

It All Begins With a Dream

By Eileen M. Riley

Most women have aspirations to improve their lives that can be put into three categories: (i) modest improvements on what may brighten an ordinary day, such as a new lipstick, a bunch of flowers on the table, a glossy magazine, or time spent with a loved one, (ii) aspirations on a grander scale such as a new career, travel, or taking up a new sport, and (iii) fantasy that is limitless and attainable only in one's dreams. In the dream, one can become whomever one would like to be, regardless of the practical limitations of education, socio-economic standing, and intelligence quota. On a Monday, you can be a political candidate. Tuesday may find you throwing out the first pitch of a World Series game. Wednesday, you may decide to be an artist, and Thursday you may just want to take a stroll. Friday, you may be perched out on the deck of a schooner. Saturday, you may be a Toreador, and Sunday, you may want to rest, or you may want to be an interior designer. The possibilities are limitless, and Ida Rosenthal, the immigrant feminist at the helm of the Maidenform Company, recognized the opportunity to fuse the consumer driven desire to embrace a new feminine "look" with dreams. To market this new look, Maidenform launched the "I Dreamed..." campaign in 1949. It became one of the 20th century's most successful ad campaigns, lasting 20 years, until women began burning their bras in 1969. This was a woman-to-woman ad campaign, created by women for women. While these ads depicted women, in traditional female roles mired in beauty and fashion, which some characterized as objectifications of women, there was another side. The ad campaign also depicted women in aspirational roles that were, at the time, decidedly male, such as "[a]mbassador, editor, private eye, and a Toreador" (Bust Magazine, 2017). In the United States of 1949, one would likely characterize a woman in the role of an ambassador or a private eye as pure fantasy, but Maidenform thought it was ok for women to dream. Each dream ad placed the Maidenform woman front and center, and in charge of her dream. Her dream was depicted in the text, for example, "I dreamed I was a fireman in my Maidenform bra." Each Maidenform woman wore only her Maidenform bra on top, with the rest of her clothed in a feminized version of the uniform a man would wear; shapely red knickers in the case of a Toreador, or a fire helmet in the case of a fireman. This woman-to-woman campaign, as depicted in print ads, was consistent in its messaging, always using the tag line "I dreamed...", which further enhanced its brand recognition, thus, the dream ads became synonymous with Maidenform.

Ida Rosenthal was a business woman, but she was also a dreamer who refused to bow to convention when she immigrated from Russia to the United States. With her feminist underpinnings, Ida began her American dream in Hoboken, New Jersey at the turn of the 20th century. While most immigrant women went to work in factories, garment factories were especially desirous of female employees because of their ability to sew, Ida aspired to something more. Despite pressure from her husband, Ida resolved that she would not work in a factory. "Instead she purchased a sewing machine on installment and started making dresses out her home. In 1912 she employed six workers, selling her dresses for up to \$7.50 each" (Synyia 18). After an especially brutal winter, Ida decided that an urban setting would better suit her and

Manhattan beckoned. Not only did her customer base grow, her pocketbook expanded as Manhattanites paid up to \$225 for one of her dresses. It was during the early 1920s, that Ida partnered with an English immigrant turned couture seamstress, Enid Bissett. Their partnership, which planted the seeds of the woman-to-woman culture, and their dress-making business expanded, as did their vision as to how a woman's shape could be remolded to improve their physical appearance.

This was their rebuke of the boyish looking garments popular for women in the early part of the 20th century - whereby a woman's bust was flattened by bandages wrapped around her chest to compress her bosom. One popular slogan widely advertised by the Boyish Form Brassiere Company was "Look Like Your Brother" (Osborne 9). Ida and Enid thought it ridiculous that women should emulate a boyish look, and they used their skills as seamstresses and their superior knowledge of a woman's body to create a modern brassiere that would celebrate the curves of a woman's bosom by providing a natural uplift, and as recognized by some doctors, allowed for better posture and less constricted inhalations. What was initially patterned together to enhance the look of their frocks eventually became *the* commodity that launched Maidenform, with a legion of female customers eager to slip into the new invention. A curvy woman herself, Ida trademarked the "[v]ery feminine name 'Maiden Form' in direct contrast to the 'Boyish Form' bandeaux made fashionable by the slim silhouette of the flapper" (Synyia 20). She was well ensconced at the helm of the company when World War II ended, and the U.S. economy and consumerism were booming. As men returned home, women were encouraged to leave their factory jobs to allow for these men to re-capture their roles as providers. So, after working two jobs - keeping the home fires burning and working in the factories - women left their factory jobs, leaving behind their denim overalls and head scarfs, to return to domesticity with all of its feminine trappings.

