

# ADVERTISING ON STAMP BOXES

## *Introduction*

The nice thing about collecting stamp boxes is the wide range of items that you accumulate and the different ways they can be categorised. Often collectors will choose to specialise according to their own particular interests. For some it's the material they are made from – woods, metals, even embroidered fabric – indeed some people will consider just collecting a particular material, silver for instance. I even know a man who gets excited about plastics – plastic stamp boxes I hasten to add. Other people might focus their collection on a particular manufacturer – WMF, Tiffany, dare one suggest Fabergé (for the person who wishes to keep their collection small). Collecting boxes from a particular country is also an option; I know someone who collects ones that come from America, and someone else who collects ones from Sweden.

Some of us, however, are more interested in the social aspects of stamp boxes – what they say about the society of the day - what is being depicted on them; the reasons that people bought them; and the reasons for them being made in the first place.

It is this latter aspect that came to mind when I realised that a few items in my collection were actually advertising something. When I looked in auction catalogues, on eBay and at other people's collections, it dawned on me that this was not an unusual thing. We know that stamp boxes were at the height of use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and it would seem that the development of the advertising industry occurred at the same time.

This article will look briefly at the history of advertising and particularly the history of the promotional product with special reference to the stamp box.

## *The beginnings of advertising*

The rise of the consumer society has surely been responsible for the creation of the advertising industry due to the need for sellers to make potential customers aware of goods and services on offer. However advertising is not a new thing, according to Saunders (1999), it is known to have been around in some form as early as 3000 B.C. with crude inscriptions appearing in Egyptian tombs. There is also evidence that there were advertisements for theatres engraved in stone by the Greeks in 500 B.C. Visitors to Pompeii will also have seen what can only be construed as advertising there too.

Later on in history, medieval Europe's town criers were hired by merchants to applaud the qualities of their wares. Furthermore, trademark signs erected in front of shops in the sixteenth century were a form of advertising, too, and during the eighteenth century factories used advertising to inform people about their goods. But it was the nineteenth century that saw the beginnings and development of advertising as we know it today.

## *The first promotional items*

The idea of providing items to promote goods and services on offer seems to have been a comparatively recent one. According to the website of the Advertising Speciality Institute (ASI) the first promotional item to be produced in the USA was in 1789 when commemorative engraved metal buttons were used in George Washington's inauguration. At an earlier date, and elsewhere, they suggest, medieval armour makers presented complimentary wooden pegs to each knight that they outfitted. The pegs could be driven into the wall and used to hang the armour so that the craftsman's name could be seen where it was carved - they admit that this could be fable, however. They point out, though, that George III used an early promotional item for his coronation in 1768. It took the form of a card with the new king's likeness on one side and his coat of arms on the other. The purpose appears to have been "to promote goodwill", and this is surely what any promotional item sets out to do.



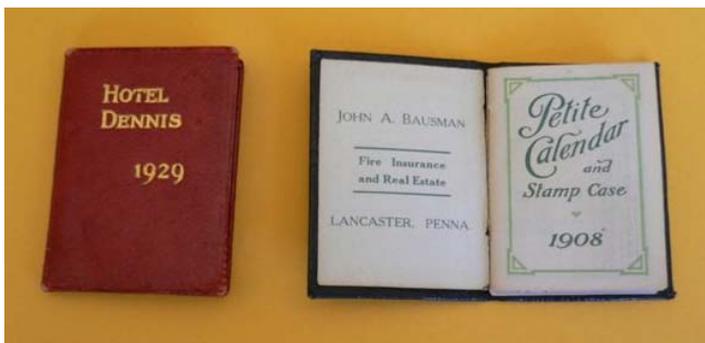
*Figure 1: A moulded plastic box from the Massachusetts Benefit Life Association.*

In America, in addition to political campaign items, early promotional products included calendars and almanacs. The 1820's saw almanacs carrying advertisements on the back for family bibles, cough drops, painkillers and various other products. Some of these were sold but most were given away.

However, it appears that the inspiration for promotional items, as we know them today, came from an American printer named Jasper Meek. His story is told on the ASI website. It seems that in the 1880's he had the idea of making schoolbags that merchants could give to their customers for their children to use. On the outside of the bag would be the merchant's name and advertising message and this would be seen all over town as the children carried their books to and from school. Meek made the rounds of local merchants with his new advertising scheme; the first order was to Cantwell's Shoe Store, and other merchants soon followed. This was probably the start of the promotional item industry, and the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century saw an abundance of promotional products developed and marketed. The stamp box was a small part of this development. After all it was the ideal vehicle - an every day utilitarian item that was small and easy to produce at low cost.

What Meek achieved, according to the authors of the ASI website, was something new "the concept – packaging an imprinted item (the book bags), a target market (the children), and a unique distribution strategy (giving them away at a shoe store), a tactic that still defines the industry today".

### *Stamp holders as promotional items*



*Figure 2: Two calendar/stamp booklets one advertising the Hotel Dennis, the other for a Fire Insurance and Real Estate Agent, both in the USA.*

It is uncertain whether the early stamp holders with advertising messages on them were given as free gifts or actually sold. Some items seem to lend themselves better as free gifts than others, for example, diaries with paper loops to hold blank pages together so that stamps could be inserted between them. The aptly named "Petite" calendar and stamp case from Hotel Dennis in 1929 (Fig 2) makes it quite clear that this was a free gift; printed inside it is - "It is with much pleasure that we again send to our large circle of friends the Petite Calendar and Stamp Case for 1929". They then go on to describe the improvements to the hotel - "The private bathrooms have been modernised by the installation of the most improved plumbing

features, hot and cold water connections.....The generous public spaces and interior arrangements make the lounge marvels of beauty and solid comfort." A similar diary and stamp case, this time from John A Bausman, Fire Insurance and Real Estate Agent in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is dated 1908 (Fig 2). There is even the recipient's hand written name and address in it - Mrs John Sachs, 228 St James Street, Lancaster, Penna.

