

# New Mexico Quarterly

---

Volume 3 | Issue 3

Article 7

---

1933

## The Lack of Specifications in Advertising

John D. Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Clark, John D.. "The Lack of Specifications in Advertising." *New Mexico Quarterly* 3, 3 (1933). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol3/iss3/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## The Lack of Specifications in Advertising

By JOHN D. CLARK

THOSE who deal in any of the commodities which pass in commerce have standards, more or less rigid, which enable the seller to indicate the quality of his goods, and the buyer to have fair knowledge of the materials he contemplates purchasing. These standards come as near as words can come, to telling exactly what the commodity is. The words used in the standards are apt to be technical, but they convey, to those who understand them, accurate pictures of that which they are used to describe.

The large scale purchaser of coal buys on specifications and his contract is based on such standards as: percentages of moisture, volatile combustible matter, ash, fixed carbon, sulfur, and the number of British thermal units which a pound of coal will yield upon combustion. The purchaser of small amounts of fuel hunts in vain through the newspaper advertisements of the retail fuel companies for such indications of quality.\* Advertisements of gasoline draw liberally upon the dictionary, and the merits of the different brands are *suggested* by flowery words, and such pictures as those of camp-fire scenes, polar bears, and beautiful maidens. One marvels that human ingenuity can devise the many themes used to *suggest* wide variation in the quality of a commodity which comes from crude oil. The advertiser could tell the *exact truth* about his product if he chose to inform the public in terms of the specifications known to the trade, among which are: initial boiling temperature, temperature at the end of distillation, sulfur content and anti-knock rating. Were specifications supplied in advertising, the consumer could have a chance to select the brand giving him the most for his money when the fuel is used in his own car.

\* Rigid specifications for small orders not practical. Cost of analysis is added to too small amount of fuel.

There are specifications used in the rubber trade, and in the commerce of textiles. There are specifications used for tires. They seldom, if ever, appear fully in tire advertisements. When one buys a tire he purchases that make which *he thinks* gives him the most for his money. He would have some real yardstick with which to arrive at a judgment if advertisements of tires quoted the specifications of the tire trade.

Some of the mail order houses submit specifications to the tire makers and award contracts to the factory which furnishes the best tire for the lowest price. It is entirely possible that a nationally advertised tire and a mail order house tire are identical except for name. Can one reason that, as the mail order house spends less for national advertising, one can get the most for his money if he purchases the mail order tire? Can he? Yes and no! Yes, if he has complete specifications of both. No, if he does not.

Recently in the laboratories of the University a senior student was analysing a crank case oil which retails for \$1.40 a gallon. The student determined all the points of oil specifications of a nationally advertised oil, and then, out of curiosity, analysed a non-advertised oil which retails for \$0.50 a gallon. The two oils were practically identical. Can he and his friends save \$0.90 a gallon on future oil purchases? Yes, if they analyse each purchase. Yes, also, if specifications are given. Otherwise, no. However, those who purchase large quantities of oil can make contracts based on specifications, and can secure high grade material at excellent prices.

This symposium is on *Advertising*. The writer is placing his emphasis on *what might appear in advertising*, instead of what does appear. How refreshing it would be to see cigarette manufacturers announcing the quality of tobacco in several columns, some of the columns telling the trade specifications of various tobaccos and one column telling the specifications of the tobacco used in the cigarette

being advertised. A bulletin issued by the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station gives the nicotine content of cigarettes. A cigarette advertised for its *mildness* does not, according to the bulletin, contain the lowest amount of nicotine. Percentages of nicotine are definite and specific. What does *mildness* mean? What accurate instrument can measure mildness?

Prominent men and women endorse various products. Often they are not competent to judge accurately, (by specifications), the products they recommend. They never say, "This product, which I endorse, is the best value for the money, as I have proven by the most refined of scientific tests." Scientists, too, sometimes make endorsements. Do they give exact facts and specifications, such as they would give if employed by a large purchasing agent who employed the scientist in order that he might secure the largest return for the least money? Just find them in the advertisement if you can!

We have good protection concerning the healthfulness of the foods which pass in interstate commerce. Labels on containers must tell no untruth. The administrators of the Food and Drug Act see to that. One cannot, however, tell from ordinary labels on two packages of similar foods, which of the two is the best value for the money. But, if the labels should have printed upon them the specifications which the government would ask for if it were to purchase a large order, say, for the Navy, one could be much more certain of purchasing to good advantage.

There are those who say that the specifications used by the trade in each commodity, would be far too difficult for an ordinary individual to comprehend; that these specifications would be so technical as to be meaningless to the average purchaser. One answers: is there any harm in advertising the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and in the most accurate way that this is known? There may be no harm, but the advertiser prefers not to

release the advantage which the seller has over the buyer. Unless specifications are given the *seller knows exactly* what he is selling, and he knows its relation in quality to other seller's articles of the same sort, while the *buyer thinks he knows* what he is buying.

Probably most purchasers would not learn the significance of many specifications. Those who are interested could easily do so. As for the technical difficulties, look at the subject of vitamins. Once this was a technical subject little understood by laymen. Today the modern, up-to-date housewife knows her vitamins as a sailor knows his compass.

Summarizing: he who advertises the specifications used by the trade and tells where his commodity fits into those specifications, comes most nearly to telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth concerning that which he advertises. Advertisements of scientific equipment used in laboratories and hospitals are apt to be very specific. Scientists insist on knowing what they buy for their technical work. Many advertisements of commodities sold to the general public contain almost anything but specifications. They may appeal to any of our instincts, and in so doing act as "red herring across the trail," to divert our attention from the fact that the *advertisements do not tell what we should know if we are to get the most for our money.*