertising Department grew increasingly important after the turn of the century, subsidizing the editorial work of such famed editors as Bok and Lorimer. The Advertising Department also played a large part in establishing Curtis’s dominance in the publishing world, a dominance it used to influence the standards and practices of American advertising.¹³

Individual, But Also Societal Changes

Parlin’s move from the nadir to the pinnacle of his field involved more than just one man carving out a distinguished career. (See Figure I.1.) It involved changes, both personal and societal, in the world of publishing and the world of business. In many ways, Parlin’s employer, Curtis Publishing Company, was like the thousands of American businesses that slowly changed as a modern industrial society took shape during the first three decades of the twentieth century.¹⁴ As Curtis grew larger and its bureaucratic structure became more complex, it sought ways to maintain contact with other businesses and with its customers—both advertisers and readers.



CHARLES COOLIDGE PARLIN

Manager of the Commercial Research Division, and the bound volumes of reports, written by him, dealing with market methods and conditions of many industries

MANY years ago Curtis advertising representatives discovered that in order to sell advertising effectively they needed to be able to talk intelligently with a manufacturer about the manufacturer's business. Some of the questions asked them by the manufacturers were: What is the possible market for my merchandise? Through what sales channels can it be sold to the best advantage? Shall I use jobbers or shall I sell direct to the department stores? What margin of profit should the jobber and the retailer have? Shall I sell to the chain stores? How much sales resistance will I meet with dealers and with consumers? How can I get dealers to make window displays of my product? How can my own salesmen take advantage of the opportunities created by my advertising? How much advertising are other manufacturers applying to similar merchandise?

The answers to these questions were not to be found in books, for few books had been written on such merchandising problems. Then it was that the Curtis Company organized the Commercial Research Division to investigate these problems so that the Advertising Department might be able to answer accurately and helpfully the merchandising questions of Curtis advertisers.

The Division had a pioneer work ahead of it. Neither the United States Government nor any state had ever taken a merchandising census. How much business was done by department stores nobody knew, and soon it became apparent that the only way to find out was to go and ask, store by store, city by city. In 1912, and again in 1920, Commercial Research representatives visited almost every city of over 50,000 population, and many smaller cities, from Maine to California, from Florida to Washington, and estimated the volume of business done by every department store in each of those cities and also the volume of business done by every wholesaler in general dry-goods lines.

COMMERCIAL RESEARCH

By CHARLES COOLIDGE PARLIN

They went to the department stores. They interviewed the managers and their assistants. They discussed all manner of local and national merchandising problems with them. Then, when they returned to the East, they wrote the four-volume report on Department Store Lines which became a work of basic importance.

They found that men and women bought in different ways. Men buy either at the nearest place, or as they are attracted by display, or by seeking out a desired brand, or at an accustomed store where they can say "Charge it" and escape red tape.

In women's buying they made a distinction between shopping lines and convenience goods that has been universally accepted as basic in merchandising.

Women buy convenience goods in the same manner as men buy, but in shopping lines—that is, lines that involve styles that give a touch of originality to dress or home—women wish to see more than one stock before making a purchase.

It was found that department stores grew out of this desire to shop. No merchant can hold a monopoly of the department-store trade of a city; to sell shopping lines he must have competition. They found that

three is the magic number in women's shopping—most cities up to 20,000 population having just three department stores—and that only three cities in the United States had more than seven full-line department stores.

In the same way, by actual field studies, reports were compiled and written on other basic industries. The report on Foods took up the problems of almost every foodstuff. Automobiles were investigated from practically every point of view including an estimate of just how much influence women have in the purchase of a Ford or a Rolls-Royce. Agricultural implements and The

Diamonds are chunks of coal that stuck to their jobs

Figure I.1 Charles Coolidge Parlin personally researched or oversaw dozens of market reports for Curtis Publishing Company. His work was promoted both externally and internally, as with this article in a Curtis employee magazine.

It promoted an attitude of service to both as it first carved a niche in the world of publishing, then tried to improve on its position in and increase the control it had over the marketplace.

