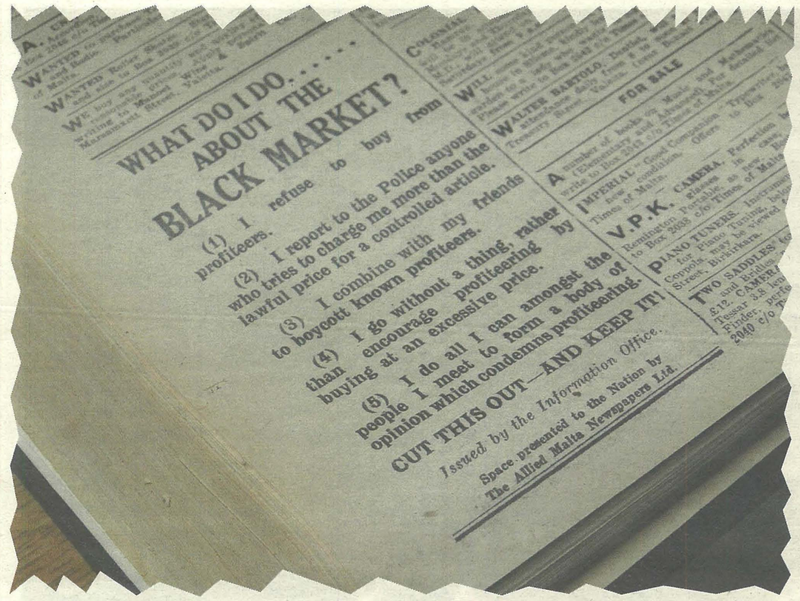
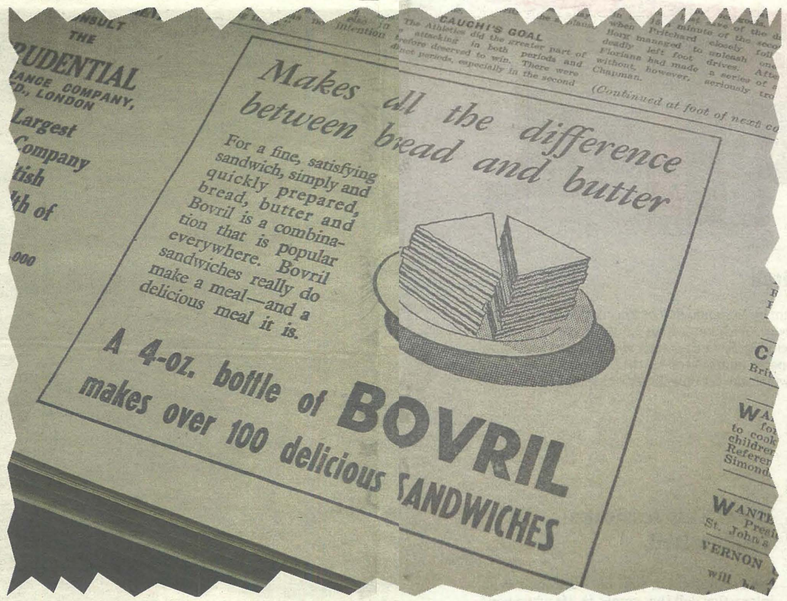
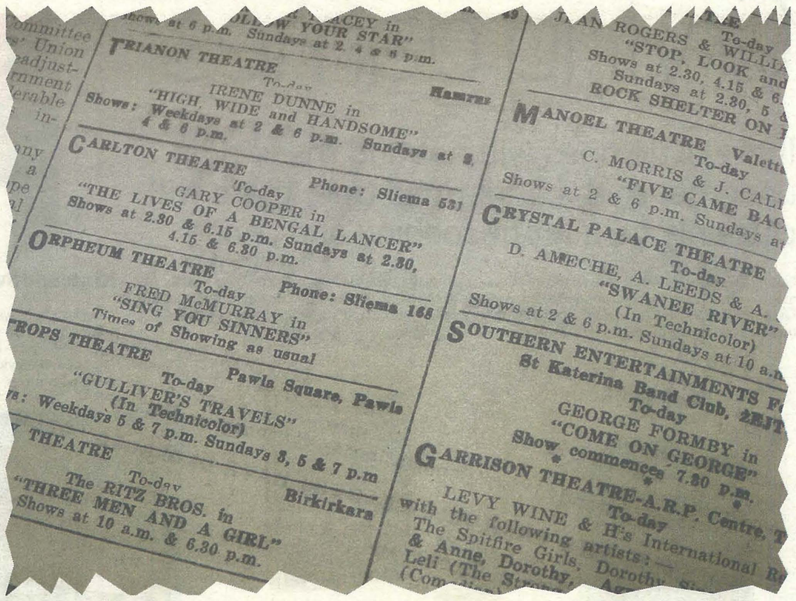






