

THE GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL OF APPROVAL: FROM INNOVATIVE CONSUMER PROTECTION TO POPULAR BADGE OF QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

By providing information through factual content, editorial comments, and advertising, the great magazine expansion of the late 19th century reduced market imperfections for many consumer goods. Given the virtual absence of government and non-profit sources of information, some magazines even took the initiative to prohibit misleading advertising. However, in the early 20th century *Good Housekeeping* surpassed normal practices and created both a guaranty for advertised products and a Seal of Approval from the Good Housekeeping Institute.

This first scholarly narrative of the guaranty and Seal concentrates on the creation of the two devices, their later challenge by the Federal Trade Commission, and continued public trust in the Seal long after it declined to a simple limited warranty.

Introduction

The dramatic transformation of the United States from a predominantly rural nation in 1860 to a giant of industry and urban population in the 1890s created national markets for many processed foods and manufactured goods, as large-scale production and distribution provided gains in efficiency. However, national markets often weakened the personal contacts that had traditionally characterized relations between producers, middlemen, and consumers. This left the public poorly informed and often the victims of fraud. However, the distrust that resulted also created conditions that would reward the establishment of confidence in a brand's consumer goods.

Of the many market reform efforts that followed, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval merits particular attention, for it became one of the most durable and successful consumer-protection devices in American history. Emerging from a publisher's "Iron-clad Contract" about the quality of items advertised in a magazine, it remained synonymous with quality and authority long after the initial market imperfections largely disappeared. The Seal of Approval entered the vernacular as a badge of functionality and quality, and among economists the term came to symbolize the existence of trustworthy characteristics that lowered the cost of doing business. For example, Michael Bordo and

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Hugh Rockoff titled an article, "Was Adherence to the Gold Standard a 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval' during the Interwar Period?"¹ Approval", *The Journal of Economic History* 56, (June 1996).

Despite such significant issues surrounding the Seal of Approval, historians of advertising, like those of the mass media in general, failed to devote detailed attention to the Seal, and consequently paid scant tribute to its significance. Apparently no historical analyses of any sort treat the Seal, and scholars merely mention it in passing. Historical accounts, like Frank Mott's *History of American Magazines*, refer to it only briefly, when discussing the development of *Good Housekeeping*. Several recent marketing studies of third-party certification marks did analyze public perceptions of the Seal, but they focused on public trust in various types of certification at one moment in time.² Because the Seal of Approval and the Ironclad Contract from the publishers of *Good Housekeeping* were linked to the early development of magazine advertising codes, and because nearly a century after its creation, the Seal continues its role as an advertising tie-in, the absence of a narrative treatment of the subject is unfortunate. Clearly, it is worthy of its own history.³

The Origins of the Seal: The Early Years

Given the material progress, social change, and economic inequality of the Gilded Age, it is not surprising that parallel transformations characterized the products people bought and the markets where they bought them. Before the Civil War, aside from specialty and luxury goods, Americans typically satisfied their modest material desires by purchasing locally-made products. The customer frequently knew the producer as well as any merchant intermediary. By the early 20th century, however, industrial capitalism had often established national markets for branded merchandise. These national markets typically fractured the previous connections between producers and consumers, removing personal assurances of quality and disadvantaging purchasers just when many new varieties of products entered the marketplace.

Responding to the public distrust that resulted from these changes in markets, firms emphasized their trademarks. In theory, trademarks offered the consumer some information, an implicit suggestion of quality, and a connection, however tenuous, to the distant factories and headquarters. However, not all goods bearing trademarks were what they claimed to be. If they were not, the consumer had little recourse, for the legal doctrine *caveat emptor* provided little after-sale protection. Information about the reliability, safety, and other characteristics of consumer goods had become vitally important to even working-class families, but neither the courts nor regulation held companies to their advertised word.

To reach distant consumers, firms also turned to advertising, and its growth significantly fueled the era's explosive growth in popular magazines. By the turn of the century, the number of monthlies exceeded 1,800, compared with only 280 four decades earlier. Several of the new magazines dominated American newsstands for the century to come,

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including *McCall's* (founded in 1870), *Popular Science* (1872), *Woman's Home Companion*, (1873), *Farm Journal*, (1877), *Cosmopolitan* (1886; substantially different from the present), *Collier's* (1888) and *Vogue* (1892). Women's titles particularly flourished, becoming the first truly mass magazines. In their early decades they frequently advocated pure food and drug legislation, and generally led the struggle for better products.⁴

