

Premature adults

Anupama Wagh-Koppar, JWT Delhi, argues that we should approach marketing to children with infinite care and respect

CHILDREN ARE OUR consumers today and in the future - so let us raise our future consumers the right way. While we serenade them today, let us keep an eye on how our communication is affecting them, because it will not only affect brand strategy, but has the potential to raise a generation of cynics who are hard to talk to and difficult to persuade.

India offers the exuberance and buoyancy of a young nation along with population numbers and a rapidly developing economy. Children in India constitute 18.7% of the world child population; and one-third of the country's population is under the age of T5 - an opportunity that marketers can keep mining for a long period. Even in 2020, around 50% of the population of India will still be under 35.

Getting the idiom right to communicate with the child consumer is going to determine a lot more than just monetary gains. It entails not only developing the market and reaping its benefits over a long period of time, it means weaving the social fabric of a nation that is an emerging force to reckon with; and the real challenge lies in doing so with foresight and responsibility.

Are we reaching out to children with adult messages and pushing them to grow up sooner than necessary? Are we destroying the innocent questioning mind and sense of awe that are the essence of childhood? Are we doing too much too soon? Are we developing a generation of cynics who we will find it a challenge to reach out to?

Winds of change

Let us take a closer look at the winds of change in a child's life in urban India. There are seven signs and symptoms of the environment pushing kids to grow up before their time - and gradually changing the very definition of childhood.

1. Gone are little smock dresses, pretty frocks or little boys' blue shorts - anything that looks childlike.

Picture this: you go to shop for clothes for a four-year-old girl and all you find is low-waist jeans, tank tops, spaghetti-strap



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dresses - mostly grown-up designs in small sizes. In fact, a look round the store makes you feel that teen and young adult clothing has shrunk to size four.

2. Most popular toys seem to imagine for the children, rather than encourage imagination.

Boys have play laptops and an array of strange cards that can be traded. Yesterday's spinning top has given way to the fancy Beyblade. While the spinning top required the child to wind it well, the Beyblade is mechanical.

3. Children learn by emulating adult behaviour, but we are propagating occasional adult behaviour as routine behaviour to young minds.

The TV soap operas that mum and mother-in-law watch are being watched in the presence of the children. Delve deeper, and we know that though the children appear uninterested they are taking in the adultery, con games, vindictive dialogues and the other convoluted plots that most soap operas depict.

4. Weren't birthday parties about having a great time and the joy of eating pastries and chips?

The number of birthday parties that children attend makes their social calendar busier than that of most adults I know. The birthday party is more than just having fun; it is about winning a game at the party, carrying an expensive gift, getting a cool return gift, getting dropped in a fancy car, and all the other status, competition-driven activities.

5. Shouldn't we be gently exposing children to various dimensions of achievement? And let them choose their field of play?

The super all-rounder kid is another message that most media propagate. Each of us has our own strengths, and life is about leveraging these strengths. To make it look as though you can either do it all or you are not a happening child is not only dangerous; we risk creating unnatural expectations.

6. There is little room for unstructured play, which psychologists say is the best way to foster a child's imagination and creativity.

Childhood memories were made of lazy afternoons, sherbet ice cubes, dolls' weddings, skipping ropes, playing teacher, playing with friends or just simply being. I thought motherhood would let me relive my childhood, but I find the story is rather different today: a plethora of activity classes, too many choices, too much competition even in play activities, very little baby talk, far more demanding children who have less time on their hands to do kid things.

7. Young minds exposed to the media are not developed enough to process the information and calls for action that some ads programmes and reality shows make.

All advertising seems to talk to children. It seems to be delivering brand messages either to children directly, or through children to adults. A lot has >

been said on pester power and the fact that one in every four commercials has a child as the protagonist or is heavily child-centric is proof enough that marketers are wooing kids as never before.