During the war years, Americans rationed everything in sacrifice to the war effort. In terms of femininity, women eschewed silk stockings, painting a thin line up the backs of their legs to replicate a seam. Likewise, clothing was recycled to within an inch of its life. Skirts were narrow and shoes were sensible. All that changed after the war, as society, fed by the new post-war consumerism, encouraged women to embrace their femininity, and their curves. "Fashion is ever evolving, enhancing some body parts while de-emphasizing others" (Synyia 19). This was particularly so when, in 1947 Christian Dior revolutionized the fashion landscape with his introduction of the New Look (Osborne 16). "Dior's new look quickly became known as the 'New American Figure'. The silhouettes were ultra-feminine with cinched waists, full hips and bust lines, and head to toe accessories" (Osborne 16). Ida and Maidenform were ready for the fusion of opportunity and market demand, and prepared to make advertising history in the form of the "I Dreamed..." campaign, which provided women with the foundation to build the new look.

When the campaign launched in 1949 it sent shockwaves through the advertising world. This time period is an important component to Maidenform's ad campaign as it struck at the heart of post-war culture in the United States at a time when gender norms were returning to their pre-war tradition: men were providers and women stayed home. In the post-war year's culture, new



visions of femininity, for the first time, “celebrated female sexual allure and desire” outside of the confines of domesticity and marriage (Howard 57). Howard explains that Maidenform pushed the envelope further by creating ads that pictured models clothed only from the waist down and wearing only their Maidenform brassiere above the waist, “[d]oing very public things in their dreams, such as directing traffic or shopping” (598). Each of the over 100 ads comprising the “I Dreamed...” campaign included the caption “I Dreamed” and the accompanying image told the rest of the story. For the first time in advertising history, the bra was not hidden under a blouse or a sweater, creating a separation with the mixture of outer clothing and an exposed bra. Unmentionables were out of the closet. These ads took risks by showing real women out in public, with their bras plainly visible. The campaign spoke “[t]o the postwar woman’s multifaceted desire to walk the line between the seductive and the wholesome, the free and the permissible” (Synyia 151). Further, Maidenform became synonymous with the New Look, and gave women something to aspire to beyond the confines of domesticity and middle class life. The campaign was rooted in what Synyia describes as Maidenform’s “Women-to-Women” philosophy.

This philosophy flowed throughout Ida’s company and “[e]mphasized a special, exclusive female communication – Maidenform products were projected as being made by women, for women, and as speaking to a multi-faceted female desire” (Synyia 3). This theory tacitly implied that women knew and understood what other women wanted. This was a new and different approach, and men were not a part of the dialogue. Ida Rosenthal was in the business of making brassieres that were designed to alter the shape of women’s breasts. She insisted she was simply helping nature. What she was really doing was selling her version of femininity through the dialogue of the dream campaign.

Before Maidenform launched the dream, lingerie ads were mostly published in women’s periodicals. These ads were typically illustrations, which had the effect of creating distance and privacy, suggesting that the undergarments were hidden and not for public discourse. Generally these ads showed a woman in her boudoir or some other exclusively female arena. If bras were unmentionable, how could Maidenform become visible and directly marketed to the American female consumer? “One marketing study commented on the private versus public predicament stating that while Maidenform was the outstanding leader in the field, its product was not the type that establishes its market dominance by being visible to the public eye as in the case of Chevrolet automobile” (Synyia 31). In reality, women were not going to stride down the street showing off their Maidenforms. But they could in a dream.

The “I Dreamed...” campaign was created by three women from Norman, Craig & Kummel, a venerable ad agency in New York City. These ladies would bounce ideas off of one another and then make their pitch to Ida for final approval. The ads attempted to traverse “the public and the private with an inferred conversation between the female producers [of the bra] and the female consumers” (Synyia 28-29). Maidenform pushed the previously established boundaries of marketing with dreamy atmospheres and colors, double entendre, and “subtle sexuality” (Synyia 29). All of this appeared to be safe because the woman to woman approach provided the illusion

