

Gleam: Rebranding Big Steel in Postwar America

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In the late 1950s, after almost fifty years of dominance, the American steel industry, led by United States Steel (U.S. Steel) and the steel trade body, the American Iron and Steel Institute (AISI), woke up to a significantly changed commercial landscape.¹ The industry found itself challenged by competition from foreign steel producers, new materials such as plastics and aluminum, labor unrest, and a public that understood Big Steel as old-fashioned (Meikle 1995). In response, the steel industry took advantage of a recent marketing revolution that focused on interpreting consumer desires and aggressively engaged in promotional efforts that sold steel as a bright, light, and modern material (Vargo and Lusch 2008; Nuccio 1964: 15).

This chapter will focus on the Steelmark merchandising campaign, the first industry-wide promotion of steel as a modern material, which employed a four-pointed star-like form, suggesting a glinting twinkle of reflected light and the “Gleam of Stainless Steel” marketing promotion, which associated shininess with informal, fashionable, living, while employing the gleaming Steelmark emblem (Plate 9). This study evidences a consumer-oriented emphasis in postwar institutional marketing focused on modern lifestyle where shininess was employed as a key visual and rhetorical trope. In the steel sector, this period witnessed a more public-oriented corporate identity, offering a set of goods, messages, and symbols that reflected an increased emphasis on consumption and modern living. While focusing on the influence of market research, this article seeks to show how design outcomes (e.g., logos, trademarks, retail spaces, and advertisements) originated from unique economic, political, professional, and aesthetic realities. Additionally, the chapter investigates the transformation of a once complacent, industrial giant as it responded to a rapidly emerging consumer market. The article joins a growing body of research on the relationship between design, market research, and promotional activities, including advertising and marketing campaigns (Porter 1999; Blaszczyk 2000; Nickles 2002) (Figure 5.1).

The American postwar period is widely understood as one of extraordinary economic affluence and lifestyle consumption (Hine 1987; Lears 1994; Foreman 1997; Glickman 1999; Cohen 2003; Daunton and Hilton 2001). A remarkable output of academic writing of recent decades strongly associates consumption with the construction of modern identities (Campbell 1987; Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991;

the gleam
in her eye
says It's
stainless
steel!

Right now, at the finest department stores, eyes are shining at the new and exciting displays of Stainless Steel for carefree living. Visit the Stainless Steel Shop in your store where the latest in stainless cookware, flatware and appliances are all gathered in one place for your easy selection. This is the time to shop for Stainless Steel. No other metal gives you such quality.

*McLouth Steel Corporation
Detroit 17, Michigan*

Look for the STEELMARK
on the products you buy.

McLOUTH STAINLESS STEEL

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AMERIC

Figure 5.1 *McLouth Stainless Steel advertisement, c. 1961: "The gleam in her eye says it's stainless steel!"; "A Special Report on: Carefree Living for your Home, The Gleam of Stainless Steel," American Metal Market, Section 3, February 19, 1962, p. 6. Hagley Museum and Library Acc. 1631, AISI Records, Box 123, Folder "Stainless Steel 2." Reproduced with permission from Hagley Museum and Library*

Lash and Friedman 1992; Bell and Hollows 2006). In 1966, the design critic Reyner Banham in his classic appreciation of gleaming consumer goods, “All That Glitters Is Not Stainless,” linked the twentieth-century shininess of the “average parking lot and

New steels are born at Armco

First, Armco produces a complete range of high-quality stainless steels that help make products bright and beautiful, tough and long-lasting, easier to sell.

At the same time, Armco helps you and your customers tell about the unmatched advantages of modern stainless steels in products they buy.

In 1962, for example, Armco is supporting you

Two ways Armco Stainless Steels help you and your customers sell

and your customers for the fourth straight year during the month-long "Gleam of Stainless Steel" promotion sponsored by the Committee of Stainless Steel Producers of the A.I.S.I.

