

# Cleavage Control!

How did fifties TV deal with bra and girdle advertising? Verrry carefully! | **By Bob Pondillo**

If you think Janet Jackson's 2004 Super Bowl breast-baring episode caused a national scandal, you haven't heard the fascinating story of how postwar TV advertising dealt with "problems" of female cleavage. From the very get-go, one of commercial TV's biggest concerns—and public relations nightmares—was how it would display certain female pulchritude on the small screen.

One key reason for its anxiety was problematic: Just as American television made its commercial debut in the late 1940s, so did the return of clothing that over-emphasized a woman's bust.

The era was, indeed, the age of "mammary madness": a time of cone-shaped brassieres—dubbed "torpedo" or "bullet bras"—that caused each breast to appear perpendicular and pointy like the head of a missile. Evangelist Billy Graham remarked that citizens of the period had become "absorbed and obsessed with sex, especially the female bosom."

In 1948, NBC-TV refused to accept advertisements for girdles and brassieres. Chief network censor Stockton Helffrich considered corsets and bras "not a particularly timely [ad] classification for the new medium."

NBC-TV was not hostile to these products *per se*, just concerned about audience reaction to such marketing on commercial television and the potential public relations problems such messages could pose to the nascent industry. These products stirred concerns because of their association with human reproduction and bodily functions, areas of abiding taboo, never

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to be spoken of in mixed company or in front of children. For example, when

asked what commercial content was disconcerting on television, a survey respondent remarked, "bras and girdle [ads that] talked about the lift and separation," concluding, "That's embarrassing when there's teen-age boys around...it starts the imagination."

Nonetheless, one of Helffrich's earlier memos made clear that he saw a possible future for bra and girdle promotion, and explained "a classification of this type can be better absorbed in the framework of a come-of-age television schedule." That sense of uncertainty, of not knowing what kind of advertising the television viewer would bear, was a central concern as the industry was inventing itself. Based upon their experience with radio advertising, early television practitioners knew if

they first limited controversial ads to certain parts of the day, such a scheme would gradually spur general audience acceptance. Helffrich's mention of a come-of-age schedule at least suggests that possibility. And, true to form, six months later, in late January 1949, NBC television had already reconsidered dropping its ban on advertising bras and girdles, but only on local broadcasts and in specific time periods. Helffrich wrote, "Possible [commercial] treatments...[may] be acceptable and we have indicated with certain reservations a willingness to examine suggested presentations."

By November 1949, NBC-TV censors took a chance on a girdle commercial deemed "in pretty good taste." It "featur[ed] a demonstration of the girdle on a life-like dummy," explained Helffrich, "followed by a dissolve...to a live model attractively outfitted in a negligee bearing a marked similarity facially and by stance to the dummy seen earlier." Still, there was some tampering by the censors. Helffrich, for instance, insisted the girdle had to cover the dummy's thighs. If there was even the hint of a "crotch shot," as he put it, tulle—fine silk netting used in veils and scarves—had to be used to mask the "offense" of exposing a female "thigh between the bottom of the girdle and top of the hosiery." Helffrich's final caveat had the ad restricted to daytime broadcast "and on a woman's participation show basis only."

By early February 1950, there was speculation that Maiden Form Brassiere would soon be allowed to advertise on an NBC-TV Saturday night program.

Chief rival CBS-TV was the first to accept a bra commercial—showing it three days a week on its afternoon *Vanity Fair* fashion broadcast—it was therefore assumed evening ads for women's undergarments could not be far behind. The controversial CBS-TV afternoon bra commercial was uninspired and straightforward: a female spokesperson sat before cameras holding samples of the company's brassieres while exhorting their virtues. "The first [bra]," wrote Helffrich, "was a flesh colored number...[the spokesperson's] only particularly graphic remarks [were]...Maiden Form 'supports from below'...[with] the accent on 'uplift.'" Next came a strapless black bra dubbed the "Hold Tight," that again referred to the undergarment's support and comfort. Helffrich stated the product was "perfectly in line for a women's weekday daytime show...[but still] undesirable [for] nighttime network programming," and NBC-TV ad sales agreed, as did head of NBC television programming, Sylvester "Pat" Weaver. So, while there was no specific network code forbidding such sponsorship, Helffrich's rule-of-thumb precedent restricted such advertising to before 4:30 p.m. or earlier. "Placement at any other times would be poor programming," he declared.