The first issue of *Good Housekeeping: a Family Journal Conducted in the Interest of the Higher Life of the Household* appeared on May 2, 1885. Clark W. Bryan both founded and published the new periodical, and he clearly aimed to elevate life in the home, though the precise meaning of "higher life of the household" seems lost.⁵ Bryan's magazine followed closely the appearance of three other women's magazines destined for wide readership (*McCall's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, and *The Ladies' Home Journal*), and in the face of this competition, *Good Housekeeping* sought to differentiate itself. It did so by devoting much more space to food issues.⁶ Bryan also devoted editorial space to attacks on unscrupulous manufacturers and misleading advertisements. This emphasis symbolized the *Good Housekeeping* philosophy that soon came to characterize the magazine, the importance of keeping very close to the interests of the readers.⁷

After Bryan died in 1898, the magazine passed through a succession of owners, then became the property of the Phelps Publishing Company in 1900. The fit between magazine and new publisher apparently worked well, for that same year *Good Housekeeping* set up an Experiment Station, later known as the *Good Housekeeping* Institute. Initially oriented to the editorial office rather than the advertising department, in 1902 it began testing the reliability of materials and equipment designed for the household consumer. Producers paid a fee for the testing; the products winning approval were listed in each issue. Soon the magazine only accepted advertising from products in this group, and regularly published "An Inflexible Contract Between the Publisher and Each Subscriber."⁸ Popularized as the "Ironclad Contract," it included a money-back guarantee (or more accurately, guaranty)⁹ of the reliability of the advertisements. In addition, in 1904 the Experiment Station introduced "Our Roll of Honor for Pure Food Products." This conveniently served two causes, consumer protection and corporate profit. The list provided consumers with improved information about products, and it probably encouraged firms to advertise in the magazine, because advertised products from the list carried a five-point star with the words "Pure Food Assurance - - Good Housekeeping."¹⁰

The first Seal of Approval appeared in 1909, designed to display on the packaging of a product its approval by the Institute. The Seal took the form of an ellipse enclosing the words "Tested and Approved by the *Good Housekeeping* Institute Conducted by *Good Housekeeping* Magazine." (See Exhibit 2). One of the first seals linked to a publication, its stated goal was to offer the consumer a unique combination of education and protection, with a desired byproduct to "profoundly promote improvement in and vastly greater use of, labor-saving devices, money-saving apparatus and other conveniences for household use."¹¹ Nevertheless, companies paid to have their products tested and thus qualify to use the Seal. In contrast to later practice, the Seal initially graced the reports of the Institute and appeared in packaging, but was not displayed in advertising copy published in *Good Housekeeping*.

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Thus, in the early years, the Institute played two distinct roles in testing product quality and evaluating proposed advertising. To qualify for the Ironclad Contract and to advertise in the magazine, the advertisers had to have their products tested by the Institute. However, the Institute's tests and clearance to run an advertisement were just initial steps towards actually achieving the Seal of Approval. The Institute's review of advertising, was then, separate from the use of the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval (an even more rigorous process), but if a product was approved by the Institute, a service the manufacturer actually had to pay for, then the product did not need to be re-reviewed before being advertised in the magazine.¹²

In creating the early "Ironclad Contract" and the "Roll of Honor", *Good Housekeeping* had responded to needs for information that were as old as commerce. In devising a seal, its solution was as old as money itself, the creation of a visually distinct symbol of quality. The seal also served one purpose intended by the guilds of the Middle Ages: to discourage the production of defective and shoddy wares.¹³ While a trademark bridged the gap between the consumer and the merchandise, *Good Housekeeping* used its mark to guarantee that the bridge was stable, and capable of bearing the consumer's confidence.

Born when there were no advertising regulations, no consumer protection laws, and no liability legislation, the Seal of Approval provided a significant service reaching beyond *Good Housekeeping* readers to both companies and consumers in general. The Seal was one of the first codes to set standards for the products advertised in a periodical, and its standards of product performance applied even if the product had not been advertised in the magazine. From those beginnings nearly a century ago, despite later lawsuits and an inquiry by the Federal Trade Commission, the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval continued to receive high popular acceptance, becoming, as one author put it, "a synonym for consumer confidence."¹⁴

Initially, the Seal was offered as a consumer service to inform readers, and products earning the Seal were not required to be advertised in *Good Housekeeping*. However, from the start, a product could not be advertised without the testing approval of the Institute. As a result, in the Institute's first year, the magazine reportedly rejected \$196,000 out of \$240,000 in advertising revenues.¹⁵ Clearly the Seal was not initially considered a money-making gimmick, unlike some other attempts by third parties and professional associations to inform the public for a fee. In fact, if the claims of rejected advertising are correct, the testing requirements from the Institute must have reduced advertising income significantly in the short run without a compensating rise in circulation.¹⁶

The magazine's interest in the quality of products led *Good Housekeeping* to support actively the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. It also worked to "petition for similar improvements in the laws regarding drugs and medicine."¹⁷ *Good Housekeeping* became even more closely linked to such crusades when, in 1912, Dr. Harvey W. Wiley was hired to head the Bureau of Chemistry within the Institute. The former chief chemist of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Wiley had won fame in the fight against food adulteration, and earned respect as the "Father of the Pure Food and Drug Act."¹⁸ When he retired from the government, the position he accepted at the Institute paid less

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than any alternative, but probably offered the greatest opportunity to continue his crusade. He remained with the Institute for seventeen years, and later claimed he rejected more than a million dollars of advertising submitted to *Good Housekeeping*.¹⁹ His close association with the Institute worked to lend additional credibility to the young Seal.