In our home-office area, Armco again will tell your stainless product story on local TV, radio and in newspapers—actively aid in department store displays and promotions. It's one more example of the promotional help that's part-and-parcel of the steel you buy from Armco Division, Armco Steel Corporation, 642 Curtis Street, Middletown, Ohio.

CAREFREE LIVING FOR YOUR HOME

THE GLEAM OF STAINLESS STEEL

ARMCO Armco Division

62 7

WILLIAMSON, DE 19807

Figure 5.2 “Carefree Living” trade advertisement for Armco Steel Corporation using the Gleam emblem and Steelmark hangtag, 1962: “A Special Report on: Carefree Living for your Home, The Gleam of Stainless Steel,” *American Metal Market*, Section 3, February 19, 1962, p. 7; Hagley Museum and Library Acc. 1631, AISI Records, Box 123, Folder “Stainless Steel 2.” Reproduced with permission from Hagley Museum and Library

appliance showroom” to democratic patterns of consumption (Banham 1974: 156). These linkages are consistent with the steel industry’s pairing of modern living and consumer products in their postwar campaigns (Figure 5.2).

Although it embraced institutional advertising relatively late, after 1935 U.S. Steel was depicted as a friendly nation-builder that contributed significantly to the public’s well-being, a useful image during the business-bashing New Deal era, and one that was developed by the advertising agency Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBD&O) (Marchand 1998: 224, 228). In the years after the Second World War, however, Big Steel required a more modern and consumer-oriented image. A central theme of the steel industry’s promotional materials was the notion of shininess, the gleam of stainless steel in particular, as a unique and valuable quality: one that would aid the promotion of the entire steel industry. Thus, through aggressively marketing steel as innovative and stylish, the steel industry hoped to shed its image as heavy, dirty, and old-fashioned—as a U.S. Steel-sponsored consumer survey of 1955 indicated (Fleishman 1958). Likewise, promoting stainless steel, especially to homemakers, would help to diminish the public perception of steel as a backward-looking producer of bridges and railways and present a modern face for the sector as America traversed the Cold War and entered the space age.

The following quote of 1949 from the *Science News-Letter* perhaps typifies the association of stainless steel with luminous modernity in the middle of the twentieth century and is suggestive of the kind of shining image that the steel industry wished to portray.

A flashing, stream-lined railroad train. The speedy X-2 experimental jet plane that flies faster than sound. The shiny spoon on your table or the mirror-like sink in your kitchen. Rustless, all of them, because they are made of stainless steel, these metal objects in our modern world are symbolic of permanence and untarnished beauty. They are metallurgic science applied and shining most brightly.

(Ewing 1949: 394)

From 1944 to 1959, with European and Japanese production capabilities ravaged by the Second World War, the American steel industry, led by U.S. Steel, was globally dominant. During most of its first 100 years, beginning in 1901, U.S. Steel was an industrial giant that dominated the American steel industry, while remaining the world’s greatest producer of steel (Warren 2001: xvii; 2). American steel capacity expanded hugely through the 1940s and 1950s largely as a result of the demands of the Second World War, the Korean and Cold wars, and the need to satisfy an increasingly voracious consumer appetite.² During this relatively noncompetitive period, the steel industry thrived financially but was lulled into complacency. From the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, however, American steel was under threat as foreign producers competed successfully through low wages, cheap shipping costs, affordable materials, and the modernization of plant (Warren 2001: 23). If Big Steel can be understood as a symbol of American national identity, then foreign competition could be seen as an external threat, not just to the economy, but to the America’s industrial values of productivity and global might. Whereas the United States produced an estimated

62 percent of the world's steel in 1945, by 1950, this had dropped to 46.6 percent, and by 1960, this figure had reached a low of 26 percent (Warren 2001: 214–5). Over the same period, U.S. Steel, the largest of America's steel companies, saw increases in expenses, labor costs, and operating rates, and witnessed only modest increases in profits (Warren 2001: 227). In addition, domestic competition from aluminum and plastics manufacturers greatly worried steel industry leaders. Across the ferrous metal industries, increased external and internal competition spurred increased marketing. By 1964, the *New York Times* wrote of the intensive efforts and vast expenditures by the steel sector, noting that “Mighty steel, which only a few years ago appeared to have lost to newer metals in the battle for supremacy, has come back strong” (Nuccio 1964: 15).