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But what if a bra manufacturer wanted to advertise on a specific show at a later time? Lilyette Brassieres' desire to display its foundation garment line only on Faye Emerson's nighttime NBC-TV program asked just such a question.

By May 1950, Emerson's new show—*Fifteen with Faye*—seen Saturdays from 10:30-10:45 p.m., had only been on the network for about a month, but her earlier CBS-TV shows and many other television guest appearances had already caused considerable controversy with certain viewers and critics.

But Emerson's program—a breezy celebrity chat show on trends in fashion, theatre, and New York café society in general—was not the problem; her glamorous gowns were. On television Emerson always wore revealing designer frocks with dramatic plunging necklines, which became her trademark. As the new visual medium took its first steps, Emerson's décolletage became the subject of popular and industry newspaper coverage, sparked photo layouts in *Life* and other publications, and inspired comedians' jokes—one wag quipping "Emerson put the 'V' in TV." All the more reason Lilyette wanted to associate itself with Emerson's poitrine, intending to advertise its fetchingly named Cue-T-Bra. Lilyette's ad copy stressed its brassiere's "ingenious... self-adjusting straps [that] lift each bust individually [for]...contour separation." Despite sales-department and sponsor pressure, the NBC-TV censorship department again turned away the nighttime brassiere business for daytime television placement. In this case, Helffrich appeared more concerned about local press reaction than home viewer anger. "It would be hard to conceive of [bra] claims of this type," Helffrich explained, "on a show like Faye Emerson's getting by without a tweaking from [New York newspaper television critics] Gould, Crosby, et al."

The exhibition of brassieres on live models was initially out of the



Dagmar (top photo) decorated NBC's *Broadway Open House* in 1950.

Marilyn Monroe (above) was a legend.

question on television, so dummies were used, but *Sponsor* reported CBS-TV considered changing its display standards to real women. “A tasty idea,” remarked Helffrich, “and I guess it remains to be seen whether or not it

is actually done.” Whatever would happen, one thing was clear: NBC-TV would not be a trailblazer in this area. As it turned out, live models *were* used by the upstart ABC-TV network. Moreover, Helffrich noted, ABC permitted the ad to be broadcast during “family viewing” time—considered until 9:30 p.m., Eastern Time, 8:30 p.m., Central Time, and 9 p.m. elsewhere. On Friday evening, October 20, 1950, the HI/low Witchery and Disguise Bra was displayed on a live model to network audiences. Helffrich wrote, “I haven’t caught this particular pioneering effort but called my counterpart at ABC, Grace Johnson, to get her side of the story. She insists the plug was handled in good taste [and] says they have had only one adverse letter...” Nonetheless, the *New York World Telegram* was critical of the “event” as was John Crosby, TV critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, who wrote that using a live model “accentuates the—uh—positive, if I make myself clear, and I’m afraid that I do.” On balance, the commercial was praised by entertainment industry publications *Variety*, *Radio Daily*, and *Cue*. Helffrich, again toeing the conservative company line, noted, “NBC...is taking a wait and see attitude.”

