Sometime before 1911, an H. J. Heinz sales representative spent a week in a Wisconsin town promoting the company’s vinegar. As Frederick W. Nash of the sales and advertising department told the story, no grocer in this community of about ten thousand stocked the product. Most bought vinegar from farmers and believed that their customers would not pay extra for vinegar with the Heinz label. The sales representative went from door to door in the best neighborhoods, collecting introductions from one woman to the next. He sold nothing, but offered taste tests and compared Heinz manufacturing techniques “with the crude and imperfect methods of farmers.” If asked, he regrettfully informed his hostess that Heinz vinegar was not for sale in her town. About fifty influential women telephoned their grocers to complain, and the sales representative left town with orders in hand (1).

This story—possibly apocryphal—comes from a company too successful to be typical, but it demonstrates how advertised, branded consumer goods triumphed among the middle and upper classes during what political historians call the Progressive Era. The sales representative was not working alone, nor was the Heinz brand new to women wealthy enough to have telephone service. Innovative marketing and public relations efforts had distinguished the company since before the 1893 Columbian Exposition, where it gave out a million pickle charms. The five-hundred-person Heinz sales force could install window and interior displays simultaneously in 25,000 stores, coordinating pyramids of mincemeat, for example, with Thanksgiving advertising in women’s magazines. Thousands of light bulbs flashed images of gargantuan pickles over New York City and many other towns. The Heinz factory tour attracted twenty thousand visitors annually, and about fifteen thousand a day used the rest rooms, toured the demonstration kitchen, and took in the stereopticon slide show of the main factory at Atlantic City’s Heinz Ocean Pier during the summer (2).

In going directly to consumers to create demand, the Wisconsin sales representative followed the outlines of the strategy that underlay all this promotional effort: creating markets for branded products. This strategy established direct relationships between manufacturers and the end users of their products, and transformed the chain from manufacturer to wholesaler to retailer to customer. No longer might a grocer’s customers rely on his opinion about the best soap; no longer could wholesalers look for good deals among various soap manufacturers. People asked for Ivory, which could only be obtained from Procter and Gamble. Indeed, by 1909, some argued that a million dollars’ worth of advertising could not conquer the Ivory name—in essence, that Procter and Gamble was invulnerable to competition.

Manufacturers’ branding was used not only on packaged, labeled versions of traditional goods like vinegar and soap, but as an essential piece of the marketing strategy for new products like chewing gum, corn flakes, safety razors, and phonographs, which had never been made at home or in small crafts shops. Since colonial times, wealthy urbanites had eaten from ceramics made in English factories, and more typical Americans had bought a few manufactured products. But in 1880 they still groomed their food or bought it from the grower, and most people wore some homemade clothing. During the next thirty years, Americans everywhere and of all classes began to eat, drink, clean with, wear, and sit on products made in factories. Standardized, uniform goods that cost money supplanted the makeshift, the homemade, and the handmade, altering fundamental ways of life.

Without land for gardens or time for handicrafts, even poor urban workers joined an expanding market for manufactured goods. Inexpensive products like gum, soap, and tobacco offered premiums as part of their marketing; working people who saved wrappers and tokens could aspire to Kodak cameras, Gillette razors, Thermos bottles, and the lowest-priced Victrolas. Even people who lived far from stores could shop; the Sears and Montgomery Ward catalog pictured nearly every kind of manufactured product America had to offer.

Formerly customers, purchasing the objects of daily life in face-to-face relationships with community-based craftspeople and store-
keepers, Americans became consumers during the Progressive Era. They bought factory-produced goods as participants in a complex network of distribution—a national market that promoted individuals’ relationships with big, centrally organized, national-level companies. They got their information about products, not from the people who made or sold them, but from advertisements created by specialists in persuasion. These accelerating processes, though by no means universal, had taken firm hold of the American way of life.

The emerging consumer identity was especially well established among the middle- and upper-class people, many of them women, who regarded what we now understand as consumer issues as naturally allied to other progressive social and political campaigns. Struggles over pure food and drugs, weights and measures, and retail price maintenance were political manifestations of debates over manufacturing interests’ power as surely as discussions of trust busting or child labor. Shop-at-home campaigns against mail order houses used rhetoric that pitted “the people” against “big business.” Yet reformers regarded the fruits of mass production as indications of progress no less than did their contemporaries.

Promoting New Products

The transformation in American consumption habits was planned and coordinated by an advertising industry that was itself changing. Advertising agencies had once simply brokered advertising space in magazines and newspapers. Now they took on new roles, hiring artists and copywriters to create the advertising itself. The most advanced agencies handled product sampling and other non-print promotions as part of carefully planned campaigns that used market research to target markets segmented by ethnicity and income.