Steelmart and Gleam Campaigns

In the immediate postwar years, manufacturers were able to more easily sell goods due to pent-up consumer demand following the Great Depression and the Second World War. But once these needs were met, subsequent sales were much harder to achieve. It wasn't until the postwar period that America's “marketing revolution” occurred where a more diverse range of market research methods were widely embraced by manufacturers in order to more precisely determine the desires of consumers (Dobson 1988: 304; Dawson 2003: 39).³ In 1955 U.S. Steel hired the market research firm Alfred Politz Research, Inc. to conduct a nation-wide survey to discern the public understanding of steel and counter commercial competition. With an office staff of 200 and a field staff of 1,300, Alfred Politz Research was listed as one of America's largest market research firms in 1958 with 8–10 long-standing retainer accounts, including Socony-Mobil Oil Company and Chrysler (Fleishman 1958; Dawson 2003). In the Politz survey, which included 4,000 interviews with people over 15 years of age, respondents said they associated steel with girders, heavy machinery, and engineering projects, and considered it “strong, heavy, and reliable, but not particularly modern or having good styling” (H. A 1958: 101). Most people were unaware of the lighter uses of steel or its thousands of types, grades, and finishes (H. A 1958: 101–2). In addition, the survey found that consumers often didn't recognize products made of the material and that this was increasingly difficult with the introduction of new surface treatments like aluminum and vinyl coatings (AISI 1963a).

While the plastic's industry from the late 1940s had vigorously promoted its product as ideal for easy cleaning, or what cultural historian Jeffrey L. Meikle called “damp cloth utopianism,” the steel industry would embrace the marketing concept of shininess as symbol of modernity over a decade later (Meikle 1995: 167–82). Spurred on by the 1955 consumer study, the plan was to develop an industry-wide campaign to promote steel as a modern material (AISI 1960b: 1). For the first time in its history, the AISI created a Committee to Promote the Use of Steel (CPUS). The Market Development Subcommittee was launched shortly afterward to promote the “lightness, brightness and versatility” of steel in products, in particular through their identification with the Steelmark insignia (AISI 1963a). Thus, under the auspices of U.S. Steel and in coordination with the AISI, was born the Steelmark program (an industry-wide

promotion designed to “make people steel conscious and win a greater share of the consumer market”) and the company’s first “total corporate identity,” intended to unify and focus the company’s image (H. A 1958: 100). Run by the U.S. Steel’s advertising agency Batton, Barton, Durstine and & Osborn (BBD&O) with design work by Lippincott and Margulies (L&M), a pioneer in corporate identity, the main goal of the program was to encourage consumers to associate steel with “modern living—good design—[and] beauty and style” (H. A 1958: 100). Of course numerous factors—from economics to consumer impressions—pushed the steel company toward aggressive marketing and design activities. However, a narrative of American steel under attack also helped to sell the professional services of designers and marketers to steel executives. The Steelmark was unveiled in January 1960, though used in sales material as early as 1955 (Wright 1955). BBD&O was considered an “establishment” agency but was later responsible for the groundbreaking youth-oriented Pepsi Generation campaigns after 1961 (Frank 1997: 120; 171). U.S Steel’s alliance with a conventional agency was consistent with their own moderate approach to business and innovation.

