

GIZMODO

How "Clean" Was Sold to America with Fake Science



Sarah Zhang: February 12, 2015

The average American's daily hygiene ritual would seem unusual—nay, obsessive—to our forebears a hundred years ago. From mouthwash to deodorant, most of our hygiene products were invented in the past century. To sell them, the advertising industry had to create pseudoscientific maladies like "bad breath" and "body odor."

Americans had to be convinced their breath was rotten and their armpits stank. It did not happen by accident. "Advertising and toilet soap grew up together," says Katherine Ashenburg, author of *The Dirt on Clean*. As advertising exploded in the early 20th century, so did our obsession with personal hygiene.

Even our very notion of "soap" changed. Until the mid-19th century, "soap" meant laundry soap, the caustic stuff used for scrubbing soiled linens and clothes. A kinder, gentler alternative was invented for cleaning the body, and it had to be called "toilet soap" to distinguish from the unrefined stuff. Today, "toilet soap" is a superfluous designation. Toilet soap is simply soap.

Advertisers did not invent a notion of cleanliness out of a vacuum, but they did cannily tap into anxieties wrought by social upheavals in the early 20th century. As people moved from farm to factory to office, working spaces became where they spent all day with strangers in closer and closer quarters. Men and women began to work together. Women, especially, were a target of ads playing on the theme, *"Often a bridesmaid, never a bride."*

She caught the bouquet but . . .

Milly caught the bride's bouquet but everybody present knew that nothing would come of it . . . that she wouldn't be the next to marry by a long ways . . . and they knew the reason why, too.

People with halitosis (unpleasant breath) simply don't get by. It is the unforgivable social fault.

You never know when you have it—that's the insidious thing about it. Moreover, you are quite likely to have it, say dental authorities. Conditions present even in normal mouths constantly produce objectional odors.

Don't take a chance

The one way to make sure that your breath does not offend others is to rinse the mouth with Listerine. Do it every morning and every night, and between times before meeting others.

Listerine instantly gets rid of odors that ordinary mouth washes cannot hide in 12 hours. Don't experiment with untried or so-called bargain mouth washes when so important a matter as your breath is concerned. Listerine's lasting deodorant effect is a matter of fact, not of claims. Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, St. Louis, Mo.

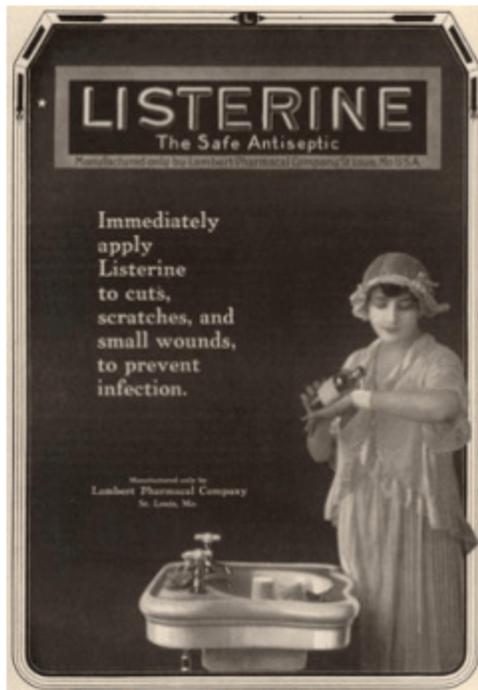
How's your breath today?
Use LISTERINE to make it agreeable

Now at
NEW LOW PRICES

And to be sure, advances in science and technology played a role, too. Plumbing made the weekly ritual of a Saturday night, pre-Sabbath bath easy to repeat every night of the week. Public health campaigns born out of a better understanding of germ theory trumpeted cleanliness.

Amidst all this, a new affliction called halitosis descended upon American. You know about it thanks to Listerine, the orchestrator of what maybe be one of the most successful advertising campaigns in history.

How Listerine Made Americans Terrified of Bad Breath



There's a reason why Listerine is so nasty—it wasn't originally meant to go in your mouth. When Joseph Lawrence invented the alcohol-based liquid in 1879, he created it as disinfectant for surgery. And for the first several decades of Listerine's existence, it was only available to doctors.

Ads for Listerine touting its various health benefits as an antiseptic. Left: Madison and Madison Ave Collection / Duke University Library. Right: Magazine Art

In 1914, however, the brander's owners, Lambert Pharmacal, Company decided to introduce Listerine to a wider audience. The liquid was then sold as a general disinfectant with a whole range of uses from treating dandruff to insect bites, but sales were nothing spectacular. During a brainstorming session, Gerard Lambert dragged in a chemist at the company, who happened to drop a little-known term "halitosis." Here's what happened in Lambert's own words.