In limiting advertising to more reliable products, *Good Housekeeping* was not unique. Other publishers in the era of muckrakers and progressivism had already moved to protect their readers from fraudulent advertising. Perhaps surprisingly, the distinction for initiating such policies goes to such agricultural magazines as the *Farm Journal* in 1880 and *Farm Life* in 1897. *Agriculturist* apparently began censoring its advertising as early as the 1860's.²⁰ *The Ladies' Home Journal* also played a pioneering role in regulating advertising in 1892, when it ruled out all advertising for patent medicine. In 1910, it adopted the Curtis Advertising Code, which prohibited either *The Ladies' Home Journal* or *The Saturday Evening Post* from accepting advertising meant to defraud or deceive.²¹

By contrast, initially the Seal of Approval certified even products that were not advertised in the magazine. Thus it served the general public as an indicator of quality. Editorial policy during the first three decades reinforced the role of the Seal as providing general information to consumers, and isolated it somewhat from the magazine's advertising interests. The Seal of Approval did not appear on the same page as the guarantee of advertisers (generally found near the beginning of each issue), but instead accompanied the description of the Institute's findings of products deemed worthy of the Seal. The words within the Seal said "Tested and Approved by the Good Housekeeping Institute," an entity entirely separate from the advertising department.

Similarly, but separately, "Our Guarantee" of advertisements first appeared in the July 1913 issue above the Index to Advertisers, which debut then. It read:²² All advertisements appearing in *Good Housekeeping Magazine* are absolutely guaranteed. Your money will be promptly refunded, by the manufacturer or by us, if you purchase goods advertised with us and they prove unsatisfactory. This applies equally to purchases made through your retail merchant or directly from the advertiser. The only condition is that in making purchases, the reader shall always state that the advertisement was seen in *Good Housekeeping*.

Following the Index to Advertisers was a handy Complaint Blank for those consumers who had "been dissatisfied with the goods made or furnished by any advertiser in *Good Housekeeping*." From this beginning until the July 1929 issue, the wording of the guarantee changed seven times, and it may have remained little changed between then and December 1938. It expanded and contracted to fill anywhere from less than one-quarter page (June 1924-November 1928, for example) to an entire page (January 1917-January 1920).

During the years 1909 - 1939, the Seal underwent only one main change, in July 1929. This was the addition of a five-pointed star prominently displayed in the center of the Seal. The red star indicated that the product was not only also approved by the Institute, but also advertised in the magazine and thus backed by the Ironclad Contract from the Publisher. The only other alterations were the additions of embellishments on

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the exterior of the Seal, which seemed popular in the early days. Examples of this art can be seen in Exhibit 2.

The early success and popularity of the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval did not go unnoticed by other consumer magazines. In 1925 *Better Homes and Gardens* began offering a money-back guarantee on items advertised in the magazine, and in 1951 even presented its guarantee in the graphic form of a seal. *Parents' Magazine* issued, in the 1930s, its "Commendation Seal" for advertisers meeting their requirements. In 1958, *McCall's* instituted the *McCall's* Use-Tested Symbol program, which based its guarantee not only on the product when purchased but also on tests of how well the product would wear. The impetus for *McCall's* initiative was likely the almost simultaneous appointment as editor of Herbert Mayes, who during thirty-three years at *Good Housekeeping* had seen how well the Seal of Approval worked.²³

The Years in Court, 1939-1941

By the 1930s, *Good Housekeeping* lagged behind the circulation of the industry leader, *Ladies Home Journal*. Nevertheless, the Hearst magazine regularly proved financially successful, and over the years eclipsed the profits of its competitors. Unfortunately, it seems impossible to discover to what extent this success depended on editorial content (mostly factual articles and serialized fiction, with frequent displays of color), and how much resulted from the guarantee and Seal of Approval. However, in the last years of the Great Depression, these features of the magazine came under direct attack from newly extended reach of the federal government.