In 1958 *Industrial Design* magazine reviewed U.S. Steel’s sweeping identity program and the new Steelmark. The article noted that the impetus of the identity program came from U.S. Steel’s John Veckly, Director of Advertising, who believed that with the increased use of plastics and aluminum after the Second World War and “their phenomenally successful advertising campaigns, inroads were being made in areas of the market—notably consumer goods—that U.S. Steel could and should be exploiting” (Frank 1997: 103). Veckly felt that he needed more than just a survey to convince some of U.S. Steel’s more independent affiliates. Therefore, he needed a “disinterested third party”—a design agency. Veckly thought Central Operations could more persuasively advance their arguments if he chose a design authority with a strong reputation (Frank 1997: 103). L&M seemed to satisfy this requirement, having already achieved a considerable profile through its work with some of America’s leading businesses, including the American Tobacco Company, Clairol Incorporated, Dow Corning Corporation, General Mills, and Kraft Foods Company (*Design Sense*, No. 9).

Around 1960 the in-house branding and corporate identity publication of L&M, *Design Sense*, outlined the two years of “intensive” work that led to final designs of the U.S. Steel trademark and Steelmark emblem, including the “mammoth” Politz survey, a three-month tour of U.S. Steel plants and offices, and a review of “thousands of pieces of printed matter” from the various departments and divisions of the “giant corporation” (*Design Sense*, No. 9: 8). L&M’s conclusion, which conveniently paralleled Politz’s, was that the existing U.S. Steel trademark had “valuable equity”: research had shown it was one of the three best-known trademarks of “some hundred” tested. This finding strongly delimited the bounds of the design brief and led to a solution that offered “no essential change,” but “modernization” and the establishment of procedures for consistent application of the mark across the corporation and its affiliates. L&M staff noted that the previous “look” of U.S. Steel had constantly shifted—“at times brilliant, at times stuffy and old fashioned” resulting in “confusion” in the public’s mind and a “badly blurred image of steel as a contemporary product” (*Design Sense*, No. 9: 8).

L&M’s redesign of the existing U.S. Steel trademark aimed to embody “the new image of steel—a light, stylish material” of “its present campaign” while maintaining

visual continuity with the existing logo—the three serif letters “USS” within a circle. To achieve visual clarity, the redesign of the logo required dropping the serifs, increasing the distance between the letters, and widening the circle (H. A 1958: 104). While the new trademark was accepted by U.S. Steel, its director of market development felt that in the light of intense materials competition, “something more was needed The consumer had to be made aware that he was buying steel and using steel products in its multifarious forms. Steel had to be promoted as an omnipresent material with many-sided usefulness.” What was desired was a new slogan and a new mark “that would sell steel—anyone’s steel.” BBD&O developed the slogan, “Steel—Lightens Your Work, Brightens Your Leisure, Widens Your World,” while L&M designed the Steelmark—“a kind of hallmark as sterling is in silver ... designed in such a way as to make [the] visual association with the new U.S. Steel trademark irresistible” (H. A 1958: 105). The aim to design a hallmark suggests a conscious effort to equate steel with precious metals, thus offering a glinting promise of quality, value, and status.

L&M sought to maintain visual continuity between the two marks. Both the Steelmark and the U.S. Steel logotype used the same-sized circle and similar letterforms. Both used a trio of letters (in the case of the U.S. Steel trademark) or star-like geometric forms, known as hypocycloids (in the case of the Steelmark). A blank space in the Steelmark insignia permitted the addition of the name of a steel type, such as stainless, galvanized, and the like (AISI n. d.). The tapered star-shaped forms were meant to suggest lightness and “convey versatility and up-to-dateness” (Gregor 1961: 39). The hypocycloids were described by the design firm as “concave-sided ‘diamonds,’” reinforcing the bright and light qualities of modern steel, while continuing the comparison with precious materials. The “gaiety” of colors employed were meant to harmonize with the new slogan: “yellow for ‘lightens’—orange for ‘brightens,’ horizon blue, suggesting sky and water, for ‘widens.’” In *Design Sense*, it was noted that the “three-part, star-like symbol” suggested “luminosity, modernity, brightness, airiness”—a “visual expression of U.S. Steel’s new theme” (*Design Sense*, No. 9: 9). In 1963, a press release for the Steelmark noted that the campaign was part of a long-standing effort to “win public recognition of modern steels that are bright and modern” and strong and durable (AISI 1963a).