Entrapment of adulthood

It seems too much too soon for the children, who are attracted to the entrapment of adulthood, but are far from being emotionally ready to handle the responsibility that comes with it

Sangita Dhir, a teacher in a leading school in India, opines that parents are equally responsible for this, as they want their children to learn too many things too soon and grow up soon. Sangita says 'Lifestyle has changed with income levels rising, and so have the demands and aspirations of parents and children.' She points out that parents adjust their children's routines around their own, rather than vice versa, resulting in late nights and dozing off at school, going to adult hangouts and on adult shopping sprees.

She feels that working parents compensate for lack of time by showering kids with expensive gifts. She narrates an incident where a parent told her that his son's daily expenditure is a staggering amount; while another parent shared that the child called from a shop asking for a shocking amount to be sent to him to pick up something he liked. She concludes 'Value systems and the value of things are fast diminishing.'

Psychologists say, when communication at the sensory level addresses toddlers as though they are Children and children as though they are teenagers, it pushes them towards adult behaviour. Children are likely to fill their minds with age-inappropriate thoughts about smoking, alcohol, sex, and so on. This takes them away from sports, academic and other activities that children would otherwise be involved with. Any failure due to this diversion makes them rebellious.

Truths about childhood

A few truths about childhood and children put things in perspective:

1. Most kids consume messages in black and white, and are gullible in believing a

message without deeper processing. So it's all or nothing.

2. Children are not futuristic, they live their lives in the present and are the best example of making the most of today and not thinking about tomorrow.

3. Though children need independence, most feel the need for clear-cut guidelines - especially at a young age, since they have not yet developed the skill to prioritise activities logically.

4. Learned behaviour is a reality. Almost all children learn by observing behaviour and response to behaviour. The influence of a role model in shaping a child's beliefs and attitudes is significant. Role models can be parents, peers, favourite heroes or anyone the child looks up to.

5. Last but not least, children learn and experience through all five senses because their cognitive ability is developing. Overexposure and multiplicity of messages can lead to sensor) overload, which causes confusion and learning disability.

Clearly, we are treading on impressionable ground. While other social changes are affecting children, mass-media communication is by far the biggest influencer. Legal guidelines for advertising to kids deal only with the obvious, i.e. no violence, no denigration of a child, no abusive language, and so on. There is no mention of persuasive language used with selective truth, or limited facts that can do more harm than what seems obviously wrong.

Let us not forget that just showing the effect and not the means could mislead children. While legal criminals are written about, discussed and sometimes brought to book, creative criminals are rarely pulled up. Unless we become aware sooner than later, we will find it impossible to penetrate the cynicism of the new society, a trap that we have set for ourselves, I call it the 'premature adults' (PMA) syndrome.

What is PMA syndrome?

PMA is when children behave like adults or clearly beyond their age and are not mentally ready to handle the consequences of this behaviour or rationalise the experience.

In the context of marketing and brand strategy, it is important to remember that kids form their attitudes and beliefs as they step out into the world and begin the socialisation process. Purchase behaviour and usage experience form a part of this. A purchase occasion, either alone or jointly with parents, imparts an experience to the growing-up child and this experience is a part of their upbringing as a consumer.

Positive experiences can make them positive, happy consumers, and negative experiences can make them cynical about brands and promotional offerings.

Implications of the PMA trap

>• Destroying sense of awe

life is exciting because it unfolds itself to the many surprises it has to offer. The sense of awe is what keeps minds fresh and open. Knowing too much too soon not only kills the joy of discovering, it almost

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destroys the sense of awe and hence our sense of finding joy in simple things.

t Role ambiguity

Conflicting messages from parents and society can confuse kids, and they may not be clear about their role and how they should conduct themselves. At a deeper level, this can create loss of confidence and complexes in a child's psyche.

Limiting creativity and imagination

If all the thinking is done for them and everything is available on a platter, it is bound to slow down their questioning minds. A lion who does not hunt behaves like a tame dog after a while; it is about conditioning the mind.