In 1938, Congress passed the Wheeler-Lea Amendment that declared unlawful "[U]nfair methods of competition in commerce, and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in commerce." The amendment placed regulation of false and deceptive advertising under the jurisdiction of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), whose first major action under its new powers was not against an advertiser, but instead against a publisher.²⁴ In August 1939 the Commission lodged a complaint against Hearst Magazines for having engaged in misleading and deceptive practices in issuing guarantees and seals of approval, and for publishing grossly exaggerated and false claims for products in the advertising pages of *Good Housekeeping*.²⁵

The FTC was able to unearth examples of ill-advised behavior by the magazines, though they were perhaps not unusual given the era's publishing standards. Among the advertised products, for example, were a vitamin preparation alleged to feed the capillaries and provide nourishment to the skin, a cosmetic that claimed to refine pores to invisibility, and a proprietary medicine that would destroy the "pimple germ" in sixty seconds. Similarly, the Shopping Service had been advertised as a free service for the convenience of readers, although behind this "free service," *Good Housekeeping* received a commission of 5% or more on all merchandise sold.²⁶

In fact, the Shopping Service had been dropped in January 1939, and Hearst's lawyers determined to fight the charges. Consequently, during a period of nearly two years,

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the FTC organized a series of hearings in Chicago, New York, and Washington.²⁷ Suspicions arose more than once that the envy of competitors, directed against one of the Depression's most prosperous magazines, influenced the complaint, particularly when the publisher of *The Ladies' Home Journal* and the editor of *McCall's* were among the leading witnesses called by the Commission. They testified that the *Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval* did indeed constitute unfair competition. The coincidence that some of the products mentioned as having made "grossly exaggerated and false claims" in *Good Housekeeping* were simultaneously advertised in *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's* was never mentioned.²⁸

The advertising community followed the case closely, for through the lengthy hearings it sometimes seemed the Federal Trade Commission was out to ban seals of approval altogether.²⁹ In the end, after ten volumes and more than eight thousand pages of testimony, the Federal Trade Commission issued what most observers considered a mild cease and desist order. Reformers of the 1930s clearly felt betrayed, and *Consumers Union Reports* titled its account of the case "Crime without Punishment."³⁰ Nevertheless, the Federal Trade Commission did clarify matters. It held that in the past the guarantee of the Seal of Approval had been limited to a mere warranty of physical construction and chemical composition, although consumers had been led to believe that *Good Housekeeping* guaranteed that products would perform the services advertised - - rather remarkable services in the case of some products. In the future, then, *Good Housekeeping* must "clearly, conspicuously and explicitly" state the limitations on its guarantee, or be prepared to take the consequences if products bearing its seal failed to live up to their advertised claims.³¹

The publisher responded that *Good Housekeeping* had no intention of appealing the order, and the Seal was changed significantly.³² The words "tested and approved" were removed; the new phrase promised "replacement or refund of money guaranteed by *Good Housekeeping* if defective or not as advertised within"³³. Thus the "Seal of Approval" officially became "The *Good Housekeeping Seal*," promising replacement or refund of money; thus the Seal and the Ironclad Contract became the same entity.³⁴

From September 1941 to July 1944 the guarantee read: This is Your Guarantee

Each product and service advertised in this issue of *Good Housekeeping* is guaranteed to this extent: If it is defective or if not as advertised herein, it will, upon request and verification of your complaint, be replaced or your money refunded. All products and services advertised in *Good Housekeeping* and the claims made for them in *Good Housekeeping* have been carefully investigated.

Thus, despite all the adverse publicity and doubts cast by the Federal Trade Commission on the credibility of the *Good Housekeeping Seal*, the publisher regrouped and continued to offer the consumer a guarantee — a guarantee that had enough resilience and life of its own to weather the storm of the investigation. Ironically, anecdotal evidence and research from later years suggests that the public has misunderstood the more limited function of the Seal.³⁵ Thus, the producers who paid for it benefitted from the popular impression that the Seal provided greater backing than it actually provided.

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After 1941 the magazine's use of the Seal changed considerably. Previously, it had been exhibited only in conjunction with articles from the *Good Housekeeping* Institute. Clearly its reputation as a mark of quality had been established, so now *Good Housekeeping* permitted advertisements to display it. At the same time, products not advertised in the magazine could no longer receive the Seal, whose wording appeared on page six, along with the guarantee. The legal requirements for offering independent certification to correct a market failure had grown much greater, and in practical terms, third-party endorsement by a profit-seeking corporation was less necessary. Nevertheless, popular impressions continued to consider the Seal akin to certification.

Maturity, 1941-1975

The business of *Good Housekeeping* appeared little harmed by the Federal Trade Commission hearings and the surrounding publicity. Its circulation climbed steadily, reaching 2,500,000 in 1943, and surpassing 3,500,000 by the mid-1950's.³⁶ A chronological study of each issue of *Good Housekeeping* during the years 1939-1975 confirms that the Guarantee to Our Consumers is found in every issue, usually near the beginning. A total of twenty-five changes occurred in the presentation of the Seal and guarantee. Many involved the appearance of the Seal, such as its graphics, and presence. Others, however, involved the wording of the guarantee.