The look of the Steelmark emblem was consistent with contemporary postwar design imagery that evoked a new kind of modernity, one that rejected the grid and embraced the organic, while suggesting the possibility of orbital space flight and the energy and power of the atom (Crowley and Pavitt 2008). This trend was perhaps typified by the use of parabolic shapes in logos, such as the mark for the contemporary office furniture company, Herman Miller, by the George Nelson office, and structures, such as Eero Saarinen’s innovative stainless steel Gateway Arch for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, St. Louis (competition 1947–48; built 1959–64), which celebrated the American project of national expansion (Handlin 2004: 249; Berry 2005: 28) (Plate 10). Saarinen said he chose the parabolic-like catenary curve because he considered it “pure,” “dynamic,” and “timeless” and that he chose stainless steel because of its “permanence” and because it “belong[ed] to our time” (Saarinen 1968: 22). With the launch and orbit of the Russian satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, the parabolic orbital path would have been strongly associated with the space race—its

technological achievements, global anxiety, and the promise of advanced consumer goods. In America, space exploration promised not only scientific discovery and military prowess, but consumer applications of space-age materials and innovations. The Steelmark could be considered as a Cold War weapon in the battle between the Soviet Union and America. While the USSR may have launched the first man-made object into space, the United States set the pace for consumerism. The Steelmark, a twinkling combination of parabolic forms, could therefore be seen as appropriating the orbital imagery of the Sputnik, while promoting America's advanced consumer economy. Such meanings can be associated with the kind of modernity the AISI desired for "new" metals, a modernity of innovation, novelty, and contemporary living.

After testing the Steelmark for a year in 1959, using the mark on over 12,000,000 consumer goods, U.S. Steel presented the unregistered symbol to the steel industry for use as a merchandising device ("Producers Agree on Symbol to Appear on Products": 45, 52; "U.S. Steel Tests Plan in South"). In 1960, the AISI announced: "The Entire Steel Industry Adopts Broad Identification Program" (AISI 1960b: n. p.). Typical of the embrace of the Steelmark across the sector was the announcement in 1960, in a leading steel trade journal, *Iron Age*, that "[s]tainless producers are dropping their old symbol to join the Steelmark campaign" ("Steel Stresses Product Identity": 50). The use of the Steelmark by stainless steel producers and manufacturers was particularly appropriate, as they were in competition with hallmarked silver in the flatware market. The use of the Steelmark across the industry suggested a familial, or even paternal, relationship with U.S. Steel, while creating a more unified identity for the entire trade.

The Steelmark was intended for use in a variety of promotional contexts, including window displays, hang tags, point-of-sale display materials, packaging, catalogues, sales literature, signage, livery, and print and television advertising (Wright 1955). It appeared in numerous steel company advertising campaigns in trade and consumer magazines, including *Look*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and many others (AISI 1961: 1). There were even local Steel Days, three-day events where steel was celebrated through speeches, parades, and fireworks. In 1963, the emblem was even adopted as the symbol for the American football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers. A press release of 1963 estimated that the Steelmark tag appeared on 40 million products and, continuing the association with hallmarking, that an estimated 6 billion "impressions" of the Steelmark have been made through printing on packaging, product literature, and in advertisements (AISI 1963a). It was claimed that in 1964, around 2,000 manufacturers of steel products used the Steelmark (Nuccio 1964: 15).

Selling Gleam: Stainless Steel Promotion

Because of its shininess, association with contemporary design, use in cutting-edge technology, and its resistance to rust, stainless steel was the ideal material to communicate the qualities of modern steel to the general public. Of course, the unique characteristics of the material had long been foregrounded in its publicity. Stainless steel, with its emphasis on brightness and novelty, can be seen as having paved the way for the Steelmark campaign. It certainly helped to illustrate the diversity of steel during

the campaign. In fact, the annual two-week “Gleam of Stainless Steel” department store promotion prominently displayed the Steelmark alongside the gleam symbol, an op art version of a Steelmark hypocycloid.

