



It's said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but that was before someone thought to write those words some ten thousand feet above the earth, over a ten-mile-wide expanse of clear blue sky.

Think of it: You're walking down a city street or relaxing on a sandy beach. Overhead you catch sight of a plane carefully releasing smoke in a clearly deliberate pattern, and you watch—you can't help yourself—as a message is formed. And when the message is complete, you read it and get it, and it sticks with you just as well as any jingle or slogan—even better, if you can appreciate the uniqueness of the medium.

That is the effectiveness of skywriting, even in a sophisticated age of telecommunications and computers. Skywriting grabs, entertains, and promotes with plenty of smoke but with no mirrors. Skywriting is as basic, clear, and honest as it gets.

Skywriting Facts

Definition:

Skywriting is an aviation technique created by vaporizing fluid in the plane's exhaust system while the pilot maneuvers the plane to form letters in the sky.

Dimensions:

Each letter is about one mile long and two miles above you. The average Pepsi message is written across a ten-mile slate of sky.

Visibility:

On a clear day, each letter can be seen from the ground for up to thirty miles in any direction. That's 2,826 square miles for each message written. As the wind drifts the sky-written words, even more people are able to see them.

Altitude:

Skywriting is typically done between 7,000 and 14,000 feet. Air temperature drops 3.5 degrees for every 1,000 feet of altitude, so on warm days, skywriting must be done at higher altitudes.

Weather:

Ideal conditions are clear, blue skies with a high level of humidity.

Execution:

Each PEPSI takes about ten minutes of carefully choreographed flying that includes seventeen different, precisely timed turns and fourteen different burst of skywriting fluid.

Skywriting Fluid:

An EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) approved, paraffinic-based fluid that is vaporized in the 1,200-degree heat of the exhaust of the aircraft's engine.



the Pepsi Skywriter

Skywriters: Doing Ads on the Fly



When the Wicked Witch of the West wanted to relay a message to the elusive girl from Kansas, she didn't take to the airwaves but to the air. She mounted her broom and wrote her notorious warning in the skies above Emerald City, knowing full well that Dorothy would see it and get the message, no matter where she happened to be.

A Mass Medium

But this most recognized-skywriting in popular culture, by the most infamous skywriter in history, was not the first.

Years before MGM employed the dramatic concept in its renowned motion picture, Pepsi-Cola Company was utilizing this unique form of communications in its product advertising.

Smoke Connections

Skywriting—the process of writing words with smoke from an airplane against a clear blue sky—got its start during World War I, when a British air-force major used it as a means to send military signals to troops on the ground. Later, another British pilot became the first person to use skywriting for commercial purposes when he wrote “Daily Mail” above the racetrack at Epsom Downs in England. An American pilot brought skywriting to the United States in 1922, when he flew over New York City and spelled out the message



HELLO USA. The following day he skywrote CALL VANDERBILT 7200, and some forty-seven thousand people responded by making the call.

The Pepsi Skywriter

Pepsi, then a small company with large ambitions, saw the communication potential in skywriting and turned to the heavens for a more effective, less expensive alternative to radio advertising.

The First National Ad

Pepsi's first aerial ad premiered above New York City on May 1, 1931 with the simple plug: “Drink Pepsi-Cola.” The phenomenon caused such a sensation that a woman reportedly telephoned the company to announce that God had written the product's name across the sky.



In for the Long Run

Though Pepsi wasn't the first to use skywriting or advertising, it became one of the foremost pioneers and, for the better part of twenty years, utilized this imaginative resource as no other company did to promote its name.

Through the mid 1940s,

The Pepsi Fleet

In the late 1930s through the mid 1940s, Pepsi contracted or owned fourteen aircraft; and in 1940 alone, the company commissioned more than two thousand writings over forty-eight states and sites as far away as Cuba and Venezuela.

The most famous of those planes is the historic *Pepsi Skywriter*, a 1929 Travel Air D4D. The open-cockpit bi-plane became a skywriter in 1931 and, except during the years of World War II, was used by Pepsi as a primary means of advertising over cities and towns across the United States.

But as television entered America's living rooms in the 1950s, commercial advertisers entered with it, and skywriting faded in its effectiveness and appeal.

An Historical Showpiece

In 1973, in anticipation of its seventy-five years as a soft-drink manufacturer, officials at Pepsi asked veteran aviator Jack Strayer to search for an old skywriting aircraft that could be put on display at the corporate headquarters in Purchase, New York.