Later legislation continued to affect the Seal. The Lanham Act of 1946 extended trademark protection to certification marks. In the past, well-known marks frequently had been counterfeited and had enjoyed little protection under common law.³⁷ The new act provided for registration of the marks and prohibited false representations by competitors.³⁸ This was reflected in the *Good Housekeeping* Guarantee by a note added for several issues in 1962 warning against "Any person using *Good Housekeeping* as a title, trademark or trade name for any product or enterprise" without the magazine's authority.

The final legislation affecting the Seal significantly was the Magnuson-Moss Act of 1975. It imposed three major requirements on firms choosing to give a written warranty, by requiring that firms (1) designate the warranty as a full or limited warranty, (2) fully disclose the terms of the warranty, and (3) make the terms of the warranty available to the consumer prior to the sale of the product.³⁹ How *Good Housekeeping* chose to handle these terms is reflected in the Consumer's Policy it printed in July 1975. From an "Iron-clad Contract", the guarantee had descended to a limited warranty, and the policy laid out as well certain exclusions to the guarantee.

Fourteen other changes occurred in the Seal and guarantee between 1941 and 1975. Very likely some resulted from lawsuits that consumers brought against the Institute, because although it never lost a case during the period, the increasing litigiousness of American society may have been an important reason *Good Housekeeping* altered its guarantee to make it more specific.⁴⁰ Other changes in the length of the wording and the amount of space allotted to the Consumer's Guarantee may have reflected stylistic changes, including modernization and streamlining of the editorial pages.

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The shortest guarantee ran from December 1945 to December 1954, varying in length from three to four lines. Beginning in 1955, the consumer's guarantee (as it had begun being called in January 1950) started qualifying its coverage: "Advertising claims accepted for certain products presuppose proper installation and/or servicing. Neither the manufacturer nor *Good Housekeeping* can be responsible for such work by dealers or independent contractors." Insurance, real-estate, and institutional advertisements joined the list of products that could not be guaranteed in June, 1959. Beginning with that same issue, advertising claims such as those of taste and odor were recognized as being "purely subjective and, unless patently erroneous, are accepted and guaranteed even if not the opinion of *Good Housekeeping*." These changes reflect the growing national consumerism, as customers demanded more information and pursued their rights.⁴¹ Explicitly stating certain exclusions may again have been a measure *Good Housekeeping* took to forestall possible problems.

The wording within the Guarantee Seal underwent two changes in this period (see Exhibit 2). The first, in 1962, dropped the phrase "If Not as Advertised Therein" and replaced it with "If Product or Performance Defective." This effectively shifted the emphasis away from the advertising copy and subjective claims made by the advertiser. Only if the product proved defective was a refund or replacement offered. The final change in wording inside the Seal came with the Magnuson-Moss Act of 1975. The wording thereafter read *Good Housekeeping* Promises *A Limited Warranty to Consumers *Replacement or Refund if Defective."

The full extent of consumer awareness of the Seal in its mature years can be seen in the findings of Parkinson's 1975 study. Working with a sample in Delaware, he found that the *Good Housekeeping* Seal had a consumer recognition rate of 98 percent, higher than any other seal or certification mark, including "U.S.D.A. Choice" and "Underwriters' Laboratory." Such recognition clearly benefited the manufacturers of products that carried it: Parkinson concluded that in the absence of informational cues such as differential prices, known brands, and physical dissimilarities are lacking, the presence of a familiar seal or certification mark is a positive inducement toward the selection of a brand.⁴² Another study from the same time period (1980) found 60.4 percent of high school graduates and 48.2 percent of college graduates reported looking for seals before buying a product.⁴³ Obviously the *Good Housekeeping* Seal continued to play a role in consumer decision-making more than seventy years after its birth.

Decline and Redesign

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the *Good Housekeeping* Seal plays a much less important role in American commerce than it did for nearly all the twentieth century. Legislation, regulation, and non-profit organizations such as Consumers' Union have greatly increased the ability of the public to make informed consumption. While market imperfections certainly remain, in the era of web searches consumers undeniably find information much more conveniently than in the past.

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While the *Good Housekeeping* Seal continues to retain an amazing level of recognition among American women (a recent study showed 92 percent of the respondents were familiar with it⁴⁴), the critical issue facing the Seal has become one of relevance for a new generation of consumers. In the late 1970's, the number of license agreements bearing the Seal reached a peak exceeding 200. By 1997, among other indicators of an aging symbol, the number of agreements had dwindled to 78.⁴⁵ *Good Housekeeping* was forced to acknowledge the need for careful handling of this venerable brand name/trademark, and the magazine took action. The Seal itself was redesigned with a more contemporary look, the warranty period was extended from one to two years, and the magazine spent \$2.9 million on its marketing campaign for the new Seal.⁴⁶

The net result of this effort was an increase in the number of licensing agreements to 110, which translated into about 1,500 products bearing the Seal.⁴⁷ *Good Housekeeping* also extended the brand relationship to over 60 television stations, offering them newsworthy segments from the Institute on consumer concerns. The next chapter in the evolution of the Sea has begun.