In the prewar years, the public would have witnessed the gleam of stainless steel in numerous contexts. In the 1930s, bright stainless steel was used to draw the eye to numerous artifacts, including architecture, trains, and automobiles. The stainless crown ornamentation of the 1931 Chrysler Building was perhaps the most flamboyant use of the material in architecture in that decade. But it was also widely used in other prominent tall buildings, including the lobbies of the International Style 1932 Philadelphia Savings Fund Society building. In 1933, the Budd Company built the attention-grabbing experimental stainless steel streamliner, the Pioneer Zephyr for the Burlington Lines. In 1936, Allegheny Ludlum and the Ford Motor Company teamed up to produce a half-dozen presentation cars with all stainless steel bodies (Meldrum 1957). An AISI report of 1952 drew attention to where the public might encounter stainless steel, noting the percentage of stainless shipments for 1948 was 3.7 percent for aircraft; 5.5 percent for rail transport; 23.6 percent for appliances, utensils, and cutlery; and 28 percent for automobiles, where it was used for trim, hub caps, and other bright work (Basford n. d.). In the 1950s, the AISI’s Committee of Stainless Steel Producers (CSSP), based in New York and made up of members from around twenty steel- and alloy-producing companies, including U.S. Steel, energetically promoted the material through the “Gleam” promotion, exhibitions, and television, but primarily through print publicity aimed at consumers, retailers, steel manufacturers, architecture and building trades, and industrial and commercial users. By the early 1960s, the committee focused on education, research, fact files, and publicity aimed at the steel and business press. Language used in the print publicity emphasized the stylishness, strength, beauty, hygiene, and luminous qualities of stainless steel (AISI 1960a).⁴ In the 1960s, *Steelmaking*, an internal publication for the steel industry, urged its readers to emphasize steel’s shining modernity in contrast to competing materials such as plastics and aluminum. A 1963 survey in the article “New Images Are Made, Not Born” found that luster was considered a quality lacking in steel among those involved in the “selection and specification” of materials. The author warned, “[I]mpressions such as these will not disappear of their own accord. People at all levels in our industry must work at telling the story of modern steels” (AISI 1963b: 3). Perhaps guided by a CSSP press release, the magazine *Industrial Design* in 1961 reminded readers of the “popular attributes” of stainless: its “lustre, sleekness” and “its own natural surface,” which provide a significant visual “accent” to product design (Gregor 1961: 43).

The stainless steel industry’s promotional publications, in-house newsletters and sales pamphlets, consistently promoted the material in relation to its physical attributes: its shininess, durability, and hygienic qualities. However, style and lack of upkeep, compared to silver, were also put forward as beneficial characteristics. Terms such as “luster,” “brightness,” and “gleam” were often used interchangeably to denote the modern qualities of domestic products made of stainless steel. Such qualities could be used to suggest a range of meanings associated with consumer modernity, including stylishness, novelty, cleanliness, and even a kind of domestic “magic.”

Steel firms understood that the reflective qualities of stainless steel could be marshalled to their advantage. An industry publication of 1956 advised retail sales staff to emphasize the shininess of stainless steel in their displays. “The finish of stainless steel suggests strength, hardness, durability, brilliance, and clean definite lines. Therefore, it can be displayed to best advantage to accent these qualities, by surrounding it with contrasting finishes and textures. Wood grain, cloth textures, and dull, soft finishes” (Republic Steel 1956: 6). In a sales pamphlet published by the CSSP in 1956, the author waxed lyrical about cookware that provided “stove to table magic” and “bright and shining” cutlery that was almost indestructible, noting that “[s]tainless steel is synonymous with modern design” (CSSP 1956: n. p.). An AISI pamphlet for sales staff explained why “stainless steel is good to buy,” proclaiming it “[s]tays bright” and “doesn’t disappoint” by getting “shabby and spoiling pride of ownership,” making an obvious reference to the tarnishing of silver (CSSP n. d.: n. p.). Hoping to distance the material from the negative associations of metal surface coatings, another publication warned, “All that glitters is not chrome” (CSSP 1956: n. p.). In 1956, the shine of stainless steel was associated with modernity and status goods by Miss Stainless Steel, Gloria Wright, “an experienced diplomat for stainless steel producers” to various “opening day ceremonies” at department stores across the United States, who proclaimed it “the modern metal for today’s modern designs” with “lustrous beauty [that] lasts,” “at home with fine china and crystal” (Wright 1955; Trench 1961: 18).