One of the crucial means it used was marketplace information.¹⁵ By using what it promoted as new scientific methods of knowing and understanding competitors, customers, and markets, the company saw itself as better able to chart a course in the modern business world. Through its magazines, Curtis helped disseminate information to millions of people. Through its market research department, it sought to gather information that it thought would help position itself against the competition and would better prepare itself for working with thousands of established and potential advertisers. Curtis also saw Commercial Research as a means of extending a hand of cooperation to American business in general. It rarely published its research reports in full, although it did make them freely available at its offices in such cities as Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco, and it encouraged advertisers and advertising agencies to make use of the information and insights. The idea was to improve clients' chances for success, with the hope that strong customers would become repeat customers in the highly competitive, yet lucrative, world of advertising.

Market research, however, did not appear with the waving of a magic wand. It had to be sold as a necessity for modern commerce. Even as businesses yearned for information, they often looked upon early research with suspicion. Could they trust the information? Could they afford to gather their own information? Did they really need information? Was it just a fad, something that would cost them time and money without ever paying off? Those were the types of doubts that Parlin and his colleagues at Curtis Publishing Company faced as they cobbled together their early market research. As the Division of Commercial Research evolved, it became more than just an instrument for gathering information. Parlin was forced to become a salesman, a public relations man, an advertising man, and an expert on circulation, sales, distribution, wholesaling, retailing, and dozens of other facets of publishing and business. Curtis Publishing looked to the division for economic forecasts and for help in

planning strategy and direction of many different facets of the publishing business—all part of what one historian has called a move toward “bureaucratic rationality,” administration based on logical and statistical rules rather than intuition.¹⁶

In the decades since Curtis established its research division in 1911, American business and industry have grown increasingly hungry for information about themselves, their competitors, their markets, and their audiences. By 1947, American business spent an estimated \$50 million annually on market research, which it used to guide corporate decision making. Today, writes Eric Clark, research is a key part of all new products and advertisements, and “virtually nothing appears from a major advertiser or agency until it has been opinion-pollled, test-marketed or copy-tested, submitted on the way to panels of consumers whose words have been turned into statistical tables or analyzed by psychologists.” Billions of dollars are spent on researching products, markets, advertising, consumers, and public opinion, not only by companies, but by politicians, news organizations, advocacy groups, and just about anyone with the money and the desire to influence public opinion.¹⁷ Businesses have come to rely on market research to gauge the “public mind” and to judge changes in consumer tastes, with the goal of turning consumer wants into corporate profits. For them, market research has become, in effect, the rudder on the ship of modern corporate capitalism. Applying what they call micromarketing, many businesses today use detailed information about consumers’ preferences for such things as food, leisure, and an array of goods to target new products to people in specific regions, towns, neighborhoods, and even households. “The vision of the future is you can get whatever you want,” said Robert Meyer, a professor of marketing at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. “Years ago, retailers and manufacturers would just be guessing where to introduce products.”¹⁸

We often think of this availability and use of information as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, a phenomenon built on technology, on electronics, on the ability to move information quickly. This “information age,” though, is really just an expansion of needs, practices, and systems that developed decades, even centuries, earlier,

as Steven Lubar has shown. The United States itself was formed with the notion that the wide distribution of information was essential to the well-being of a democratic society. That belief in information helped spur the development of such things as roads and transportation, a national postal service, and communications devices from the telegraph to the telephone to the computer modem. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, savvy business owners found that information, when applied to trade, could position them to earn higher profits. Curtis Publishing took that idea to a new extreme at the turn of the twentieth century, emphasizing the role of information gathering in publishing, advertising, and other types of business.¹⁹

An Important Part of an Important Company

By focusing on Curtis Publishing, I attempt to show how that hunger for information about such things as product distribution, business competition, and magazine readership gave rise to market research during the 1910s and 1920s. Curtis Publishing, although certainly not the first company to conduct market research, was especially important in the development of research and business information because it showed that an individual company could compile information about national, regional, and city markets—information that many people of the time thought could be obtained only by the federal government.²⁰ As Curtis's research efforts grew, so did the company's promotion of that work. Curtis executives saw research as a means to distinguish the company from its competitors, in a sense to create a new brand of business—a business infused with Progressive notions of societal betterment. Again, Curtis was not the first or the only company to follow such thinking, but it was certainly one of the most important, largely because its sheer size and revenue dwarfed those of its competitors.