Conclusions: The Seal's Changes and its Changing Roles

Historians of the media, looking back at the late 19th and early 20th centuries, credit magazine advertising with being "a primary force in raising the American standard of living to the highest in the world."⁴⁸ Moreover, advertising itself enabled the popular magazines to exist at an affordable price, a relationship that did not exist before the 1880s and 1890s. Advertising could pull in the revenues, however, only as long as consumers retained confidence in the products being advertised.

In this environment, the creation by *Good Housekeeping* of the Institute, the Seal of Approval, and the guarantee met perceived needs that extended beyond its readership. *Good Housekeeping* effectively designed a private aid giving the buyer some dependable third party assurance about the product she was buying. This created a quality floor under certain kinds of products and services, and served as one important source of product-related information. Commercial success followed for the magazine, and popular trust in the Seal became almost universal.

For nearly a century, *Good Housekeeping* carefully managed and advertised its Seal, building it into a valuable asset that attracted and held a loyal customer following. Consumers imbued that mark with all they knew or felt about the business behind it, based on reactions, experiences, and images provided by advertising. *Good Housekeeping* obviously understood the importance of symbols in daily life.

One era cast a distinct shadow over this otherwise remarkable achievement. During the Great Depression, the magazine's practices departed from the crusading spirit of its founder, early editors, and Dr. Harvey Wiley at the Institute. At the same time, the New Deal government and the Consumers Union increasingly provided effective alternatives to the third-party certification role of the Institute's Seal of Approval. However, by uniting the Seal of Approval with the guarantee, the magazine regained public's trust.

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Tracking the appearance and wording of the *Good Housekeeping* Seal offers a unique historical insight into a part of American popular culture of the marketplace. In the early years (1909-1939) several factors in the environment apparently influenced the changes that took place. These include: (1) an absence of advertising on the inside of *Good Housekeeping* and thus no Index to Advertisers or "Our Guarantee" from December 1913-August 1915, (2) a changing atmosphere for advertising as internal attempts at advertising regulation became the norm instead of the exception, and (3) major changes in format as the magazine increased in both size (September 1916) and length (250 pages were common by the mid-1930s).⁴⁹

During the years in court (1939-1941), there seemed to be a new awareness of the legal implications of offering a guarantee. The wording became more concise and precise, explaining exactly to what extent the product and services were guaranteed. It comes as no surprise that this trend continued to the present.

Stylistic changes in the Seal parallel the trends seen in trademark symbols, which became simpler and more streamlined. Many early marks created by corporate leaders in the early 20th century lacked the guidance of design professionals, who recommend simplicity to facilitate perception, understanding, and remembrance.⁵⁰ For most of its life the Seal lived on page six. The prominence of this position naturally exposed it to the same forces of change that altered the layout of the table of contents and other introductory pages. However, other changes are not easily attributable to broad outside forces. Thus one assumes there were significant inside forces at work that impacted on the guarantee, including changes in personnel and editorial policy.

But whatever the underlying causes for the changes, for nearly a century the *Good Housekeeping* Seal managed to maintain a unique place in the mainstream of American life. Perhaps one can get a feel for the place it has in American society when one considers how the phrase "seal of approval" has entered both the vernacular and the jargon of economic historians who never opened an issue of *Good Housekeeping*. How far that phrase came from its origins in 1909 and the early days of the *Good Housekeeping* Institute, is illustrated by these remarks from 1960:⁵¹

As for the Seal I don't know any advertising gimmick with such a long-lasting solid success. All over America and anywhere in the world where our people have gone, women demand the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval [sic] on their products. They feel an almost religious faith in its magic.

Through decades marked by vast changes in the marketplace, from the general advertising atmosphere to product liability laws, an active Federal Trade Commission, and *Consumer Reports*, sentiments like this allowed the *Good Housekeeping* Seal to remain as a standard for product assurance in the face of growing consumer sophistication. Will the future prove as successful? In many fields, specialist sources of information seem likely to replace the general ones, and the possibility exists that the Seal will become a vestige that gradually loses its unique place in the minds of the American public. Moreover, the development of entirely new fields of products will remain a challenge to the Seal, because as the proportion of total consumer products advertised in *Good Housekeeping* diminishes, the Seal will appear on fewer items that consumers purchase.