While the stainless steel industry had long promoted the material as gleaming, hygienic, durable, and attractive, it wasn’t until early 1959, coinciding with the piloting of the Steelmark by U.S. Steel, that a national campaign promoted stainless steel as a modern consumer-oriented material. At the outset, the annual two-week “Gleam of Stainless Steel” department store promotion was conceived and supported by Inco, the International Nickel Company. The “three-dimensional” trademark, a checkerboard, red, white, and blue star, was an “adaptation” of the “familiar” Steelmark symbol and was used in promotional materials and store displays (AISI 1962: 33) (Figure 5.2). The use of a receding grid pattern was reminiscent of the work of the op art painter, Bridget Riley, in particular “Movement in Squares” of 1961. In the early to mid-1960s, op art became a craze and the “Op Art Look” was widely appropriated and adapted in numerous examples of popular visual and material culture (Follin 2004: 171). The deliberate use of such imagery by the steel industry further evidenced the desire to identify their business with modern lifestyles and identities, while distancing themselves from their old-fashioned image.

In its first year, the “Gleam” promotion involved thirty-two leading department stores and numerous manufacturers of stainless steel appliances, flatware, and utensils. In 1960, it was extended to sixty stores and their branches (Trench 1961: 19). By 1961, major stainless steel producers had joined the promotion, supported by a nation-wide print and radio advertising campaign and the continued participation of over sixty of the nation’s major department stores. In 1962, the CSSP and the AISI took over the sponsorship and coordination of the “Gleam” promotions (Larson 1964: 9). The CSSP provided promotional materials for participating department stores, including in-store posters, banners, and counter cards, as well as suggestions for window displays and newspaper and radio advertising. Manufacturers assisted with the release and

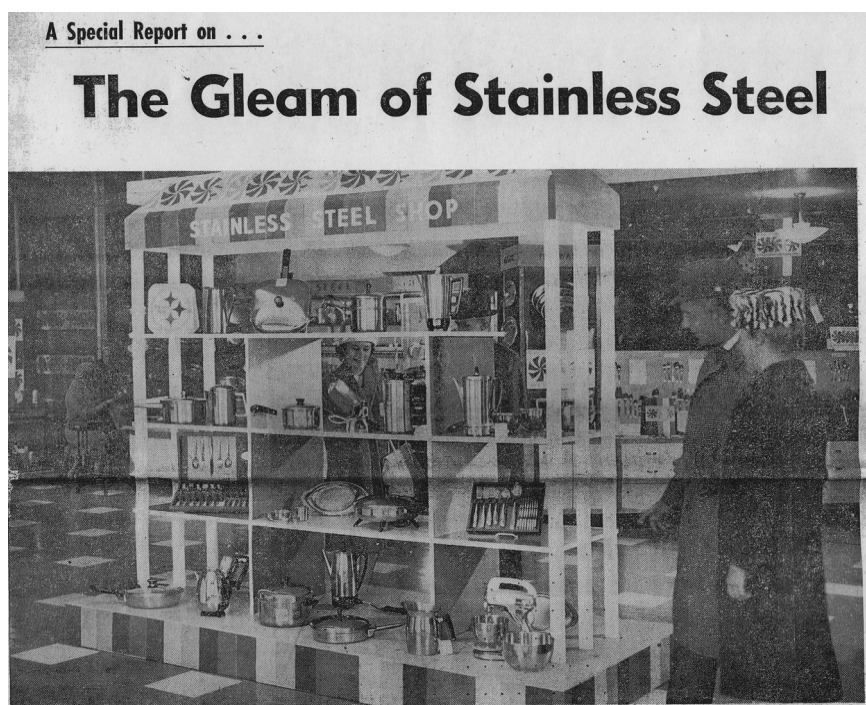


Figure 5.3 Title page of “A Special Report on ... The Gleam of Stainless Steel,” *American Metal Market*, Section 2, January 25, 1961. Hagley Museum and Library Acc. 1631, AISI Records, Box 123, Folder “Stainless Steel 2.” Reproduced with permission from Hagley Museum and Library

