



A Short History

The matchbook is an American invention, a further development of the paper matches that first appeared in the 1880s. A match "folder" was created by Joshua Pusey, a Philadelphia patent attorney, in 1892, but the modern matchbook was patented a few weeks later by Charles Bowman of Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

Pusey unsuccessfully challenged Bowman's patent but he had the last laugh. Bowman's matchbook company soon went out of business but Pusey sold his design to the Diamond Match Trust in 1896 and became Diamond's patent attorney. Diamond adapted Pusey's folder and was the first mass-producer of paper matchbooks.

The first organization to advertise on a matchbook is reputed to be the Mendelson Opera Company of New York City. Strapped for advertising funds, the manager purchased 200 blank matchbooks. Cast members pasted pictures of opera stars on them and hand-lettered ads for upcoming productions. The gambit was a resounding success.

However, matchbook advertising really began in 1902 with Henry C. Traute, a visionary Diamond Match salesman.

Traute is credited with three innovations: he moved the striker strip from the inside to the outside of the cover where it was less of a fire hazard; he coined

the immortal phrase "Close cover before striking;" and he persuaded advertisers to give matchbooks away for free.

Traute successfully argued that matchbooks were the cheapest form of advertising, with a box of 2,500 matchbooks costing only six dollars. Each of these "miniature billboards" would be seen up to twenty times until all the matches were used.

Statistics later confirmed Traute's insight. By the end of World War II it was estimated that 99 percent of smokers used book matches and of these 45% remembered the name of the matchbook advertiser.

Traute convinced the Pabst brewery to buy 10 million Diamond matchbooks printed with their ads. The American Tobacco Company bought 30 million and chewing gum king William Wrigley ordered a billion of them.

The matchbook advertising industry prospered until the early days of the Depression when the economic disaster inflicted a major blow to its income.

Nevertheless the industry quickly rallied by exploiting the collectability of its product, issuing matchbooks that bore pictures and biographies of movie stars and sports heroes. Series of images on every imaginable topic soon began appearing on matchbooks.

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