By 1890, the *Ladies' Home Journal* had pushed its circulation to more than 400,000, the highest of any magazine at the time. Thirteen years later, *Journal* circulation surpassed one million, and in 1924 surpassed two million. The rise of the *Saturday Evening Post*

was even more spectacular. The *Post* had few subscribers and was losing money when Curtis bought it in 1897, and Curtis employees often referred to it as “the singed cat.” The *Post*’s circulation rose to more than 200,000 shortly after the turn of the century and soared to two million weekly in 1913, making it the widest-circulating magazine of the era.²¹ Curtis’s advertising revenues were even more impressive, growing from about \$250,000 in 1892 to \$850,000 at the turn of the twentieth century to nearly \$10 million by 1912.²² In 1923, Curtis estimated that its magazines accounted for 48 percent of the total advertising revenue of the thirty-six leading national publications, and more than half of expenditures for color advertising in the same publications.²³ Between 1915 and 1922, the *Journal* carried about a third of the advertising in all women’s magazines, and between 1918 and 1922, the Curtis farm magazine *Country Gentleman* carried about a third of the advertising in all farm publications, and for most of the 1920s outdistanced all other farm publications in advertising income.²⁴ By the end of the 1920s, the *Post* carried six times as much advertising as any other publication except the *Journal*, and the *Journal* carried nearly twice as much advertising as any other publication but the *Post*. Combined yearly advertising revenue for the three Curtis magazines exceeded \$70 million in 1928—40 percent of the total advertising revenue of the sixty-four largest publications. In many ways, Curtis publications *were* the mass market of the early twentieth century.²⁵

Previous histories acknowledge Curtis’s importance as a business force but do little to explore the workings of the company. This book not only broadens the perspective on Curtis Publishing Company, but it revises several commonly held assumptions about Curtis magazines and the mass media market of the early twentieth century. It makes no attempt to reduce the importance of editorial matter in the success of the *Post* or the *Journal*. (Without strong editorial appeal, any publication is doomed.) It shows, however, that Curtis Publishing’s success was not built solely on the strength and planning of its magazines. Cyrus Curtis did not simply turn his editors loose and then wait for readers to snatch up copies of the magazines en masse. Curtis Publishing’s success was much more complex than that.

That is, the magazines were simply the most visible component of a wide-reaching business operation.

The following chapters show, for instance, how Curtis used market research to provide feedback about the audience of the *Post* and *Journal*, to position itself among a growing number of publications that pursued advertising, to carefully chart the spread and growth of a consumer culture, and to reinforce its authority among businesses that advertised in Curtis magazines. They show how advertising and research established themselves as vital components of Curtis Publishing Company, and how those two components were used to improve the organization's trust and image. They also show how Curtis promoted a business ideology that stressed the value of science, research, and market information as important means of building credibility and increasing profit in corporate America; and how a symbiotic relationship between advertisers, publications, and advertising agencies strengthened as mass media emerged and developed. Similarly, without a highly structured circulation department that sold its publications aggressively, Curtis never could have achieved distribution that reached into the millions. And without a successful advertising department and business operation, the company never could have achieved the enormous profits that allowed it to expand, experiment, and reinforce its domination. In short, Curtis Publishing worked in many different ways to create the mass media marketplace in which it was so enormously successful. The market did not come to Curtis; Curtis aggressively pursued and shaped the market.