promotion of new products and by staging in-store demonstrations (Larson 1964: 9). Key to the promotion was the installation in the stores of a permanent stainless steel “shop” featuring household utensils and small appliances (Trench 1961: 18) (Figure 5.3). By having a shop within a shop, producers could squeeze out competitors, including producers of aluminum and plastics and importers of stainless steel. The design of the shop could also present a contemporary and stylish environment for stainless steel, thus reminding consumers that steel and the steel industry were as modern as their non-ferrous competitors. The CSSP reported that the promotion increased stainless steel sales by 34 percent in 1960 and 22 percent in 1961 in forty-eight department stores and exposed 46,000,000 people to the “Gleam of Stainless Steel” advertising (CSSP 1962: n. p.)

Conclusion

During the immediate postwar years, the American steel industry thrived as a result of a buoyant consumer society, the needs of the Korean and Cold wars, a stable labor

market, and lack of competition from foreign producers and competing materials. However, by the late 1950s, this period of relative calm had turned to one of intense anxiety. The Korean War had ended; steel's relation with labor had soured; and competition from imports and domestic non-ferrous materials, such as plastics and aluminum, had substantially increased. Additionally, U.S. Steel, the industry colossus, suffered from its own lack of innovative agility, lagging behind technologically and thus losing out to competition (Warren 2001: 4). In an attempt to counter the public's view of steel as dirty and old-fashioned, the once complacent industry embraced an aggressive and forward-looking policy of design and marketing aimed at producing a gleaming modern image of the sector and its products. While Big Steels' responsiveness to technological change was sluggish, its reaction to consumer perceptions was more immediate. The designs of a contemporary logo for U.S. Steel, the nation's leading steel producer, a glinting Steelmark on millions of product tags, packaging and marketing materials, and an aggressive "Gleam of Stainless Steel" campaign, quickly brought the industry's image up to date, emphasizing stylish consumerism and recasting the behemoth of Big Steel as quintessentially modern and consumer oriented.

In the early 1960s imported steel continued to challenge the industry, thus reducing domestic demand. At the same time, U.S. Steel faced competition from "mini-mills," domestic enterprises that undercut the larger producers. Despite the introduction of a shiny new identity—a clearer image of steel—reflecting modernity and stylishness, by the mid-1970s, with a stagnant economy and unfulfilled hopes for government import restrictions, the steel industry had reached a monumental commercial crisis. The continuing tribulations of U.S. Steel throughout the 1960s and beyond reveal that institutional and corporate image reorientation were no panacea against the commercial realities of big business.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on Maffei 2013. On the history of the United States Steel Corporation, see Warren 2001.
- 2 In 1945, Americans spent \$120 billion on personal consumption. However, this rose dramatically to \$325 billion in 1960. Glickman 1999.
- 3 Packard 1957: 23–4 used the phrase "marketing revolution." On the prewar rise of market research as a profession, see Laird 1998; Witowski 2010. For a critique of the periodization of market research and observations on its prewar origins, see Schwarzkopf 2009. Lury and Warde 1997 note that there is no consensus in the social sciences on how to understand, predict, and analyze consumer behavior. In her study of General Motors in the prewar years, Clarke 2007: 129–37 discusses the impossibility of judging specific purchasing preferences based on quantitative surveys. Nickles 2002: 599 notes that the class bias of market researchers was often reflected in their studies.
- 4 The 1955 budget was projected at \$94,975. Paret 1960: n. p.

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