Trade cards in Colonial America

When Colonial America was settled there were many traditions and practices that came with the people who were looking for a fresh start in a new land. The use of Trade Cards, which started in Britain, France and parts of Europe, were a highly stylized type of advertising that came with them.

The Trade Card is a form of communication that shares a history with an even older form called a “visiting card”. The visiting card was in use in elite society circles to introduce one’s self to another person by following the accepted rules of etiquette. Instead of simply expecting someone to accept your visit you presented a card at the persons home you wish to visit or speak with. If a second card then arrived at your home, then the person you left the initial card with was open to a visit or appointment. If no card was forthcoming, then you were discouraged form pursuing it any further and to do so was considered bad form. One of the methods developed under this set of societal rules to show heightened interest was to leave the card with a bent corner. This signified you left the card personally as opposed to sending it via a third party or handing it to a servant. Visiting cards eventually became less common but Trade cards were just starting to have an impact. (1nd)

Similar in look and function to the “visiting card” the Trade card evolved as a way for businesses, tradespeople and proprietors to generate word of mouth and an awareness among its future customers by evoking a feel for proper conduct and appreciation for the customer. Initially Trade cards were printed on paper and were comparable to shopkeeper’s bills that would double as an advertisement. Eventually they were printed on card stock and were designed to be portable and to fit in a pocket or folded to carry. As Trade cards were expensive to create and the business of printing was not able to quickly adapt to changes in style they were usually either printed in small runs of one hundred or larger runs with limited distribution. Business owners or proprietors were very selective in how they used the cards. Many times, they were given to new or existing customers at the time of sale to help the customer remember where the goods were purchased. The cards were printed in a small square or rectangular size to encourage these customers to carry it with them or hand it to someone who might need these businesses in the future. At other times these cards were handed out to prospective customers by the business owner who identified them as person of substantive economic means and desire that would purchase from them or circulate it among their circle of acquaintances. (2nd)

The design of the cards evolved in several phases. The earlier designs from Britain and Europe relied heavily on associations with royal members of society and the unimpeachable integrity of their services or products. These designs frequently had crests of arms, heavy flourish type crests and flowery superlatives designed to entice the customer. As the cards became more popular the designs then began to focus on the quality and types of goods or services the business provided. The illustrations then became very detailed with many featuring a lithograph type rendering of the place of business or a collection of goods sold. Many were also imbued with an “action” illustration that became a pictograph version of what the business did as a service or goods they sold and how they were used. In the early history of Trade cards in the colony the styles and designs were very similar to those most likely sent or brought over from other countries. As the colony prospered the cards changed in to a style that better reflected the trade and commerce typically seen in a new county.

The types of businesses that utilized these Trade cards were as varied as the businesses themselves. There are examples of cards advertising draining of bedpans, removal of bugs using specialized wallpaper, the venerable chimney sweeping and ember removal and fishing equipment for the refined gentleman. The cards themselves became highly collectible early on for several reasons. They were usually of high quality and the printing was highly detailed. In addition, many businesses could not afford the printing costs associated with them so when a card was handed out by a business it created the perception of a higher quality goods or services for the customer and in turn it gave them a feeling of stature in relation to the purchase of these commodities. This scarcity due to the cost also added to the desirability. Since there was not yet a traditional type of mass advertising this built in restricted availability was a positive effect on business growth by creating an increased desire for higher grades goods due to pent up demand by prosperous colonists.

As the status of Trade cards rose in the commerce of colonial life many businesses tried to stand out even more. Many hired designers to create new designs or create a specific branding for their businesses. These designers were primarily working from France, Britain or Europe but as the colony grew this in turn created a new occupation for printers or illustrators. By the 18th century Trade cards evolved into more than simply a form of advertising. Businesses, investors and various types of proprietors began to use the cards as a form of security or actual trade for commerce. It had now common practice for someone to send or ship a Trade card via a courier or representative internationally to others to signify that this person or business was in effect guaranteed to be fiscally backed or financially interested in doing trade with them. Obviously much of this activity was based on expected behaviors and moral pressure to be as good as one’s word is. Such was the complicated and trusted relationship of the Trade card now.

In time this same financial trust was used with all customers of businesses that issued the cards. The owners or employees of these businesses began to use these cards as a form of an open account ledger and receipt due to the scarcity of coins and bills. A customer would purchase a good or a service on an open account and the business would record the sale on the back of the card. The card is now in effect a bill of credit and a receipt. When the bill was paid either in installments or in full it would be recorded and noted by dates and employee signatures. When the purchase was complete the card many times was returned to the customer as proof of purchase to use for any future lines of credit and in the case of defective services or merchandise. Over time these cards served as proof of credit worthiness and allowed customers to make larger purchases, even at other businesses. (3nd)

While the use of Trade cards existed well past the 18th century the offer of extended payment and credit terms changed rather quickly reflecting the change in society and the behavior of customers purchasing goods. The changes in advertising and lowered cost to reach the masses of customers also caused a rapid decline in the cache of Trade cards.

Trade cards did not disappear entirely though. Today we use something very similar called a business card. It has much of the same functionality and appearance. The highly detailed and embellished designs are now rarely seen even though the costs are so low any business or average person can afford to print them. It would also be highly improbable you could convince a business to issue you a line of credit based solely on the fact you possess the card. Ironically people also use them frequently as “visiting cards” without realizing the real history of the small pocket size card.

# References

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