of an exclusively female dialogue. But others were able to listen in. And while many of its early ads reflected the societal norms of femininity of this time, many of the ads broke the mold and portrayed women wearing all different kinds of male hats. These print ads inspired women to go beyond the confines of their limited vocational opportunities. Not only did Maidenform place these ads in periodicals that targeted fashionable women, such as *Vogue*, *Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, they reached beyond the fashionable by expanding their marketing campaign to the more domesticated women who read *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCalls*, and *Women's Home Companion* (Synyia 31). And while the dream ads were populated exclusively by women (on the rare occasion men did appear they were in the background in minuscule form), they reached for the stars when they included magazines that catered to a cross section of genders, such as *This Week*, *N.Y. Times Magazine*, and *Life*, as if an FYI to the male consumer. Thus, Maidenform went beyond the confines of “[a]n 18-35 year old female demographic. The audience for the Dream ads was young and old, male and female” (Synyia 32). The campaign was devised to address desires that many women previously didn’t entertain because of the strict confines of gender norms and opportunity available to them at this point in American history. And it did so in a way that didn’t attempt to demean or make women feel guilty. It asked women to “[b]elieve something to be true” (Carroll 46). The ad campaign was respectful, innovative, and fun, and stretched the boundaries of society’s view of women as just wives, mothers, and sex objects.

In focusing on dreams and aspirations, Maidenform locked step with one of the key attributes of a great campaign: giving the consumer something to aspire to. In “What Makes a Great Campaign Great? The A-B-Cs of Winning Advertising” James Forr states that a great ad “[m]ust suggest that by using a particular product...the consumer will be transformed into (or at least perceived as) and idealized version of themselves. The aspirational image is often extreme and likely unattainable” (Forr 2). The Maidenform Dream campaign, and the women behind it made advertising history. Following are descriptions of five of the almost 100 Dream ads.

The ad depicting a Maidenform’s 1953 ad of the woman who [dreamed of being a fireman](#) contained text that is laced with double entendre such as “I am the chief and the siren too, dangerous, yes...but beautifully under control.” In this black and white ad (one of the few to include a poetical narrative), we see a beautiful woman at the top of a fire pole very high in the sky. She is wearing a fireman’s helmet, and women’s gloves. With one gloved hand, she clings to the pole, with the other, she holds her helmet in place. She is smiling and in control. She’s wearing a full skirt, reflective of Dior’s new look. The skirt is striped, which at first glance is reminiscent of an awning or a circus tent. On top, she wears only her Maidenform bra. There appears to be either a plume of smoke or a cloud passing between the woman’s thighs and ankles. In addition, there is a plume above her head, suggesting perhaps, that her head is in the clouds. Far below on the street, we see a hook and ladder truck, with the ladder fully extended. In addition, there is another fire truck. There are approximately 8 very tiny firemen looking up at the Maidenform women, several of them with their arms raised in alarm. She is smiling down at them. She doesn’t need them.

In 1952, Maidenform told a woman that she would be a political candidate and [win the election in her Maidenform bra](#). The colorful ad includes photo of a beautiful blond woman, against a black background wearing a full red skirt and her Maidenform bra. Her hands are jubilantly raised in celebration to each side of her head. She's expressing joy at having won an election. We know it's some kind of political election, as papers fly about the woman, and her right arm supports part of the ticker tape containing the partial phrase "PEOPLE SELECT....170,000,000,000....." Microphones dance around the base of her skirt, as if on their own, without a show of hands, conveying that those who held them have thrown their hands up in shock. Fireworks explode in the background in celebration. One building is in the background, and is rather diminutive. The dome is slightly reminiscent of the U.S. Capitol dome, however, the shape also suggests an obelisk, which may represent the Cold War with Russia that permeated American during this particular time. She's taken the world by storm, and it is at her feet.

In 1951, the [lady ambassador](#) entered the dream realm. Against a dark background, we see the base of an elaborate staircase. Atop the newel post is a male head. The Maidenform woman is in front of two large marble pillars that are flounced with a red curtain. She is standing on a black and white marble floor. All of this is evocative of a very formal interior; an embassy. The woman is very regal. She is wearing a fitted black skirt with a slit that is festooned with a red and white striped bustle that attaches to her hip. The bustle is attached with an eagle rhinestone (or diamond) brooch. She wears a matching red and white striped stole. In her hair is a navy-blue plume. Her lips are bright red. In between her skirt and her hair, she wears only her Maidenform bra. Her left hand is outstretched as an offering to someone we cannot see, a man, perhaps? With her patriotic colors, she mirrors the colors of American flag. On a very distant wall, what appears to be a coat of arms, suggesting a foreign setting. This ad tells us that foreign dignitaries will be eating out of her hand.