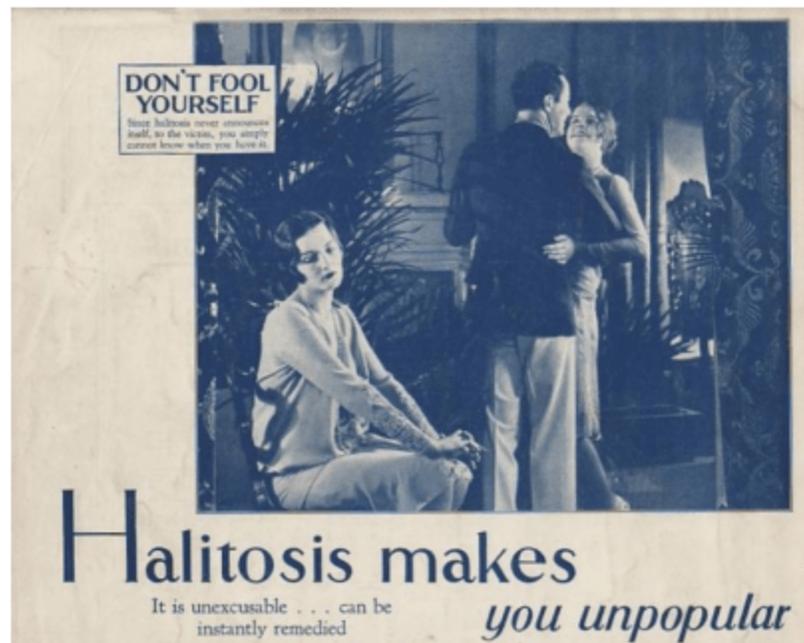
I asked him if Listerine was good for bad breath. He excused himself for a moment and came back with a big book of newspaper clippings. He sat in a chair and I stood looking over his shoulder. He thumbed through the immense book.

"Here it is, Gerard. It says in this clipping from the British Lancet that in cases of halitosis . . ." I interrupted, "What is halitosis?" "Oh," he said, "that is the medical term for bad breath."

[The chemist] never knew what had hit him. I hustled the poor old fellow out of the room. "There," I said, "is something to hang our hat on."

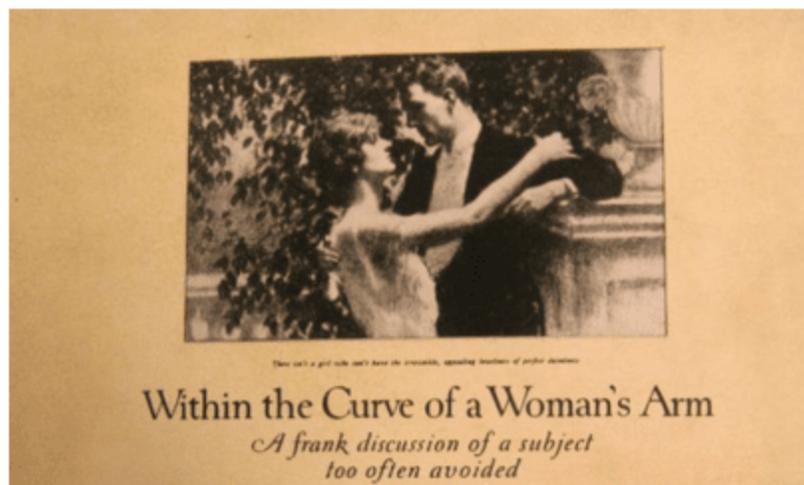
Halitosis lent Listerine the authoritative air for a fantastically successful advertising campaign, creating a market for the novel product of mouthwash. In an early version of A/B testing, coupons were sent out accompanying old and new-style Listerine ads. The halitosis ads did four times as well. Sales climbed 33 percent in just the first month.

From then on, Listerine took out a parade of advertisements insinuating that bad breath was pervasive, but people were simply too polite to tell you. Bad breath I mean halitosis was secretly holding you back, and only Listerine could fix it.



Lambert would become the third largest advertiser in major American magazines, according to Vincent Vinikas in *Soft Soap, Hard Sell*. The company created the demand for a product Americans did not know they wanted, let alone needed. And it's not just bad breath Americans came to fear.

The Ad Man Who Launched His Career With Antiperspirant



James Webb Young, one of the legendary ad men of the 20th century, was still a young copywriter when he got the Odorono account. Odorono was, well, not great. As Sarah Everts describes in a fascinating piece in *Smithsonian Magazine*, the antiperspirant's acid solution had a nasty habit of eating through clothes, including one woman's wedding dress.

