Advertising in Action

No one knows for sure when advertising first started. It is possible that it grew out of the discovery that some people did certain kinds of work better than others did. That led to the concept of specialization, which means that people focus on providing one specific product or service.

Suppose there was a man we’ll call Mr. Plowright. Using what he knew about farming and working with iron, Mr. Plowright invented a plow that made farming easier. He opened a shop, and then he put up a sign outside the shop to attract customers. That sign may have been no more than a plow carved into a piece of wood over the shop door.

Historians believe that the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were the first to use signs and images for advertising. Even before people could read, they understood such signs.

A medium is the method used to communicate a message. You might say that the first medium used in advertising was visual with signs and symbols. The second medium was sound. Originally, just the human voice and maybe some kind of simple instrument, such as a bell, were used to grab attention.

A crier was someone with a voice loud enough to be heard over the other noises of a city. In ancient Egypt, shopkeepers hired people to spread the news about their products. This job was not too different from a TV commercial in today’s world.

The practice of using town criers also was very popular in Europe and North America. By this time, though, another medium for advertising had become available: print. Printed advertisements became the easiest way for businesses to publicize their goods and services. The first advertising agency was established in Philadelphia in the 1870s. Now businesses could hire someone to write their advertisements.