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Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in  
Twentieth-Century France (review)

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Stephen L. Harp. *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France*. Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 2001. xiii + 356 pp. ISBN 0-8018-6651-0, \$39.95.

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Michelin's marketing policies, especially from the 1890s to 1940, offer a fascinating exploration of the interaction between business objectives and French cultural identity. The principal marketing innovation in the 1890s was the construction of a corporate identity by applying anthropomorphic symbolism to advertising. This was a novel approach, similar to that developed in the United States by Pillsbury, whose creation of the "Dough Boy" was the method of projecting the company's image to consumers. "Bibendum," known in English as "the Michelin man," was born in 1898. An effigy constructed exclusively from tires varying in size, Bibendum represented an instantly recognizable rubberized image. Furthermore, beyond recognition at the purely informative level, the personality projected through Bibendum was also immediately discernible as essentially French. Reflecting French contemporary society, at least before World War I, Bibendum appeared as an upper middle-class, cigar-smoking, champagne-swilling male chauvinist, conforming to national and gender stereotypes and completely politically incorrect. This was a conscious attempt to exploit national identity to engage corporate and product loyalty. After the war a more fatherly pneumatic figure replaced Bibendum's raffish character, signaling the Michelin brothers' desire to align themselves with the patriotic pronatalism movement in France.

Other elements in Michelin's marketing policy assumed increasing importance. Although early advertising set out to inform the public about the technicalities of automobiles, tire use, and maintenance, the focus shifted increasingly to the practicalities of motoring and to the pleasures that touring had to offer, part of the campaign to stimulate automobile ownership and use. Tourist guides, initially distributed without charge, showed locations of garages and hotels (excluded from advertising) to assist travelers. The introduction of maps with road numbers began in 1912, when the guides ran to several hundred pages. By also offering cities, towns, and villages installation of free signs and milestones showing names and numbers, the company complemented the efforts of the Touring Club of France to promote tourism, a major source of the company's marketing ideas. During World War I Michelin issued detailed guides to the battlefields for tourists. Scenic information was added to garage, hotel, and restaurant locations. Most important in the long term was the intro-

duction of systematic qualitative judgments of the gastronomic experience that one could expect at certain hotels and restaurants. This was only one example of the company's imitating and improving upon initiatives of the Tourist Club of France. By the 1930s, the Michelin guides were considered superior to both Baedeker's hotel guide and the Touring Club's annual restaurant guide for those in search of gastronomic excellence, an increasingly important dimension to perceptions of French culture. Sales of the Michelin guides exceeded 100,000 between 1926 and 1940.

Enlisting French gastronomy to sell tires presented fewer difficulties than the company's efforts to persuade the nation that embracing mass production and Taylorism was in the national interest. The common association of these processes in France with an impending infection of Americanization risked alienation. Michelin sought to counter that suspicion by insisting that modernization should be achieved within paternalist business regimes of precisely the kind the company practiced, even to the extent of offering employees family allowances. These tactics were consistent with the Michelin brothers' substantial financial support for the pronatalist policy advocated by the *Alliance Nationale pour l'Accroissement de la Population Française*, whose campaign to reverse population decline tapped patriotic impulses.

The marketing policies of Michelin, therefore, essentially consisted of capturing the French national identity, tastes, and national priorities to promote the company's interests. Just how successful these policies were, however, either in advancing the company's success or in shaping and defining French cultural identity, remains problematic. Stephen Harp observes that Michelin's actions definitely reflected cultural developments and to a certain extent helped to shape them. This is an understandable equivocation, but one that limits the possibility of an unambiguous conclusion that Michelin had an important influence on national perceptions. As for the success of Michelin's marketing policy, although the company remained the dominant supplier in the French market, world sales reveal that Michelin's share fell by 50 percent between 1923 and 1929, while the company lost market share to Dunlop even in France. Thus, business historians may be disappointed in the ambiguity of the socioeconomic connections in this otherwise successful historical socio-cultural study.

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