Challenging Assumptions

As this book explores the many facets of Curtis Publishing, it challenges several assumptions put forth by historians of advertising, consumer culture, and media. The early histories of American advertising were written by agency men, and modern researchers have taken for granted many of the assertions that the early writers put forth. Historians such as Jackson Lears, Roland Marchand, Daniel Pope, and Stuart Ewen have placed the locus of power in the

emerging consumer culture in the hands of the advertising agencies and the manufacturers they worked for.²⁶ They began with the assumption that the agencies, because they so closely worked with businesses on the creation of advertisements, were the guiding forces of the advertising industry. They similarly regarded magazines such as the *Post* and *Journal* as little more than vessels for the distribution of messages created by the agencies and their customers. In doing so, they overlooked the influence that Curtis had—and used—in the development of modern advertising and market research. This book makes no attempt to cast aside the wide-reaching work or influence of the agencies. By showing the significance of the company's work, though, it argues that Curtis Publishing should be seen as at least an equal to the agencies in the development of American advertising and the creation and selling of a consumer society. Curtis, by its sheer size and domination of the mass media marketplace, was a power that the agencies were forced to deal with.

My intent in this book is to look at how and why Curtis developed its market research division and to follow the changes that took place during the tenure of Parlin, the division's first director. In that sense, this is a business history with Parlin and Curtis Publishing at its center. I have attempted to reach beyond that, though, and look for cultural and social reasons for the development and use of market research and the creation of market research departments. For the most part, though, I have chosen to concentrate on Curtis. Other scholars have done a good job of looking at the many players in early market research.²⁷ In doing so, though, those works often lose the nuance and intimacy that only a focused study like this can offer. Market research was not born in abstraction; rather, it involved real people who faced real obstacles as a profession formed. Only an in-depth study can tell that story. And though I tell a specific story, I also move between the specific and the general as I link Curtis Publishing to the broader currents of publishing, advertising, and business in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

This book also challenges another widely held assumption about Curtis magazines and other popular publications of the early twentieth century, as well. Although they are often grouped together as

“mass” magazines that responded to middle-class wants and needs, Curtis publications and many of their competitors clearly coveted the readership of educated, upper-income elites. That was the audience that advertisers wanted to reach, and it was to those readers that the magazines tailored themselves and marketed themselves aggressively. The middle class was certainly important to Curtis and other publishers, but it was of secondary importance; the lower classes were, from a business perspective, superfluous. The *Post*, the *Journal*, and their competitors were indeed “mass” magazines in that they reached nationwide audiences in numbers never before achieved by American publications. Those “masses,” however, were closer to a niche market in that they represented only a fraction of the population—a fraction targeted and defined by income. Curtis Publishing had neither the intent nor the desire to reach all of America; it wanted only that part of America that would and could purchase the goods of its advertisers.

In trying to understand the development of market research, I have drawn from many sources, disciplines, and philosophies, including cultural history, the history of marketing, the history of advertising, the history of business, the history of reading, and the history of journalism. Primarily, though, I have used a cultural approach applied to the world of business, creating biographical portraits of both a man and a business. In doing so, I have relied on several assumptions related to culture: that it is shared; that it changes; and that it can be understood by examining the public behavior and private thought of those who belong within a culture.²⁸ In this case, the public behavior consists of research reports, advertisements, published works, and speeches. The private thoughts consist of writings, confidential reports, or transcripts of private meetings. By examining both the public and the private, I have tried to create a fuller picture of how market research evolved.²⁹ In researching this book, I have drawn primarily from the Curtis Publishing Company papers at the University of Pennsylvania³⁰ and at the Curtis Archives in Indianapolis,³¹ supplemented by the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency papers at Duke University. I have also drawn on many books, articles, advertisements, and trade journals of the era, using the Cur-

tis research as a means of assessing assumptions that the company passed on to advertisers about audiences and the marketplace.

The research that Parlin did for Curtis certainly did not represent *all* the viewpoints or perceptions of the era's businesses, but it did represent the way Curtis Publishing Company viewed the marketplace and the consumer. The research represented, in effect, the reality of the marketplace as Curtis Publishing understood it.³² Because of that, Curtis's marketing and research records are useful in helping to understand some of the positions the company took toward advertising and circulation. They are also useful in understanding how market research and other forms of information became incorporated into one of the most successful publishing companies of the early twentieth century. Through Curtis Publishing, I look at how the concept of market and consumer research was pitched to potential advertisers as a means of empowerment in the marketplace, but also how it was carefully presented to show that businesses needed to buy advertisements if they were to take full advantage of the research. That was the purpose in the end—to sell. In that sense, this is a study of strategy, not imagery, in an American business that gradually saw great opportunity and value in information that it could collect, analyze, and disseminate about the marketplace.

