

The Matchbook As An Advertising Medium

It's hard to tell these days, but there was a time when the matchbook was the most common and popular advertising medium in North America. They were handy, colorful, cheap (try free), and even a moderate smoker was exposed to the advertising over 20 times a day.

Matchbook advertising pre-dated the radio and was embraced by almost every major industry in America. Consumers received them as calling cards from businesses large and small, they played contests on them, they used them as money-saving coupons. By the end of World War II, over 200 billion matchbooks had been printed, and it was estimated that there were a million matchcover collectors in the United States! Most weren't what we would call serious collectors, but they at least saved their matchbooks from their favorite restaurants and vacation spots...and thereby making matchbooks familiar to emerging younger generations, as well. Some 99% of smokers used matchbooks, and 45% of those could name the advertisers on the matchbooks they were using.

And, over the decades, those matchbooks influenced the lives of countless people in countless ways. For example, in the 1930s there was a high school student who had an interest in art. His mother happened to see an advertisement on a "Draw Me" matchbook by Art Instruction, Inc. The boy took the offered art instruction course for \$170, a whopping amount in the midst of the Depression. Several years later he became one of their art instructors. Eventually, he went on to create the *Peanuts* comic strip, and the Charlie Brown and Linus characters were actually based on co-workers at Art Instruction, Inc....for that high school boy was Charles Schulz.

The 1940s and 1950s were the high point in U.S. matchbook production—billions were being produced every year, advertising everything from shoes to aircraft, life-saving medicines to Chinese restaurants. One could walk into just about every business imaginable and be greeted by that inevitable bowl or basket of matchbooks on the counter, free for the taking.

...And then came the disposable lighter! The first lighter had been invented in 1823, long before the matchbook, but when Bic introduced its cheap, disposable lighter in 1973, things began to change...rapidly.

That wasn't the only factor in the decline of the matchbook, though. In 1957, the first article linking smoking to cancer appeared in *Readers Digest Magazine*, and in 1971 the government banned cigarette advertising on television and radio. Then came the anti-smoking campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s.

Within 20 years, matchbook production in the United States had declined by 90%! It's the whole buggy whip story all over again!

The matchbook isn't dead yet, of course. As of 2014, D,D, Bean was still cranking out 4 billion matchbooks a year...plus Diamond, plus Atlas, plus imports.

So, what's exactly happened here? The matchbook is still a handy, colorful, and cheap advertising medium. It hasn't lost any of those things—but is *has* lost its customer base. Interestingly, though, there *does* seem to have been a small resurgence in the past couple of years. Whether this ultimately will mean anything remains to be seen at this point.

[<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/undertheinfluence/striking-images-matchbook-advertising-1.2801847>; <http://pabook2.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/Matchbook.html>]