Many American insurance companies seem to have employed the celluloid stamp holder to promote their business. A booklet fits inside a celluloid sleeve which bears the name and address of the company on one side and their promotional message on the other, the idea being that stamps are kept between the pages of the booklet. A wide range of companies seem to have employed these holders to promote their businesses, not just insurance companies – publishers, clothing companies, drinks producers, piano sellers, even heavy industry (Fig 3). Some of these items bear the name Meek & Co – the name of the supposed instigator of promotional items in the late nineteenth century.<sup>455</sup>

### *Mauchlineware*

According to Trachtenberg and Lewis (2002), Mauchlineware was used extensively, in the early nineteenth century, as a promotional tool for cotton thread and sewing notions. Their wooden boxes were used to package these goods and usually there was a manufacturer's label inside. To a lesser extent other retailers commissioned Mauchlineware items to advertise and package their products – from plasters to writing equipment. There are

many stamp boxes in Mauchlineware, however, there is no evidence that Mauchlineware stamp boxes carried such labels, though the name of “McClellan & Son, Publisher” has been seen printed in gilt on a plain wooden round box with a Penny Red stamp on the top, in an auction catalogue (Spinks, 6th December 2005 – Lot 56).



Figure 3: A selection of celluloid stamp holders from various companies.



Figure 4: A Mauchline stamp box showing a hotel in New England USA.

In addition, Trachtenburg and Lewis point out that the practice of giving a gift to loyal customers to encourage continued patronage, or to potential new customers, was a well established sales technique during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Commercial enterprises “spent lavishly on these giveaways as there were few advertising options” (page 106). This must have applied to others manufacturers not just the producers of Mauchlineware.

However, some of Mauchlineware produced for both the home and foreign market, could well be seen as being a form of advertising. Items showing pictures of hotels, for example, may be classed as souvenirs (Grieve 2006), but on the other hand they could also be seen as promotional items. One assumes that these items were purchased by the people who stayed in the hotel to remind them of their stay, but looked at in the present context surely they were promoting the hotel and encouraging the visitor to return there. Producing items that were good enough to keep and display may have provided the incentive for people to actually pay for stamp boxes despite the fact that they served to advertise the hotel featured (Fig 4).

### **Base metal boxes**

Surely some of the base metal stamp boxes produced in the USA and elsewhere at low cost must have been giveaways. Boldly embossed with the company’s name and message, these are not attractive items. Indeed they look more like throwaways than keepsakes. As with many throwaway items of the period, many people did just that – throw them away – so that nowadays they can command quite high prices.

The familiar chrome stamp booklet holder also became a promotional item – that is, if bearing a manufacturer’s name or the name of a particular company is the criterion. More usually these items bore crests of towns or buildings but several car companies also adopted the medium, and Butlins did too. There appears to be a buoyant market for such items as they fetch good prices on eBay – probably from memorabilia collectors rather than stamp box collectors who often have many of these crested items already. Who were the instigators of these items – the stamp case producers or the producers of the product being promoted? And why did people buy them (if indeed they did)? The cars featured seem to be the more expensive makes (Fig 5).



Figure 5: Chrome stamp booklet holder bearing a Porsche crest.

Perhaps they were to show off that you had such a car or to identify yourself as part of an owners' group. Was it like wearing "the tie" perhaps? Of course there was nothing to stop anyone who only aspired to such ownership- but was that the done thing? Maybe it hinges on whether they were given or bought.

### *The manufacturing industry*



*Figure 6: American tin plate stamp box for Stearns and Curtius of New York promoting SHAC for head aches.*

The manufacturing industries were extensive users of the promotional product, and the pharmaceutical industry seems to have been particularly active in the early use of the stamp box to promote sales particularly in the USA and France (Figs. 6 and 7). It would seem that patent medicine companies were the earliest national advertisers and the biggest spenders. According to Lears (1994) they were the best clients for the advertising agencies that began to form in the 1860's and 1870's.

The food industry featured on stamp boxes too. A tin stamp box appeared in an auction catalogue (Harmers, 4 March 2004 Lot 205), with Chocolat Ibled on the side. It was clearly labelled "Boite a Timbres" on the lid with a picture of two French stamps (postmarked 1900)). Also there, on the base, is a picture of the Factory Mandicourt, Paris. It seems a lot to fit on a stamp box, but it did have three compartments inside.

Over the last few years I have seen a wide range of manufacturers advertised on stamp boxes, either in other people's collections or for sale. At the time I wasn't driven to think of buying them nor did I think to take note of them, but writing this article has made me realise that there is a whole new collecting field to consider for collectors of any type of writing equipment.

### *Conclusion*

The early producers of promotional items and the companies who used them could never have imagined that their inexpensive giveaway gifts would end up as collectors' items. A glance at items such as Coca Cola trays on eBay reveals that such items are commanding high prices. Many early stamp boxes bearing advertising messages are similarly in demand often fetching in excess of £100, though some items do remain relatively cheap to buy and can often be bought for under £10. Indeed some of those pictured have been bought for under £5. It's a comforting thought that one can become a collector of such an interesting theme for a relatively modest cost.



*Figure 7: French wooden stamp box for Cascarine le Prince pharmaceutical products.*

### **REFERENCES**

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### **WEBSITES**

[www.asicentral.com/asp/open/aboutASI/promoindustry/history.asp](http://www.asicentral.com/asp/open/aboutASI/promoindustry/history.asp)  
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