In writing this book, I have tried to concentrate on the narrative. I use theory again and again in my interpretations, but in writing, I have tried to weave the human experience into the broader fabric of social change.³³ So, in effect, this is a humanist history thoroughly grounded in the techniques and philosophies of social science history. No matter the approach, direct causal connections are difficult to establish in any study of historical thought or culture. Records that might point to valuable connections or developments are incomplete or even nonexistent. In many cases, people do not know themselves where they picked up an idea or how they developed a way of thinking. As Susan Strasser demonstrates, cultural shifts “happen piecemeal, with new developments interacting in complex ways and exhibiting contradictions and incongruities that frustrate the historian's effort to tell a clear story of cause and effect or even to

provide accurate generalizations. People create those shifts by living their lives, making decisions that they may consider trivial or wholly personal but that have critical effects in the aggregate.”³⁴ Those difficulties in causal links hold true with the development of Commercial Research at Curtis Publishing Company. In researching and writing this book, though, I have tried to trace some of the people, policies, thoughts, philosophies, and changes, not only in Curtis but in business, industry, and society, that were related to the origins of the research division. I have tried to weave the story of Curtis into the story of the changes that took place in American business and American advertising during the early twentieth century.

I have focused most of my work on the 1910s and 1920s, trying to explain and to understand the development of market research at Curtis Publishing Company. Chapter 1 looks at how doubts about advertising, combined with the company’s belief in customer service, helped lead to the formation of Commercial Research. Chapter 2 looks at Parlin’s early days at Curtis and at the problems he overcame. Chapter 3 looks at how the Curtis advertising staff gradually came to accept Parlin’s work and eventually promoted it widely as a means of understanding the marketplace. Chapter 4 follows Parlin and his associates through some of their early studies and attempts to understand the guiding philosophies of their work. Chapter 5 looks at Curtis’s move into the rural market, a market that the company saw as the real challenge if American publishing and American advertising were to create a true mass market. Chapter 6 examines the development of readership research as an extension of market research. It shows how Curtis Publishing Company increasingly viewed readers as consumers of advertised products and how its emphasis on a “class” readership translated into an elitist—even racist—view of the American public. Chapter 7 looks at the changes that took place in Commercial Research in the 1920s, especially in the way that Curtis Publishing became involved in the promotion of consumption through its work in sales quotas and in defending advertising. Chapter 8 follows Commercial Research into the 1930s and contains the conclusions of my research, followed by a brief epilogue.

This story begins, though, in 1910 as consumption was growing increasingly important to the United States economy and to the lives of Americans as the country underwent a series of revolutionary changes. Rural Americans migrated to cities, consumer tastes changed rapidly, and the number of consumer products available on store shelves grew enormously. Many manufacturers also sought to expand beyond regional markets, taking advantage of improved transportation and methods of production, and envisioning a truly national market for the first time. Similarly, they sought to create demand for national brands in areas like clothing and food that were dominated by store brands or by unbranded merchandise. This environment forced many marketers to shift their thinking toward masses of new, unknown buyers (consumers) rather than individuals they knew—or thought they knew—and catered to (customers).³⁵ That change occurred nationally, led by companies that produced branded products that were the same from Maine to California, and created a need for information about the newly forming mass market. Who were the buyers of nationally branded products? Where were these buyers? How could they be reached? Could a company afford to reach them?

Those were some of the questions that a young advertising executive in Curtis Publishing's Boston office was pondering in 1910, as he came to the conclusion that his profession, and indeed the world of business, was changing around him. The company had to change, as well, he concluded, if it was going to keep up in this new world. The question was, how?