New media highlighted the new advertising. Newspapers and magazines had long published paid commercial messages in separate sections full of small, closely-packed ads, like classified advertising today. Now, following the lead of Cyrus Curtis’s Ladies’ Home Journal and the Pulitzer and Hearst newspapers, mass-circulation publications became advertising media, supported by advertising revenues and designed to highlight the ads. Billboards, the oldest of advertising media, were transformed by poster lithography, electricity, and outdoor advertising firms ensuring that posters would actually be kept up for the amount of time paid for. Even immigrants who did not read American newspapers and magazines saw billboards; they were also courted in ethnic newspapers and with cards placed simultaneously in thousands of trolleys, in cities all over the country, by streetcar advertising firms.

The new advertising was a response to profound changes in the production of goods. “Continuous” or “flow” production techniques—conveyor systems, rollers, and gravity slides—were common in some industries decades before Henry Ford created the assembly line for the Model T in 1913. They enabled big corporations to expand industrial output by moving materials faster through the factory. Many smaller firms did “batch work,” making large quantities of consumer products like fashion apparel, jewelry, and furniture, which came in many styles and were not amenable to the strictures of mass production. Together, batch-produced and mass-produced goods made in factories and available in unprecedented numbers around the turn of the twentieth century constituted the material for mass consumption (3).

Many of these goods were sold at new kinds of stores. Beginning in the 1870s and 1880s, modern mass retailers—first department stores, then mail order houses and chain stores—challenged the wholesalers and commodity dealers who had dominated distribution since mid-century. “Turnover” was the mass distributors’ central tenet, a parallel to the principles of mass production. This idea—moving goods into and out of the store quickly—was brought to its apotheosis by the big Chicago mail order houses, Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck. In 1906, Sears moved to a forty-acre tract, where two thousand people opened and processed more than nine hundred sacks of mail every day. Using trains and telegraphs, conveyor belts, pneumatic tubes, and scheduling systems, the mass retailers could coordinate the flow of goods from many producers to many consum-
ers. By 1915, the largest mail order firms kept files on four to six million customers, tracking their purchases.

The new retailing also challenged the wholesalers’ customers: the general stores at country crossroads and the grocery, drug, and hardware stores along small-town Main Streets and in urban shopping districts. Credit from such stores saw farmers through droughts and workers through strikes; their proprietors played central roles in community life. Big manufacturers depended on these small shopkeepers to distribute the new goods, and they courted storekeepers as vigorously as they did consumers.

**New Products, New Needs, New Habits**

Turn-of-the-century products may be understood as artifacts of a culture in the making, founded on new technologies and structured by new personal habits and new economic forms. People who had never bought cornflakes were taught to need them; those once content with oats scooped from the grocer’s bin were told why they should prefer Quaker Oats in a box. Advertising, when it was successful, created demand, but many products failed. Old-fashioned ways persisted; grocers who ordered packaged products also sold in bulk. Early twentieth-century ads attempted to build consumer trust in manufacturers, but trust in local merchants still motivated many purchases. Advertising celebrated the new, but many people were content with the old. The most effective marketing campaigns encouraged new needs and desires, not by creating them out of whole cloth, but by linking the rapid appearance of new products with the rapid changes that were occurring in all areas of social and cultural life.

As the Heinz representative suggested, the new goods were modern products produced by modern methods; they provided the physical expression of a break from earlier times and the wherewithal for modern habits. Packaged breakfast cereals suited urban people seeking convenience, punching a time clock, and not needing the calories of a country breakfast. Fountain pens permitted people to write anywhere. Safety razors replaced personal service in a public place with private, individual use of a disposable product. Cameras offered a completely new way of viewing the world. Phonographs brought the concert hall into the home.

In promoting such products, manufacturing companies and their advertising agents converted the population to the modern ways of mass production and factory-made goods, using images and approaches that ranged from fanciful to factual. They explicitly fostered new habits by selling product categories along with the products. Advertising its patented “In-Eleanor Roosevelt- Seal” packaging, National Biscuit promoted the whole concept of packaged crackers. Campbell’s sold “the Soup Idea,” as a company representative described its initial advertising. Colgate taught people to brush their teeth and (along with Gillette and other razor manufacturers) gave away pamphlets that explained self-shaving to men who patronized barbers. Kodak transformed an expensive and highly technical hobby by introducing cameras that were relatively cheap and easy to operate, and by teaching people to recognize family photo opportunities.

Expenditures on leisure goods and activities were central to new lifestyles. Even those without cameras patronized photo studios for formal portraits and had their pictures taken by roving photographers on outings to the amusement park or the beach. Amusement parks themselves offered people of all classes an opportunity to fill their leisure time with purchased experiences. So did movies, where for a nickel immigrant workers could watch actors living out American dreams, using American products. And the department store and the mail order catalog transformed shopping into a fantasy excursion.

