

TRAITUERS, ELIXIRS AND CARAVANS: A HISTORICAL LOOK AT MARKETING GENIUS, LEGITIMACY AND THE AMAZING CASE OF DUDLEY LEBLANC AND HADACOL

Tamela D. Ferguson, B.I. Moody III College of Business Administration, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, P.O. Box 43570, Lafayette, LA 70504-3570. 337-482-6081, tferguson@louisiana.edu

William L. Ferguson, B.I. Moody III College of Business Administration, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, P.O. Box 44570, Lafayette, LA 70504-4570. 337-482-6664, ferguson@louisiana.edu

Hans J. Heinen, B.I. Moody III College of Business Administration, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, P.O. Box 43570, Lafayette, LA 70504

ABSTRACT

Traveling caravan shows, child peddlers, saturation by print and radio ads, and other ingenious marketing schemes contributed to the implausible success of a most unlikely product. An elixir often sold in traditional medicine show approach, Hadacol was the world's best selling proprietary medicine in 1950, outselling Bayer aspirin. Despite antagonistic pharmaceutical industry overtones, Hadacol was successful against pressures of legitimate institutions, like the AMA and FTC. Dudley LeBlanc, Hadacol's founder, possessed cunning management and marketing styles that he employed to shepherd this most colorful and unusual product in our business history.

Dudley LeBlanc and Hadacol

A witty Cajun politician, Dudley LeBlanc, enjoyed meteoric success in post World War II America with his home brewed patent medicine - Hadacol. Combining unheard of management practices for the day, as well as an amazing marketing scheme that included some of Hollywood's biggest stars and America's best athletes, Hadacol became so successful that it even outsold Bayer aspirin early in 1950 [4], and was the best selling proprietary medicine in the world in that year [5]. The elixir was reportedly nothing more than glorified "snake oil," consisting of multiple vitamins and 12% alcohol. By all medical accounts, Hadacol could help an individual with B vitamin deficiency but nothing more [2] [3]. Shortly thereafter, Hadacol was denounced by the American Medical Association (AMA) as a fraud [4], even though many AMA members had heralded Hadacol's greatness.

Dudley LeBlanc, Hadacol's founder and primary manager, was hounded by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for claims made in its advertising - promotion created by top American advertising agencies of the day. Much like the modern day Enron, other problems, including bloated bookkeeping and tax issues, hounded LeBlanc. Still, Hadacol had one year of monumental sales (\$24 million in 1950) and became a national phenomenon gracing the pages of Time, Life, Business Week, and Reader's Digest. This paper looks at business and cultural environments, including brushes with institutionalization-type legitimacy influences, that fueled the Hadacol fire, and marketing practices that promulgated the meteoric rise (and fall) of a man and his product during post World War II America.

Short-lived Success

Hadacol's incredible, yet short lived, success was the result of two phenomena that allowed Hadacol to gain a positive reputation with many consumers, while the AMA and FTC ultimately stood as barriers to full legitimacy. First, Hadacol was conceived in rural southern Louisiana, where folk healers have long been a cultural institution, imparting an initial sense of legitimacy. These folk healers, commonly known as *traiteurs* (treaters), were accepted as a reasonable source for "a cure for what ails ya" by many of the local Acadians (*a.k.a.* Cajuns) during this time [1] which made it possible for Hadacol to gain a solid footing in the area. Early acceptance by the locals also provided the financial spark prompting the second phenomenon that showcased LeBlanc's cunning style that seemed to always land him on his feet, in the right spot at the right time. He utilized sophisticated marketing ploys, including the *Hadacol Caravan* traveling show, employing many of the same schemes of nostrum sellers of the past in an effort to legitimize Hadacol to the rest of the country. Intense management and ingenious marketing, with the help of institutional acceptance and backing of Cajun culture, allowed LeBlanc to accomplish much. These successes were short-lived given the strong negative institutional pressures of the AMA and FTC.

The demise of LeBlanc's Hadacol was just as meteoric as his ascent to fame and fortune. It may be difficult to consider Hadacol a traditional patent medicine company going up against various institutions, including the AMA and FTC, that challenged its legitimacy. Although Hadacol did use traditional patent medicine promotional tactics, most patent medicines were legitimate companies, meaning they kept good books and were honest with their stakeholders even though their products and advertising were often fraudulent. Wildly popular due to cunning managerial approaches and keen marketing ploys, LeBlanc never found true legitimacy. His books were cooked, and he racked up huge debts and tax obligations. His business model was doomed to failure, whether he was selling nostrums or cars. LeBlanc most certainly realized the shortcoming of his business model and conspired to keep things going in order to make personal profit, instead of perhaps reorganizing and forming a true, going concern business. Regardless, Dudley LeBlanc and Hadacol are certainly an amazing, colorful example of marketing genius in our business history.

REFERENCES

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