

MARKETING TO CHILDREN – AN ETHICAL ISSUE IN MARKETING

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Abstract: Marketing ethics are the principles, values and standards of conduct followed by marketers. Society actually expects marketers to adopt its own beliefs, values and principles and therefore criticism of the current business practice is so harsh. The current trend in business is toward greater ethical awareness and accept that consumers have rights that marketers must recognize. One of the most relevant example to this topic is marketing to children, a major concern to the consumerism movement. Young children are the target for advertisers because of the money they spend themselves, the influence they have on their parents spending and because of the money they will spend as „the future market”. A major reason for this concern is evidence based on Piaget’s theory of cognitive development that children are not able to fully comprehend commercial messages. Another cause for worrying is the content of commercials that can prove damaging for children by encouraging certain bad manners or activities. Finally, there is the concern that increasing amount of advertising that children view will lead to their apprehension of values that are overly materialistic.

Advertisers spend annually hundreds of billions dollars for companies worldwide in order to encourage, persuade and manipulate customers and lead them towards a materialistic lifestyle, based on expenditure. Advertising, as promoting instrument, is the center point of a strong controversy, because of the deficiencies it holds:

- enhances the consumers' materialism;
- lacks sincerity;
- raises the products' sell prices;
- accentuates the importance of symbols and of the status given by the possessions one has;
- creates unrealistic expectations about the satisfaction a good may bring in one's life.

Children are especially vulnerable to these type of manipulation and they have become the preferred target of marketers all over the world. The money amounts spent on marketing activities directed to children have grown explosively in the last 15 years (from almost 100 millions in 1990 to over 2 billions dollars in 2000)[www.media-awareness.ca, 2008].

A market specialized on children did not even existed 40-50 years ago. There were obviously products meant for children (sweets, soda drinks, toys etc.) but children had small limited amounts of money and their decisions to buy were very unimportant. The child was considered to be misses X son rather than a real consumer. But they represent nowadays the market with the fastest growth and this tendency will perpetuate in the future as well (the money for the child oriented marketing are 10 times bigger than in 1990).

Children represent the market with the biggest growth potential, the marketers being interested in it for three reasons:

1. for the money spent by themselves (the present market)
2. for their influence on the family shopping habits (the influence market); children has nowadays a word to say in the family's decisions to buy for a large number of products and services, from the place where to spend the holiday to the decoration of the house, the car type, the mark of the electronic devices or personal computers etc.
3. for their quality as future customers (the future market), marketers consider children “evolving consumers” and are quite aware of the fact that shopping habits and loyalty to certain trademarks are acquired constantly since childhood [McNeal James, 1999].

The significant development of the child and teenage market has been stimulated by the conjugated action of many economic and socio-demographic factors like: the changes in the family structure, postponing the marital age, and the birth of children, reduction of the number of children in a family, both parents working etc.

Marketers have conceived specific instruments and strategies of approaching in order to assure the success in winning over a market with such a potential.

Pester power (power of insistence) – refers to the children's capacity to ask repeatedly and restlessly a product from their parents, talking them into buying goods with which they commonly do not agree.

Marketers discovered that it is easier to determine children to ask for a product rather than trying to persuade directly the parents to buy it. This strategy permits two approaches:

- asking restlessly and persistently for a product (*persistence nagging*);
- stimulating the parents' desire to offer their children the best (*importance nagging*); an important role is played by the parents guilt feeling that they have lesser and lesser time to spend with the children [Sutherland Anne, 2001].

Using knowledge of child psychology in the development of promotion themes

Children oriented marketing becomes a social problem when it is obvious that certain promotion campaigns are using elements of child psychology (e.g. between 3 and 7 years children prefer toys that allow them to transform in a character they admire; between 8 and 12 years they are inclined to collect various items). By using this type of information, marketers have created strategies to stimulate the desire to buy not for the product itself but for the accessories it brings along (Beanie Babies, cards and figurines Pokemon or Barbie etc.).

Advertisements to children are exploiting their vulnerabilities, like the teenagers' lack of safety and the children's desire to belong to a group.

Experts in child psychology point out that until the age of 8 or 9, children do not understand that advertisements are not entirely real and thus it is unethical to make ads meant for children of that age. The cognitive structure is still developing at this age and that is why they are so sensitive to external influences. They do not make the difference between advertisements and news and consider both of them real.

3) Development brand name loyalty since childhood

Children are “hunted” by the companies since their first hours in this world, mothers must decide between the trademarks of diapers, baby oils and powders, milk formula etc. There will be many years until the child will be considered an real

consumer, but marketers efforts to gain him must start from early childhood. The age from which marketers get interested in children is also continuously dropping(almost 2 year old, nowadays); evaluations prove that at the age of 36 months, a child recognize almost 100 trademarks and from 3-4 years, children ask frequently not a product but a specific brand of that product.

4) Involvement in the educational process

Marketers are taking advantage of the profound fund crisis from educational sector and promote their name and products in many ways, including:

- they endow schools with devices and technology in exchange for the exhibition space in the institutions;
- they sponsor events, competitions and other activities;
- they guarantee funds in exchange for exhibiting promotional materials in classrooms and on the means of transportation;
- they sign exclusive contracts with the food suppliers for children.

