



# Advertising to children

Roderick White explores a controversial market

**A**DVERTISING TO CHILDREN is a suspect activity, which means that advertisers have to treat this market extremely sensitively - even if there were not controls, regulations and codes of practice specifically focused on it. In Sweden, for instance, it is banned, and some other European countries have specific restrictions on when ads can be run, or what may be advertised, to children (4,19,20).

It is suspect for four main reasons.

1. Children are considered to be especially vulnerable to commercial pressures, since their understanding of advertising only develops over time (18,19)
2. More generally, advertising is seen to encourage a materialistic, consumerist approach to life, and this is seen either as an intrusion on their youthful innocence or, more broadly, as a 'bad thing', because consumerism is a 'bad thing' (i, 21).
3. Specifically, advertising is regularly accused of encouraging unhealthy eating habits and is thus seen as a major contributor to the worldwide obesity epidemic (i, 4,14,19).
4. Advertisers are accused of using ads to children deliberately to foster 'pester power' and nagging of parents (i, 4, 8, 20).

All of this adds to considerable pressure on advertisers to market extremely responsibly to children, leading to the establishment of self-regulatory programmes such as CARU in the US (20).

For the advertiser, these issues are merely additions to the very real difficulty of developing successful ad campaigns targeted at children, or at children plus their parents. Ad campaigns have to be based on a sensitive and careful understanding of the particular group of children - in particular, segmented in terms of age and sex - who are the campaign target (2,5,24).

The key to much of this lies in the view taken of children's development and their comprehension of what advertising is about. Certainly, understanding develops and changes over time, broadly in three stages (3,11,16,18), and there is some evidence that their understanding is becoming greater at a younger age - an aspect of KGOY (kids getting older younger) (25). It is generally agreed that

by about the age of eight, the purpose and nature of ads is reasonably well recognised and children rapidly become both more generally ad-sawy and more sceptical of ads with age (3,9,14, 17, 21).

More specifically, children quickly develop strong views about whether an ad is good or not, and whether it is relevant to them personally.

'Ad literacy' has been recognised as an issue by the industry, which has promoted programmes with schools to encourage educators to work with children to ensure that they understand more fully how advertising fits into their lives (7,18).

## Guidelines

A number of enduring themes can be identified in successful children's advertising, such as:

- > the power of story-telling and fantasy (3,13,28)
- > the appeal of cartoon characters and carefully selected celebrities (5,12,15, 16, 29,30)
- > the desire to be in control - interactivity is very popular (25, 28, 29)
- > collecting as a motive (27, 28)
- > the importance of entertainment (14,30)
- > the importance of visuals (28)
- > the importance of word of mouth/peer pressure (18,28).

To these can be added some very specific pointers.

- > Where children appear in the ad, they should be at the top end of the target age group: no one wants to identify with a younger child (24).
- > Instant attention-grabbing is vital (10,16).
- > Use child-friendly humour - it may be wacky, slapstick, crude, but it works (3, 12,26,27,30).
- > Tailor ads to the precise age group's level of understanding (2,15).
- > Recognise the different interests of boys and girls (16,18, 28).
- > Recognise that what's 'in' or 'out' can change rapidly - and may vary within even a small country or region (2,24). 'Cool' matters (26,28).
- > Be fully aware of, understand, and observe the relevant advertising laws and codes of practice - wherever the ads are to run (2). Cultural differences may well

affect the way in which a brand can be advertised in different countries (13, 18, 24,31,32).

## Children as a market

Children represent a market in three ways: as actual purchasers of goods and services, with their own money or with help from their parents; as influencers of a wide range of 'family' purchases, from the car down; and as a future market for brands they may buy as teens or as adults (12,32).

Critics of advertising to children tend to forget the first of these, though surveys consistently show children as possessors of substantial amounts of pocket money, plus, as they get a little older, there is the potential for 'earnings' - either 'domestic' (such as for washing the car) or commercial (as in for delivering newspapers) (1,14, 17, 18). Pocket money tends to be spent largely on confectionery and snacks, though the range of products purchased, at least in part through children's own funds, broadens considerably as they get older to include, for example, computer games, clothes, cosmetics, and so on (6,18).

Mostly, it is pester power and nagging that are seen as a nuisance and cause of family friction. By now, advanced codes of practice preclude the use of phrases such as 'ask your mum for this', though advertisers remain keen on somehow achieving pestering (27). Consumer research suggests that pestering is seen as a relatively minor irritation, at least in Europe (i, 8). Nonetheless, peer pressures, especially, are clearly an important influence on children's brand choices (26), leading to very specific acceptance or rejection of brands across a range of fields, notably - or notoriously - trainers and clothing, generally (24).

What is certainly happening is that children are increasingly a part of the target audience for some car advertising, as they are recognised as having an influence on purchase, both directly and through peer-group pressures. Similarly, they are becoming an important factor in purchases of computers and other home electronics, where they are recognised often as being ahead of their parents in

both technical know-how and awareness of what is on the market (18). Overall, their influence tends to be greater on 'child-relevant' purchases and among higher-income families (18).

## Media

Because specific target groups are often small, budgets for both media and production can be correspondingly limited (2).