**Progressivism and the New Consumption**

Belief that progress could be equated with abundant consumer goods pervaded American culture as the diversity and quality of manufactured goods improved, their prices dropped, and daily physical needs were met with less drudgery. Even critics of corporate capitalism appreciated the benefits of mass production and mass distribution. McClure’s, Collier’s, and other inexpensive popular magazines—the media of the new advertising—were also the media of reform: in their pages the work of muckrakers was juxtaposed with advertisements for factory-made standardized products. Ladies’ Home Journal spearheaded the campaign for pure food and drugs, and featured columns by Ida Tarbell and Jane Addams. Both the advertised products and the reform campaigns were manifestations
of progress as turn-of-the-century Americans understood it. At the same time, citizens—attuned to corporate greed and misdeeds by progressive journalists and politicians—demanded protection from the big businesses on which they were becoming dependent for supplying daily needs.

Complaints about adulterated food were longstanding. Local merchants could not be held accountable for food from distant sources, and new kinds of adulteration joined such traditional fraudulent practices as extending flour with chalk and other cheap substances. Concerned with shelf life, manufacturers seeking national markets promoted the development of preservatives, colorings, and flavorings, which chemical companies tested for efficacy but not for safety. Reformers called for legislation to establish the principle that manufacturers could not legally sell poison and call it food or medicine. State legislatures began to regulate food and drugs during the 1880s, but the federal government had no jurisdiction over domestic food supplies until the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

The campaign to pass that law was championed by Ladies’ Home Journal and Collier’s, by home economists who publicized pure food concerns in their classes, and by state agencies that mounted displays at food expositions. H. J. Heinz, Frederick Pabst, and other big food manufacturers supported the legislation; plagued by proliferating state regulations, they wanted a uniform federal law. These manufacturers argued that branded, packaged goods inherently offered consumer protection by identifying the manufacturer and guaranteeing consistent quality. Trade organizations representing wholesale liquor dealers, food manufacturers, and the patent medicine interests, however, opposed the bill. So did the National Association of Manufacturers, although regulation received overwhelming support on the floor of its 1906 convention; the leadership opposed the bill, and the organization’s lobbyists worked to weaken it.

Agitation for pure foods inspired and merged with the movement for accurate weights and measures, which achieved federal legislation in 1913. At pure food expositions and state fairs, weights and measures proponents displayed measuring devices with false bottoms, compared correct and incorrect sizes of milk bottles and bushel baskets, and occasionally invited fair goers to inform on retailers. Urban weights and measures officers raided grocery stores and stalls in public markets. Other city officials construed their charge as protecting both consumers and small retailers from violations by packaged goods manufacturers who sold big boxes full of air. Speaking at a 1910 conference sponsored by the United States Bureau of Standards, a Chicago official recounted his battle to require packaged food to carry net weights. “I lost that bill,” he told the audience. “Capital was too big.”

For all the might of manufacturers, the big companies involved in distribution—wholesaling firms and mass retailers—wielded their own power. Manufacturers attempted to establish brand loyalties strong enough to overcome price sensitivity—belief in the qualities of Kellogg’s or Ivory that would convince customers to pay whatever they cost. But the mass retailers countered by offering better prices than independent merchants on branded, nationally advertised products. Manufacturers struggled to maintain control over their products with “retail price maintenance” or “fair trade,” a policy of setting prices not only to wholesalers, but also to retailers and consumers, often by printing a price on the package. This policy disregarded the tradition that producers who sold to middlemen gave up both title to the goods and any right to govern sales to third parties. Opponents called it “price fixing,” and it met with continual challenge in the courts.

The new retailing also met active opposition from local business interests. Local newspapers regularly attacked mail order houses; small-town businessmen organized “trade-at-home” organizations. Sears and Montgomery Ward fought back in catalog prose. “The amount of money that we can save you over the prices you pay at home varies from 15 to 50 per cent,” Sears claimed in 1908, “to say nothing of the fact that our goods are, as a rule, of a higher grade than those carried by the average storekeeper” (4). The two sides squared off in political battles like that surrounding the establishment of parcel post, which passed in 1912. Yet, the local merchants should not be characterized as activists for a dying past. Organized in their chambers of commerce and boards of trade, they championed local economic growth through road-building, sewer systems, train depots, and irrigation projects. But whether or not they saw or acknowledged it, the good roads they promoted and the mass-merchandising techniques they attacked were of a piece, two aspects of a transformation that reverberated throughout the culture.

That transformation provides an understanding of progressivism that complicates the conventional picture. Calls for reform of the industrial order took place within a clear and general comprehension of its benefits. In individual lives, new ways coexisted with old ones: people bought some new things and not others, and they set their new purchases next to their customary goods and their keepsakes. Farmers both ordered from Sears and bartered eggs with country storekeepers; urban workers bought goods from pushcarts as well as department stores; immigrant cooks served both traditional foods...
and Uneeda biscuits. Still, the future was clear: young people insisted on new levels of convenience, leisure, and material comfort. Living through unprecedented change in the fundamentals of daily life for all but the poorest of the poor, the progressives had reason to believe in progress. ❏

Endnotes

Further treatment of the points in this article, and citations for specifics not noted below, may be found in Susan Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

Bibliography
