

# ***HOUDINI AND ADVERTISING***

## Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Marketing D.8.5 – Give examples to show how media may influence the behavior and decision-making of individuals and groups.

Social Studies E.4.10 – Give examples and explain how the media may influence opinions, choices, and decisions.

English Language Arts B.4.1 – Create or produce writing to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

- Write nonfiction and technical pieces (summaries, messages, informational essays, basic directions, instructions, simple reports) that convey essential details and facts and provide accurate representations of events and sequences.

Art E.4.3 – Communicate basic ideas by producing popular images and objects, such as folk art, traditional arts and crafts, popular arts, mass media, and consumer products.

Art F.4.2 – Know that art techniques are used in mass media.

Art F.8.3 – Interpret visual messages in advertisements, news and entertainment programs.

Houdini was a genius at self-promotion, meaning he knew how to get people to notice him, getting publicity for his shows and making a name for himself with the public. Early on in his career, Houdini would advertise his upcoming performances at a local theater by challenging local police officials to lock him up in their most secure handcuffs and jail cells. Houdini always escaped within minutes. This surprised, and sometimes embarrassed the police officials, but it also made a good story for the newspaper to report. In this way, Houdini got free advertising. The jail break stunt almost always made the local news and resulted in big ticket sales for Houdini's performances.

Later, Houdini used his straight jacket (a garment that was used in the late 1800s and early 1900s to restrain people considered to be “criminally” insane, a danger to themselves and others) escape to promote his shows. He took the escape outside and attracted crowds as large as 80,000 people. The crowds packed the streets, blocking traffic, and watched from windows in the vicinity as Houdini's assistants hoisted him up to the top of a skyscraper or newspaper building. Dangling upside down above the thousands watching, Houdini would escape from his straight jacket. The struggle always made the evening newspaper.

Houdini also advertised his shows by putting posters and flyers up all around town and calling the press to previews. Houdini would promise to escape from a packing crate secured with locks and chains. But that was not all, the crate would be dropped into the local river, and Houdini had to escape before drowning. As with his upside-down straight jacket escapes, thousands of people would gather to watch this free performance. The newspaper covered the story, and Houdini promised more impressive tricks at his shows at the local theater. People wondering what other “miracles” Houdini could perform would buy a ticket to see for themselves.



Houdini performs his upside-down straight jacket escape above a street full of onlookers. Radner Collection at Outagamie County Historical Society.

[Click this link](#) to watch a video of Houdini performing his upside-down straight jacket escape above a crowded street.

### **Straight Jacket Escape**

Students can serve as newspaper reporters writing an article for the *Our Town Newspaper*. What would they report about Houdini and his “publicity stunt”? Would their report mention Houdini’s upcoming performance at the local theater? Would the article encourage the public to buy tickets to that show? Why or why not. Each student will write a short article (approximately 1 page) that addresses the above issues.

Remember, a good newspaper reporter answers the following questions in his/her stories:

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?

As an exercise to get started, have the class go through these questions as a group. Write down the answers on a chalkboard or overhead projector and leave them up while students are writing their articles or have students copy the answers down to refer to later when writing.