The selling game

What Christmas aspiration did adverts pitch during the war, asks **Fiona Vella**

Advertising is said to reflect the societal tastes, beliefs and norms. By looking back at the adverts that were published in the *Times of Malta* at the end of the years 1939 to 1944, this becomes very clear. Yet even their absence during the days of war has much to say.

There are whole studies and much research behind advertising. Adverts are used as a form of communication intended to convince an audience to purchase or take some action on products, ideals or services. Their regularity aim to impact on memory to create a sense of familiarity and trust to buy those products.

Indeed, while turning the pages of November – December 1939 and 1940 of the *Times of Malta*, it is evident that a group of particular brands consistently feature. Most relate to health, beauty, alcohol, insurance, entertainment (mainly cinema), fashion and gifts.

Health adverts at the time generally focus on irritability of the stomach, laxatives, cold and fever, rheumatism, eczema, fatigue and sleeplessness. The message on the adverts is mainly delivered through drawings and long descriptions about the benefits of using the products.

The text is generally presented in the form of a conversation – "Why continue to be agonised by terrible headaches, niggling nerve pains, black depression, and heavy-limbed lassitude?" – reads the introduction of an advert for tonic tablets.

"Do you realise the danger? Impure blood causes disease," says another advert selling a 'blood mixture' as ailment against rheumatism, lumbago, eczema, boils and pimples.

Communication with the readers is stark and direct – The word "Poisoned!" in capital black letters runs over the mouth of a man in a toothpaste advert. "Pyorrhoea has robbed him of his teeth, poisoned his whole system. Don't let this happen to you."

"Is running a house too much for you?" reads the title of an energy drink. "Do you feel that the cares of the household get you down and managing your servants is a strain?"

The quantity of adverts focusing on health issues form quite a big chunk of the advertising at the time. However, ironically, these are accompanied by cigarette adverts, one of which shows a beautiful young woman with a cigarette in her hand. A section of the advert text reads – "Made specially to prevent sore throats."

Some of the adverts published at the time will certainly be unacceptable nowadays. Social class differences, sexism and offensive messages are quite typical.

"Women who belong to the first sleep group never grow old before their time. There are three groups. Which do you belong to?" asks an advert selling Horlicks. "Most attractive women belong to the first sleep group," states another one. "Men who are sure of themselves belong to the first sleep group" – and – "Men who get on in life nearly all belong to the first sleep group".

"Don't look old! Tint those grey hairs with Shadeine." – jumps at you an advert selling hair colour.

Advertisements can influence strongly how we perceive things around us. By showing a high social class user of a product, the advert creates aspiration and longing to purchase that item in order to belong to that level of society.

A skin-vitamin cream portrays a beautiful lady, all dressed up in perfect make-up, set-up hair, a pair of lovely earrings and a crown. "Lady Grenfell is one of the most beautiful among the young marrieds in Society... She tells us, 'I'm using Pond's Creams containing the 'skin-vitamin', and they're really amazing."

"Many army and royal navy officers enjoy the comfort of our hand-made footwear. Why not you? Sir," entices an advert showing the drawing of a highly elegant man sitting in a luxurious armchair while a shoe-maker sits on a stool to help him try on a new pair of shiny "Best English leather".