Children's media are complex and require study in their own right, and are complicated by the high degree to which kids multi-task when using the media (18, 23). While mainstream advertisers favour TV - as a key prime mover in family life but also one where kids increasingly have their own TV in their bedroom (i, 18, 23) - especially for reaching children with limited reading ability, there is a rich range of comics and, for rather older children, magazines (16); the internet and, increasingly, computer games, are of growing importance (23); and cinema is also a significant factor: increasingly, integrated cross-media campaigns are seen to be highly successful (25, 28, 30). Word of mouth is a potent way in which knowledge of new products is spread, and new crazes created (i, 6).

And, of course, while children do use child-specific media, most of their TV viewing is, in practice, of 'adult' programming (i, 14,30) - so banning ads from specifically children's TV is hardly a conclusive way of keeping children from TV ads' influence.

Many advertisers who target children do, in fact, specify a dual target group - children of specified ages and their parents or mothers (26, 27, 29, 32). A typical budget split, cited in several case studies, is 60% child media, 40% adult; obviously, the precise balance will depend both on how the buying influence is seen to balance, and also on the media habits of the child target group.

A controversial 'media' opportunity is represented by marketing in and through schools, where any action needs to be handled with considerable tact to ensure both that the products advertised are suitable and that campaigns are not intrusively commercial (17, 19, 32). In-school marketing is more prevalent in the US than in Europe, though it has been growing in significance here, too.

## Research

Researching among children is a specialised and difficult area (23), but one in which many of the ground rules are fairly clear. Specific features of research among children include:

- > the use of friendship pairs and groups,



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## Core reading

1. A Brown: The ethics of marketing to children. *Market Leader* 25, Summer 2004.
2. W Fletcher: The challenge of advertising to children. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(2), 2004.
3. A Martensen and F Hansen: Children's knowledge and interpretation of commercial advertising intentions, truthfulness and viewing habits. *Forum for Ad Research*, October 1999.
4. N Samson: Is pester power dead? *ESOMAR*, January 2005.

## Children as a market

5. A. Dammler et al: What are brands for? *Young Consumers*, 6(2), 2005.
6. Duracell (NA): The top ten toys in Europe. *Young Consumers*, 6(3), 2005.
7. P Jackson: Children get media smart in the UK. *Young Consumers*, 6(4), 2004.
8. P Spungin: Parent power, not pester power. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(1), 2004.
9. B Young: Does food advertising influence children's food choices? *UoA*, 22(4), 2003.
10. S Young: Winning at retail. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(1), 2003.

## Advertising and marketing

11. K Chan and J McNeal: Chinese children's attitudes towards TV advertising. *UoA*, 23(3), 2004.
12. N Ghani and O Zain: Malaysian children's attitudes towards TV advertising. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(3) 2004.
13. S De Julio and Z Dahmen-Jarrin: Toy commercials across Europe. *Young Consumers*, 5(4), 2004.
14. R Duff: What advertising means to children. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(2), 2004.
15. D Lawrence: The role of characters in kids' marketing. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)* 4(3), 2003.

## Media

16. D Cordy: Marketing to children (and mums) through children's magazines. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)* 5(1), 2003.
17. M Geuens et al: Attitudes of school directors towards in-school marketing. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 3(3), 2002.
18. B Tuft: Children, media and consumption. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(1), 2003.

## Responsible marketing/legal issues

19. L Eagle and A de Bruin: Advertising restrictions: protection of the young and vulnerable? *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 2(4), 2000.
20. P Kurnit: Responsible marketing to children in the US. *Young Consumers*, 6(4), 2004.
21. C Preston: Advertising to children and social responsibility. *Young Consumers*, 6(4), 2004.

## Researching children

22. L Peile: Insight through ethnography: researching children in a different way. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 5(1), 2003.
23. D Solomon and J Peters: Measuring children's behaviour in a complex multi-media world. *ESOMAR*, January 2005.
24. V Valentine: Using semiotics to build powerful brands for children. *IJAMC (Young Consumers)*, 4(2), 2002.

## Case studies

25. S d'Amato: Action Man final combat *Young Consumers*, 5(4), (2004).
26. O Heywood: Dairylea: out of the fridge and into the playground. *IPA Awards*, 2000.
27. M Johnson and M Daniels: Why Happy Meals advertising makes McDonald's smile. *AFA Awards*, 2000.
28. J Krog and J Fønnesback: Story selling: how LEGO told a story and sold a toy. *IPA Awards*, 2004.
29. A Mathers: Kellogg's Coco Pops: kids get the vote, *IPA Awards* 2000.
30. J McDonald et al: Walkers Crisps: staying loyal to Lineker. *IPA Awards*, 2002.
31. S Palmer and D Kaminow: Kerpow!! Kerching!! Understanding and positioning the Spiderman brand. *MRS Conference*, 2005.
32. A Strydom et al: Kiwi shoe polish: a shining example of commercial success, *IPA Awards* 2004.

which facilitates the ready expression of views and opinions that might otherwise be inhibited by the presence of strangers

- > careful attention to the precise age groups to be researched

- > the use of child-friendly language, including visual rather than verbal scales, for example

- > encouraging children to become 'involved', for example by giving them responsibilities within a research project

- > observation research that may be a valuable way of getting fresh insights (22)

- > where appropriate, using parents as facilitators or assistants (23).

## Conclusions

Advertising to children will remain controversial and vulnerable to political interference. Equally, it is clearly important for many brands, so it will not disappear. More than most consumer marketing, it needs to be firmly based in a careful, precise and detailed understanding of, and insight into, the target audience to be influenced.