Sensitivity to bra advertising persisted throughout the 1950s. In mid-November 1957, NBC-TV preempted the popular *Perry Como*

*Show* for a special, *Holiday in Las Vegas*, sponsored by Exquisite Form Bra. In what was described only as “a situation” having occurred, a puzzled Helffrich wrote, “There have been enough phone calls and letters on [this]...broadcast to

### **Advertising America’s cultural obsession with the female bosom on the ubiquitous new medium of television made sexual propriety an incendiary social issue that held economic and political consequences for the networks.**

suggest *something*. But what?...Parallels and precedents notwithstanding, polite phrasing and poetic persuasion aside, [the brassiere ads] *bothered* certain viewers...[w]omen more than men, in mail I personally have seen.” The chief censor next ticked down a list of potential reasons for the audience revulsion: the Las Vegas locale perhaps; maybe because full-bosomed actress Jayne Mansfield was featured in the show despite, Helffrich noted, the “careful avoidance of the contiguity of the [bra] commercials themselves and program material.” Perchance, he mused, it was the “cumulative feelings brought to the program by certain viewers...I truly do not know,” Helffrich admitted, concluding, “nor do some very mature colleagues working with me. I do know that I...am concerned over such critical reaction...which articulates itself around words like ‘indecent’ and ‘embarrassing’ in the family viewing circle.” And it was puzzling, indeed.

Newspapers and magazines of the era continually ran large display ads for all manner of brassieres and girdles, but the women featured wearing them were

illustrations and not photographs. If a newspaper photo of a bra-clad female was too close to the real thing, the use of a live, moving brassiere model on television would be considered a near obscenity for many, or at the very least, a deeply offensive breach of taste. It is important to recall that gazing upon the female breast in this era was a taboo of enduring power, one wrapped in sex, lust, guilt, shame, and all the baser emotions to which “decent, God-fearing” people should not be tempted or exposed.

Bra ad complaints persisted into at least the early-to-mid 1960s, prompting a frustrated Helffrich in his final NBC censorship report to ask: “Is it or is it not ‘poor taste in advertising’ to advertise a brassiere on television?” He quoted a *Printers’ Ink* column that proclaimed horror over an Exquisite Form Bra commercial’s “close-up of [a] bosom that filled the entire screen and went into clinical details about a gadget in front put there to adjust the fit.” Helffrich explained what was actually presented was a special effect shot of the garment itself “as if filled out by the anatomical matter it was designed to fit,” not a close-up of a breast itself. In a direct and pointed defense, Helffrich wrote:

*The exploration of how and how not to advertise brassieres...[is a discussion that] examines “good taste” as a euphemism for evasion....“Personal undergarments” advertising, invariably relates itself to alleged damage to children, presumes a direct contribution to delinquency, and so on. If the handling is provocative, cheap, or essentially dishonest in its appeal: agreed. Otherwise, nonsense; arrant, head-in-the-sand, silly nonsense...Avoidance of television commercials concerning brassieres in effect would be avoidance of*

*reflection in television of a major cultural preoccupation: the bosom fetish. Better a passing reference to the fact that those “personal undergarments” are designed to fit than television pretence denying their existence.*

Here Helffrich speaks to the essence of the matter: a brassiere was not merely a functional piece of female under-clothing, it was an erotic symbol, part and parcel of a culturally constructed, evangelically grown American breast fetish. Therefore, bra ads hyper-focused the on-going cultural obsession with the female bosom. Advertising such an obsession on the ubiquitous new medium of television made sexual propriety an incendiary social issue that held economic and political consequences for the networks. After all, television in general (and brassiere commercials specifically) provided countless outlets for “inappropriate” gazing at the female breast. At mid-century, bra ads were regarded as yet another repudiation of a “system of sexual controls” that historian Beth Bailey says, “few were willing [or] able to publicly reject...” It seems not much has changed in fifty years.

Clearly, to show or not to show the female chest on TV still vexes the broadcast industry—as the passionate reaction to Janet Jackson’s Super Bowl breast flash strongly attests. But when one considers the backstory of “cleavage control” on early television, the Jackson incident appears to be just the latest iteration of America’s unabashed, ongoing cultural fixation with the womanly bosom.

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