A shade of the effects of World War II, even though not yet happening in Malta is already present in adverts of 1939.

"Keep yourself busy in the black-out by knitting with Listers – the nicest wool to use," advises an advert. "Bernards suggest that you give sensible gifts this Christmas. Such gifts as shirts, pyjamas, handkerchiefs, ties, socks, gloves and wool-slipovers all make very acceptable presents," recommends another one.

Not only adverts diminish in 1941 during the war days in Malta. Even the newspaper itself shrivels to a few pages although still published daily.

"Test your gas mask. Gas chamber at Castile Place today," reads a warning advert on the front page of the *Times of Malta* on Tuesday, November 4, 1941. "There is no better way of ensuring that the respirator is still properly functioning than by putting it on and entering the gas chamber."

Amid the difficulties of war, an advert speaks out the request for a pen pal – "I am an interested reader of the "*Times of Malta*", finding news of the war most interesting. I would be very grateful if any of your readers would become a "pen pal" correspondent with me and help cheer a lonely soldier's life."

A considerable decrease of adverts continues in 1942. Alcohol adverts drop out completely. Cinema continues regularly in the following theatres – Manoel and Coliseum in Valletta, Gaiety, Majestic, Carlton and Orpheum in Sliema, Odeon, Thrianon and Rex in Hamrun, Prince in Birkirkara, Buckingham and Royal in Żabbar, and Empire in Paola.

"What do I do... about the black market?" runs an advert issued by the Information Office. A Wartime Reminder advert issued by the same Office reminds people that, "Imported fuel is used for pumping water. Reduced consumption of water saves fuel. A saving in fuel saves freight, (and) saving in freight helps to win the War."

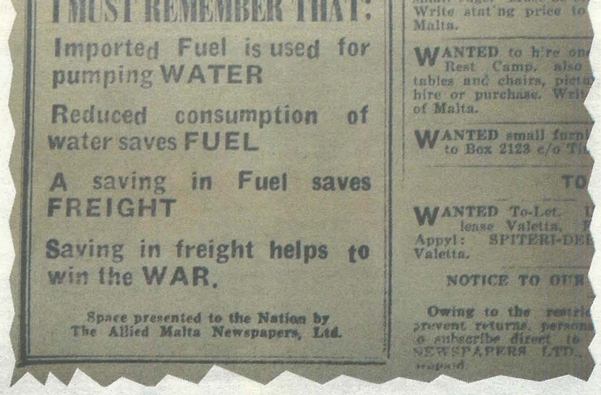
Another Wartime Reminder recommends the adequate washing of vegetables, fruit and seashells, and their proper cooking while warning against the accumulation of filth, since these may lead to typhoid fever. Inoculation against the typhoid fever is also advocated.

The siege on Malta effectively ended in November 1942. Yet adverts show that life took time to return to normal especially since World War II had not yet ended in other countries.

An advert issued by the N.F.U advises to eat cabbage and cauliflower to keep fit. Another advert informs its clientele that "Because of war conditions, supplies of Sunlight Soap are limited, so it's wise to use the soap you have very carefully to make it last as long as possible."

Even tennis balls were restored instead of purchasing new ones – "Hand in your old tennis balls to any of the sports dealers named below, who will forward them to Slazengers for renovation by a special process which includes reinflation and provision of a new outside cover."

During the war, a few selected companies such as Bovril, managed to stay in the public eye through advertisements. "Makes all the difference between bread and butter." The Bovril advert states. "A 4-oz. bottle of Bovril makes over 100 delicious sandwiches."

Other adverts such as the one for Dettol portrayed the company's involvement in the war efforts and reminded that the product should be used with "measured care" in order to keep the supply flowing.

Marketers have always adapted to changing business demands when it comes to creating new advertisements. However, there are moments when their creativity is quite shocking – "Imitating Hitler" screams the title in bold capital letters of the British American Dry Cleaning Co.