5) Buzz or Street marketing

A very efficient strategy among teenagers is using the youngsters with popularity in schools, true teenagers' leaders of opinion, in order to promote clothes, beauty products, music etc. It is a variant of "word of mouth "marketing which proves to be very easy to promote especially on Internet where young people talk to each other in chat rooms or blogs about the latest news.

6) Internet

A new dynamic domain for promotion is the Internet advertisement . Children are in the marketers attention since the age of four through Internet advertisements and this contact is often direct, not mediated by parents or professors. Thus children must give information about their preferences and those of other family members in order to have access to on-line games. These information are used afterwards **tintit** in messages sent to those children. Cartoon characters are used most frequently for speaking and developing a long-term relationship with the children. Children before teenage years do not comprehend the concept of privacy and private information and they are very impressed by these characters and tend to do whatever they ask.

Internet represents therefore a really favorable environment for marketers' activity regarding youngsters because:

- it is part of their culture;
- children are not always supervised while navigating the Internet;
- Internet ads are not respecting the specific regulations for child protection like TV channels, for example;
- it is a dependable source for collecting information about the children and their families.

7) Games and toys inspired by the programs for teenage and adults

Though the age from which a movie can be seen is established by CNA regulations, the present norms do not establish an age limit for the toys inspired by characters from movies full of violent scenes. The consequence is that from very small ages children are encouraged to ask for toys inspired by Spider man or Batman (though

the movies are not recommended under 16 years), and the video games for four years old children suggest them to defeat their enemies “in a blood bath”.

As marketers target smaller and smaller children so the concern of parent groups, experts in child psychology and education grows.

Children are encourage to ask their parents over and over again the newest toy or the latest model and every time they receive it, they only feel the satisfaction of momentarily possessing a good and a new disappointment when he discovers that it is not as funny as the advertise.

Family is the group with the greatest influence in a child's life, but television and the other visual media are gaining power over the young minds. Children are spending more time in front of the TV set than for any other activity. In every household there is a second TV for the children and they are forgot quite often in front of it for hours and hours.

The arguments of those giving an alarm signal regarding the advertisements harmful consequences on the youngsters evolution, are:

- children do not make the distinction between reality and manipulation – they consider everything seen on TV real, advertisements being only funnier news for them;
- advertisements have harmful results on each individual as well as on the relationships with the others.

Children oriented marketing is also partially blamable for the problem of children obesity. Studies show that a permanently growing percent of children get their necessary of calories from snacks, while they spend more and more time in front of the TV or the computer. Fast food advertisements are not based on the taste or nutritional values but on image and fun. Children are hedonistic, they buy out of an impulse and do not take conscientious economic decisions.

Children's protection groups are aware of the fact that producers do not intentionally want to create problems to the children but advertisements affect their system of values, the manner in which they appreciate their own evolution, the qualities of the persons close to them.

Very strict regulations were adopted in this domain in countries from Europe and in Canada exactly for protecting the children from the assault of advertisements and programs created especially for youngsters.

Sweden has adopted in 1991 the rigid law meant to protect children: no type of advertisements during programs for minors, no type of advertisements targeting children under 12 years, no type of advertisements including personages familiar to minors until 21 pm. during weekdays and 22 pm. during weekends. The Swedish model, though hard to impose, was followed shortly by Norwegians.

The Quebec region has restricted TV commercials meant for children under 13 years and Greece prohibited toy commercials between 7 am and 22 pm.

Great Britain's legislation, extremely permissive on the matter for a long time, was harshen starting with the 1st of April 2007 (the commercials for aliments with a high degree fats, salt and sugar are banned during programs for children between 4 and 9 years old) , and from the 1st of January 2008 the interdiction is applied to all the programs for the children under 16 years [Pidd Hellen, 2007].

Though in our country the publicity targeting children has not been so strictly implemented , the National Council for Audiovisual Media has decided to relax the legislation starting with the 1st of January 2008. Though the interdiction to use celebrities, personalities or doctors in the food publicity for children under 12 years

(exception making natural aliments), the presence of cartoon characters is allowed. In the food publicity for children under 12 years, it is also “permitted the aliments association with other non alimentary products for children like toys, post ups and others of this kind, with the condition of mentioning, in writing or visually, some characteristics of the aliment or trademark. Presentation must focus on the qualities of the aliment”[CNA, 2008]. The marketers arguments and the persons sustaining the legislative relaxation on the matter, refers to:

- children can choose and are very well informed, the defining of children as consumers is not the result only of TV commercial intoxication, but also of the environmental factors and above all, of the education received from the school or the family. The companies are really aware that if they cheat the children expectations they can lose them for consumers for the rest of their lives, when it is known that a consumer makes shopping during his lifetime valuing 100.000 dollars.

- Banishment of commercial is a form of breaking the right to information and the right of freedom of speech.

Protection against the extremely high volume of commercials is efficient only in the case of really small children with all these legislative norms, because in the case of teenagers marketers has succeeded in find creative methods to reach this target-public, meaning Internet and SMS on cell phones. In these domains, legislation is completely unable to cope and the possibilities are infinite.

The conclusion is that those times when children wanted to become doctors, fire rescuers, policemen or aviators are long gone. Children of this era want to make money from a very young age, choose their friends depending on their outfits and their socialization places rather than on their personal qualities.

The reason of the human existence is no longer *to be* but *to have*. As companies tend to accentuate more and more the role of trademarks and of the newest models in assuring success and popularity, thus developing the loyalty for the trademark, children become the easiest pray and therefore the most hunted one.

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