In 1951, [the Toreador](#) entered the arena. This Maidenform woman is standing front and center in this colorful ad. She is wearing red velvet knickers and matching cape, and white tights. And, of course, her Maidenform bra. It's not clear if she is wearing a traditional bullfighter's hat, as her hair blurs with the sky in the top of the picture, but her hair is fashioned in a subtle conical style mirroring the shape of male bullfighter's hat. Her arms are outstretched as if anticipating the approach of the bull. Faded in the distance, are several male bullfighters, we assume this because they are clothed from the waist up. The background colors are stormy with flashes of the colors of a sunset on the eve of a storm. We can infer that the men are afraid, and the bull might not show up.

An [all-girl-orchestra](#) was the dream in 1960. The professional musician ad was black and white ad, and is unusual as it includes four women rather than one. These Maidenform women are an ensemble of professional female musicians playing the, harp, flute, cello, and the horn. The Flutist is wearing glasses, implying nerdy intelligence. She is sitting very erect. The harp player appears to have her eyes closed and a subtle smile of dreamy satisfaction. The horn player has her eyes averted to the right, it's not clear who she is looking at or for. The cello player has her left hand on the strings of the instrument. Her posture is erect, her gaze straight. There are four different



hair styles depicted representing popular styles of the early 1960s; long curled, pulled back into a tight bun, piled on top with an elaborate top bun, and a modern coiffure, short and styled. All of the women are wearing plain black skirts and their Maidenform bras. This ad is telling us that not only can a woman work, but she can be a professional musician (an anomaly in 1960).

These five ads, as well as others, are examples of the women-to-women campaign rhetoric. The Maidenform Dream ads are classic examples of wish fulfillment advertising psychology. Further, the longevity of the ads solidified Maidenform's brand recognition. And while these ads fed women's desires for the gender norm dictates of that post-war time in America: love, romance, fashion, and beauty, they went beyond these norms by depicting aspirational scenarios. These ads created a hunger for independence and personal achievement by deploying a campaign created by women for a product made by a woman, which in a woman-to-woman conversation, told women they could have it all; if only in their dreams.

Eileen is an English major from a military family near Fort Devens in Ayer, Massachusetts. Her interest in vintage fashion led her to research representations of women in early 20th century advertisements for the Maidenform bra for her Composition II class. Impressed by the beautiful artwork she discovered in these depictions, Eileen was intrigued by the portrayals of women in roles that were traditionally held by men. Her essay explores how "these ads fed women's desires for the gender norm dictates of that post-war time in America [and] went beyond these norms by depicting aspirational scenarios." Eileen lives in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and works full time as a legal specialist in the financial services industry. In her spare time you will find her enjoying photography, biking, historical biographies and music.



Works Cited

- Carroll, Laura Bolin. "Backpacks vs. Briefcases: Steps to Rhetorical Analysis" *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writings Vol 1*, Edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, Parlor Press, 2011, pp. 45-58.
- Forr, James. "What Makes a Campaign Great? The A-B-Cs of Winning Advertising" *Quirks Marketing Research Review*, December, 2014.
- Howard, Vicki. "At the Curve Exchange: PostWar Beauty Culture and Working Women at Maidenform" *Enterprise & Society*, Vol 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 591-618. JSTOR.
- Maidenform Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Series 6: Advertising 1929-1994.
- Osborne, Daniel. *A Million Dreams...One Bra Maidenform*, University of North Carolina at Asheville, Senior Thesis.
- "Peggy Olson's Got Nothing on the Real Women Behind Maidenform's 'I Dreamed...' Ads" *Bust Magazine* (<http://bust.com/bust-magazine>) Accessed December 2014.
- Synycia, Natasha. *Ida Rosenthal and Her Maidenformidable Empire: Dreamy Advertising and Booming Business in Postwar United States*. 2016. University of California, Irvine, PhD Dissertation.

List of Images Discussed

Editor's Note: Images are viewable as cited by the author. Many images from the "I Dreamed" Campaign are also [available at the Smithsonian Archive](#).

[Figure 1](#) "I dreamed I was a fireman in my Maidenform bra," 1953.

[Figure 2](#) "I dreamed I won the election in my Maidenform bra," November, 1952.

[Figure 3](#) "I dreamed I was a Lady Ambassador in my Maidenform bra," November, 1951

[Figure 4](#) "I dreamed I was a toreador in my Maidenform bra," May, 1951.

[Figure 5](#) "I dreamed I played in an all-girl orchestra in my Maidenform bra," April, 1960.