»• Growing cynicism

One of the biggest implications is of growing cynicism. A cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past; he is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future¹ (Sidney [L.] Harris). The accessibility and sensory overload will give rise to cynicism as our children grow up. They will always struggle to find something more meaningful in life. Successful brands build relationships with consumers: what kind of relationships can one build with cynics?

»• Affecting sense of self-worth

As they are bombarded with perfect all-rounder kids and materialism, this could destroy their sense of self-worth and give rise to a generation of disillusioned individuals.

What does this mean for brand communication?

Why should we be concerned? Not only because we are socially responsible, but because our task will become tougher. Premature adults could mean the following:

^ No iconic brands.

Iconic brands are created by consumers who are positive, love themselves and find an expression of their identity in a brand.

t Lack of trust and credibility

It is a bit like the 'tiger has come' story. When the tiger does not turn up a couple of times, you stop believing he exists. Brands will find it that much more difficult to build credibility about their proposition.

> Lack of commitment towards brands

It is different for a consumer to exercise choice, but it is disturbing if consumers become indifferent.

> Brand communication that addresses compensatory behaviour rather than being inspiring; and surely we want to create inspiring brands

So, what can we do, as communication experts? There are no easy, nice-sounding answers, but it helps to make a beginning. We need to walk the tightrope of being strategists at times and counsellors at others. While the general tendency is to follow legal guidelines, it may be a great idea to self-regulate, before the legal forces catch up.

Seven steps for action

Here are seven steps to ensure that we do not raise premature adults who make for cynical consumers:

1. Retain innocence in our messages

We need to resist the temptation to layer our messages with implied meaning and too many grey areas.

2. Be simple in delivering the message

Simplicity never really goes out of fashion, especially when we are talking to children. Simplicity of words and message will go a long way in reducing confusion and increasing effectiveness.

3. Be truthful

While we all need to sell products, we also work towards a larger objective, that of providing a better life for consumers with our products. The day we compromise product truth, we risk being seen through.

4. Be contextual

Children relate to behaviour in a context: when we make claims, let us set the context clearly, so as to allow the children to decode the message clearly.

5. Parent-test all communication

Parents are closest to children and play an important part in shaping children's personalities. It would help to take them through communication messages and listen to their suggestions. We must factor the feedback into our professional judgement.

6. Use symbolic language carefully

Communication should ensure that symbolic language does not confuse or

oversensitise. Colour, sound, dress, body language, and so on, affect how a child decodes the communication. And children learn decoding over time, as socialisation develops. The colour red could be associated with 'Santa' in a child's mind, but to an adult it is associated with danger, passion, Valentine's day, etc. It is therefore important to keep symbolic communication child-relevant.

7. Help them decide, do not lure them

This point is brilliantly put by James McNeal (i): 'Children are consumers - in training ... Anyone can deceive them, cheat them. It takes a mighty good marketer to satisfy [a] child's needs and wants without doing any of these ...'. Let's attempt to raise balanced and happy consumers, just as we attempt to raise our own children.

Cynical, bored, burnt-out

To sum up, while all of us (including me) make careers out of encouraging consumerism, we need to exercise caution in hurrying our children. While it will give short-term gains, it will in the long run make for a cynical, bored and burnt-out society. Probably the signs are already evident, with teens and young adults taking to spiritualism way too early in life, and a 'been there, done that' attitude.

When we unveil and launch a new brand we are careful and nurturing towards helping it grow. We carefully guide and steer it to find its own space. When we raise our children we ensure we inculcate in them a set of values we believe in, and shape their personalities to make them balanced, happy and successful individuals.

Let's do the same for our future consumers. Let's raise consumers the right way. Provide them with positive brand and communication experiences. This upbringing of consumers will repay us in the long term. ■

1. J. U. McNeal: *Kids as Customers*. Lexington Books, 1992.



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