A bigger problem, though, was a pervasive belief that blocking sweat was bad for health. To counter that, Young's first advertisements emphasized Odorono's origins as a formula developed by a doctor. But he ran into an even bigger problem, which is that a survey revealed two-thirds of women didn't feel like they needed to use antiperspirant. And here, Young found his true target for selling Odorono: embarrassment.

The 1919 ad in the Ladies Home Journal (above) hit a nerve. Two hundred angry subscribers supposedly canceled their subscriptions because they were so insulted by the ad. But it also worked. Sales for Odorono doubled in the next year. Competitors like Mum (below) jumped on the "whisper copy" train, insinuating what people were supposedly too polite to say directly.

...AND MEN CAN BE SUCH AWFUL GOSSIPS TOO!



Let's face the truth about UNDERARM PERSPIRATION ODOR

MEN DO TALK about girls behind their backs — although they won't admit it. Is a girl pretty, a good sport, a smooth dancer? The answer quickly goes the rounds! They talk about other things, too. About the girls they hate to dance with — the girls they simply *won't* take out. For a girl must be *more* than pretty and smart. She'll never make a hit with men unless she is truly *sweet* — nice to be near.

Unpopularity often begins with the first hint of underarm odor. This is one fault that men can't stand — one fault they *can't* forgive. Yet any girl may offend this way,

*if she trusts her **best** alone to keep her fresh.*

Smart girls — popular girls — don't take chances! They know a bath only takes care of *past* perspiration — that they still need Mum, to prevent odor *to come*.

MUM LASTS ALL DAY! Start the day or evening with Mum and you'll come home with underarms as fresh as when you started.

MUM IS SOOTHING! Mum is safe and soothing as a healing hand cream. Even after underarm shaving it never irritates the skin.

MUM IS SAFE! Use Mum any time, even *after* you're dressed. For it does not injure fabrics.

MUM IS SURE! Mum doesn't stop natural perspiration. It does just what you want it to do — *take the odor out of perspiration.*

MUM IS QUICK! There's no problem about using Mum. It takes no time, no fuss and bother of waiting for it to dry. Smooth it on and you're through! To be a girl men like to have around, use Mum every day and after every bath.

HOURS AFTER YOUR BATH MUM STILL KEEPS YOU SWEET





MUM

Takes the odor out of perspiration

FOR THIS IMPORTANT USE, TOO
Thousands of women use Mum for Lint-free Nipples because they know Mum is so gentle, so sure! Don't risk underarm-irritation! Always use Mum!

The Cleanliness Institute

WHAT TO DO?

The way to loveliness is in this book

CLEANLINESS INSTITUTE
Established to promote public welfare by teaching the value of cleanliness
41 EAST 17th STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

PLEASE: Perhaps you also would be interested in "The Book About Bats," or "A Cleaner Home by 12 O'Clock." These, too, are free... a part of the wide service of Cleanliness Institute.

See Advertising Index, page 92

Early on, the soap makers also realized that advertising could only do so much to differentiate brands—what they really needed to do was band together to convince Americans that cleanliness was paramount. Thus, the Association of American Soap and Glycerine Producers established the friendlier sounding Cleanliness Institute in 1927. The institute could promote keeping clean and, by extension, soap consumption.

The industry cannily made school children its primary target. "No approach could better meet the industry's ends than inculcating every youth in American to a tale of soap-and-water. Once habituated to regular and frequent consumption, the children could guarantee a market for years to come," writes Vincent Vinikas in an excellent chapter on the institute from his book *Soft Soap, Hard Sell*.

As one of its first major activities, the institute conducted a study of the hygiene habits of students in 145 schools. They found, by their own standards much room for improvement. Only 57 percent of the schools had soap. "The object should be not merely to make children clean but to make them love to be clean," read an institute report.

So the institute set about correcting the course with a flurry of storybooks, teacher's guides, and and posters. Teachers were to write letters to parents about the cleanliness. In one case, the institute reported on a school where students were given "wash tickets" after washing their hands. Only by presenting these tickets could they even enter the school cafeteria.

The methods may read as heavy-handed today, but the habits promoted by the Cleanliness Institute will be utterly familiar. "The trade association wanted Americans to to wash quite unwittingly after toilet, to wash without thought before eating, to jump into the tub as automatically as one might awake each new day," writes Vinikas.

That vision is not far from today's reality. If anything, the grooming products deemed essential for proper hygiene have only proliferated. Even a quick stroll through the drugstore—past what seems like infinite varieties of shampoo and deodorant and whatever new product just rolled out of the factories—can tell you that.

Top image: Listerine advertisement from 1928. The Household Magazine.