

PRESTON, PROFESSOR AND ANTI-PUFFERY CRUSADER, DIES AT 79

Susannah Brooks

Ivan Preston, Journal Communications/Warren Heyse Bascom Professor Emeritus in the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication, passed away on Tuesday, March 1 at age 79.

The longtime head of the program's advertising sequence, Preston came to the University of Wisconsin in 1968, after five years at Penn State. Before receiving his Ph.D in 1964, he spent several years in advertising, public relations and journalism. Though Preston had officially studied communication arts, earning a B.A. from the College of Wooster and both an M.A. and Ph.D. from Michigan State University, his deft touch with legal matters came from hours of self-taught study. Colleague James Baughman, professor and former chair of the program, noted that Preston spent many non-teaching days in the law school.

Preston's groundbreaking 1975 work, *The Great American Blow-Up: Puffery in Advertising and Selling*, cemented his reputation as an expert on consumer ethics and fraud. He demanded that consumers start paying attention to unverified opinion statements made by advertisers – from "the best part of waking up" to "World's Finest Chocolate".

"Nothing is just an opinion; nothing is meaningless", said Preston, in a 1995 on Wisconsin article.

"Advertisers are too smart to send messages that consumers will take as meaningless. They know what works, it's only the law that doesn't know".

Though the law assumed that consumers could make sense of these claims, Preston deemed the statements patently unethical.

"In an era long before we talked about cognition or sensory responses to advertising – Ivan argued that these claims were misleading – for those very reasons", says Dhavan Shah, professor of journalism and political science. "Those subtle cues in language can play an important role in our decisions. Cognitive research has backed up his claims 100 percent".

Preston frequently served as consultant and expert witness in advertising litigations, for both government agencies and advertisers. Despite a six-month stint with the Federal Trade Commission's Division of Advertising Practices, he never shielded from condemning what he perceived as relaxed regulations and the commission's lack of consumer behavior expertise.

A fellow of the American Academy of Advertising, Preston was honored three times and, in 1996, served as its president. He also received the Paul L. Deutschmann Award from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, one of the top honors in journalism education.

"As critical as he was of the practice of advertising, he was an unbelievable defender of advertising education within the university – the resources, the attention", says Shah, who studied under Preston as an undergraduate before returning as a professor. "His impact through the field wasn't just in his writing, but in the students. He was a wonderful mentor and teacher".

Retiring in 1999 after 31 years on campus, Preston maintained strong ties to the department.

"I can remember numerous faculty meetings where he'd argued that we should hire more people and teach more advertising courses", says Baughman. "He'd been a forceful advocate, but when the meeting was over, he'd been your friend. I miss him".

Survivors include his spouse, Roberta (Robbie), and three daughters.