As luck—or fate—would have it, Strayer located the original 1929 Travel Air D4D the company had used for years as part of its advertising arsenal.

Back in the Air

But rather than simply display the plane on corporate grounds as an historical showpiece, Pepsi decided to upgrade its navigation and communications equipment and hired Strayer, a Pepsi corporate pilot and former aerial writer from the old days, to tour once again as a skywriter.

And so, this unique aerial-art form was resurrected in a modern world, and new generations began to be treated to a flight back in time when corporate advertising was more primitive but no less effective.

For the next twenty-seven years, the *Pepsi Skywriter* canvassed North America, delighting audiences everywhere with a



nostalgic look back on a simpler time when creativity and cleverness captured people's imaginations and helped catapult a company to the top of its industry.

A Smithsonian Hanger

In 2000, after countless air miles and an unparalleled record of nearly perfect penmanship, the *Pepsi Skywriter* was retired, and the corporation donated it to the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution.

Long before Super Bowl commercials and mega-star spokespersons, the *Pepsi Skywriter* singularly raised commercial advertising to new heights; and even after it was grounded by fast-changing technology, it assumed a new role and took off once again as an aerial exhibit on the evolution of commercial advertising.

A unique piece of Americana, the *Pepsi Skywriter* continues its mission to inform and inspire, but this time as a storyteller in the nation's museum.



1910

1910 Skywriting is invented by Royal Air Force Major John Clifford Savage, who developed it as a way to send signals over a wide area when other means of communication were unavailable.



1922

1922 British war ace Captain Cyril Turner first taps into skywriting's commercial possibilities for the Daily Mail newspaper with a message over Epsom Downs during the running of the English Derby.

1922 Captain Allen J. Cameron, an American pilot who saw Turner's demonstration, brings skywriting to the United States when he introduces it over New York City with the message HELLO USA.

1929 The Pepsi Skywriter, an open cockpit, Travel Air D4D bi-plane, is built by the Travel Air Company, owned by Walter Beech of Beechcraft fame, Clyde Cessna of Cessna fame, and Lloyd Stearman of Stearman fame.

1929

1931

1931 Pepsi-Cola Company first uses skywriting in its advertising on May 1, when the Pepsi Skywriter emblazons DRINK PEPSI-COLA eight times over the New York City metropolitan area.

1931 Pepsi begins its historic involvement as the first major American company to print its advertising messages across the sky. The company eventually amasses a fleet of fourteen airplanes, which for the next twenty-two years canvass not only the continental United States but also other countries, including Mexico, Cuba, and Venezuela.

1953 Skywriting fades as a communications medium with the onset of television commercial advertising.

1953

1973

1973 Pepsi locates and refurbishes the original Pepsi Skywriter and hires veteran pilot “Smilin’ Jack” Strayer to resurrect the aerial-art form, delighting people in more than two hundred North American cities for the next seven years with a nostalgic look back in time.

1977 Strayer hires pilot Peggy Davies to help him ferry the airplane from city to city, teaching her the art of skywriting and passing on the “secrets” of the profession. Two years later, Davies moves to Pepsi Corporate flight department, ultimately becoming its Chief Pilot.

1977

1979

1979 The Skywriter “MARRY ME SUE” commercial debuts nationwide, becoming Pepsi's second most-remembered advertisement in its history.



1980

1980 Twenty-two-year-old Suzanne Asbury joins Strayer to fly the bi-plane to each appearance from coast to coast and to share sky-writing duties. Upon his death a year later, Asbury takes on the entire program by herself, becoming the only working female skywriter in the country.



1981 At her first solo appearance, Asbury meets banner tower and aerobatic pilot Steve Oliver.

1981

The two become not only life partners when they marry the following February, but fellow pilots on the Pepsi team as well. Suzanne teaches Steve the art of skywriting, and he debuts with his first PEPSI written in the skies over the Daytona 500.

For the next eighteen years, the Pepsi Skywriter, Suzanne and Steve, and their faithful beagle Charlie Brown, followed by Pax, their current canine companion, tour the entire U.S. and Canada, working at thirty-three different sights each year. The plane and team are high-lighted in numerous national publications, including *U.S. People*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. They also are featured on the *Today* show, as well as in numerous media outlets around the country.

2000

2000 The Pepsi Skywriter is retired, and the company donates it as a permanent exhibit to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