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So, will the Seal will fade from significance in American life as its role is taken by others? Perhaps, although it seems premature to predict the obituary of a symbol so trusted by millions of Americans. Two recent examples show roles that the Seal continues to play. First, *Good Housekeeping* recently extended the concept of the Seal to certify that a web site and its products are in good taste and philosophically consistent with the magazine.

In a second domain, the absence of government standards means that many imperfections characterize the current market for vitamins and herbal remedies. Like consumers of food and drugs a century ago, shoppers today possess very little information regarding a product's purity, strength, or effectiveness. Of the competing seals in this growing market, only *Good Housekeeping* requires clinical studies to back up any health claims.⁵²

In summary, while *Good Housekeeping* seeks to find relevance and scope for its Seal in our current information-laden culture, its impact and significance in an earlier age of consumer misinformation and lack of information cannot be underestimated. For decades, buyers could depend on the Seal as a source of knowledge, a confirmation that the products being purchased were what they claimed to be. Few other mechanisms offered that kind of assurance. Housewives responded by imbuing the Seal with a sense of almost magical powers to provide for their families and to protect them from fraudulent products that might cause inconvenience or even serious harm. It is this legacy that lingers in the popular mind.

Exhibit 1

Chronology of the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval

May 2, 1885

Clark W. Bryan launched *Good Housekeeping: A Family Journal Conducted in the Interests of the Higher Life of the Household*, Holyoke, Massachusetts.

1898

Death of Bryan; *Good Housekeeping* sold and resold; acquired in 1900 by the Phelps Publishing Company

1900

Good Housekeeping Institute established; later developed laboratories and kitchens to test products.

April 1902

Good Housekeeping undertakes an "Ironclad Contract" with subscribers.

1905

"Our Roll of Honor for Pure Food Products" produced by magazine's experiment station.

July 1909

"Our Seal of Approval" issued by Good Housekeeping Institute. Seal varies in size and embellishments thereafter.

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1911

Good Housekeeping purchased by Hearst magazines. Circulation surpasses 300,000; offices moved to New York, 1912.

1912

Dr. H. W. Wiley joins Good Housekeeping Institute.

July 1913

"Our Guarantee" and Index to Advertisers appears; first newspaper publishers' advertising code created in 1914.

July 1929

Seal of Approval gains Five-point star.

1938

Wheeler-Lea Amendment to the FTC Act.

August, 1939

FTC complaint filed against the Seal of Approval.

May 1941

FTC decision, cease-and-desist order.

1941

Seal of Approval becomes Guarantee Seal.

1943

Circulation passes 2,500,000.

1946

Trademark Act of 1946 (Lanham Act).

1966

Circulation passes 5,500,000.

1975

Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act.

1997

Revision of the seal and policies in an effort to reverse its declining use.

Exhibit 2

Examples of the Good Housekeeping Seal

July 1909



November 1941



December 1911

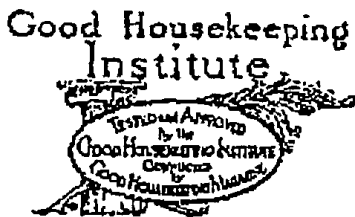


Our Seal of Approval

June 1962



December 1913



July 1975



July 1929



1997



THE GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL OF APPROVAL

Notes

1. Michael Bordo and Hugh Rockoff, "The Gold Standard as a 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval'", *The Journal of Economic History* 56 (June 1996).
2. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968): 5:130. Richard F. Beltramini and Edwin R. Stafford, "Comprehension and Perceived Believability of Seals of Approval," *Journal of Advertising*, 22, no 3 (September 1993): 3-14. James T. Bennett and Kevin F. McCrohan, "Public Policy Issues in the Marketing of Seals of Approval for Food," *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 27, no 2, (Winter 1993): 397-416. Michael V. Laric and Dan Sarel, "Consumer (Mis) Perceptions and Usage of Third Party Certification Marks, 1972 and 1980: Did Public Policy Have an Impact?" *Journal of Marketing*, 45 (Summer 1981): 135-142. Thomas L. Parkinson, "The Role of Seals and Certifications of Approval in Consumer Decision-Making," *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 9, (Summer 1975): 1-14.
3. The authors wish to thank Susanne Williams, Director, Consumer & Reader Services, *Good Housekeeping*, for her thoughtful suggestions and detailed comments about this history.
4. See James Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States* (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), 103, 122 and the chapters "Emergence of the National Magazine," and "Accomplishments of Women's Magazines.;" Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 214-215.
5. Unfortunately the standard sources provide no information about Bryan, and conclusions about him are derived largely from the pages of the magazine.
6. Helen Woodward, *The Lady Persuaders* (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1960): 125.
7. Nancy A. Walker, *Shaping Our Mothers' World*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000): 41-42; Frank Luther Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 5:130.
8. *Good Housekeeping*, 100 (May 1935): 8.
9. By assuming the fulfillment of the manufacturer's obligation, *Good Housekeeping* provided a guaranty. However, the magazine itself preferred to use the term "guarantee", as it will be termed throughout the remainder of this paper.
10. *Good Housekeeping*, 49 (July 1909): 742.
11. Ibid.
12. Conclusion confirmed by Susanne Williams, Director, Consumer & Reader Services, *Good Housekeeping*, in email from Sara Rad to Lauren Strach, 3 September 2002.
13. Frank Schechter, *The Historical Foundation of the Law Relating to Trademarks*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925): 58.
14. "The Power of the Seal," pamphlet supplied by *Good Housekeeping* (n.d.): 6.
15. "Waldo Tells How Hearst Magazine Sought True Ads," *Editor and Publisher*, 73, part 1, (February 10, 1940): 8.
16. The contrast could hardly be greater with the HeartGuide seal of approval. This brief effort in 1990 by the American Heart Association priced the HeartGuide seal of heart-healthy food at a minimum price of \$45,000, raising questions about its impact on competition. See James T. Bennett and Kevin F. McCrohan, "Public Policy Issues in the Marketing of Sales of Approval for Food," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 27:2, (Winter 93): 397-416.
17. *Good Housekeeping*, 44, (January 1907): 62.
18. "Waldo Tells How Hearst Magazine Sought True Ads," *Editor and Publisher*, 73, part 1 (February 10, 1940): 8.
19. Harvey W. Wiley, *An Autobiography*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1930): 302, 304.
20. James Playsted Wood, *The Story of Advertising*, (New York: Ronald Press, 1958): 326; John Bakeless, *Magazine Making*, (New York: Viking Press, 1931): 253.
21. Wood, *ibid.*, 325.
22. *Good Housekeeping*, 57 (July 1913), 14.
23. Woodward, *The Lady Persuaders*: 140-146.
24. Federal Trade Commission Act, Section 5 (b), 15 U.S.- C.A. 45.
25. "Crime Without Punishment," *Consumers Union Reports*, 6 (June 1941), p. 144; Federal Trade Commission, "In the Matter of Hearst Magazines," 32 FTC, May 13, 1941, 1441.

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26. FTC, *ibid*, 1440-1463.
27. "Hearst Magazine Case Taken to Chicago," *Editor and Publisher*, 72, part 4 (November 18, 1939): 7.
28. Mott, *American Magazines*, 141.
29. "Good Housekeeping Order," *Business Week* (May 24, 1941), 8.
30. "Crime Without Punishment," 6:144.
31. FTC, "Hearst Magazines," 1463.
32. "Good Housekeeping Order," 8.
33. *Good Housekeeping*, 113, (September 1941): 6. Also see exhibit 2.
34. "History of a Tradition," two unidentified printed pages supplied by *Good Housekeeping* (n.d.).
35. Parkinson, "The Role of Seals and Certifications," 1-14; Beltramini and Stafford, "Comprehension and Perceived Believability," 3-14.
36. Mott, *American Magazines*, 141.
37. D. M. Phelps, "Certification Marks Under the Lanham Act," *Journal of Marketing* 13 (April 1949): 499.
38. Trademark Act of 1946, 45, 15 U.S.C. 1127 (1976).
39. Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act, 15 U.S.C. 2302 and 2303.
40. William H. Taft, *American Magazines for the 1980s* (New York: Hastings House, 1982): 85.
41. Philip Kotler, *Marketing Management* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2000): 152.
42. Parkinson, "The Role of Seals and Certifications of Approval in Consumer Decision-Making," 4.
43. Michael V. Laric and Dan Sarel, "Consumer (Mis) Perceptions and Usage of Third Party Certification Marks, 1972 and 1980: Did Public Policy Have an Impact?" *Journal of Marketing*, 45 (Summer 1981): 139.
44. Paul Lukas, "In Which We Bash a Baby Seal," *Fortune* 136, no 5, (August 9, 1997): 36-37.
45. Sean K. Sullivan, "Good Housekeeping Seal", *Advertising Age* 69, no 26, (June 26, 1998): 36.
46. Lukas, "Baby Seal", 36-37.
47. Sullivan, "Good Housekeeping Seal", *ibid*.
48. Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 224; John Tebbel, *The American Magazine* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1969): 197.
49. Mott, *American Magazines*, 136.
50. Hal Morgan, *Symbols of America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987): 9-12; Casper J. Werkman, *Trademarks* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974): 187.
51. Woodward, *Lady Persuaders*, 125.
52. Unfortunately, given the cost of advertising in *Good Housekeeping*, only a half-dozen such products have received the Seal, and the Institute conducts only limited tests. Andrea Petersen, "Finally, Some Help at the Health-Food Store," *Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 2002, p. D1.