

Consuming Kids

INTRODUCTION

Key Points

- There are now more than 52 million kids under the age of 12 in the United States, representing a very powerful and lucrative demographic for marketers.
- Children now spend \$40 billion dollars of their own money and *influence* another \$700 billion in spending annually – roughly the equivalent of the combined economies of the world's 115 poorest countries.
- Corporate marketers have studied the shopping behavior of kids, including the so-called “nag factor,” to help maximize the number of times children ask their parents for a product.
- Children are now marketed to in unprecedented ways – through brand licensing, product placement, viral marketing, via schools, DVDs, video games, the internet, cell phones –so that there's a brand in front of a child's face virtually every moment of every day.
- Because kids are now multi-tasking with media – simultaneously surfing the web, watching television, listening to their iPods, etc. – they are bombarded with over 3,000 commercial messages every day.
- In what the industry calls a “cradle-to-grave” strategy, marketers want to get to children early, often, and in as many places as they can – not just to sell them products and services, but to turn them into life-long consumers.

THE FLOODGATES OPEN

Key Points

- While companies have advertised to children on television since the 1950s, in the beginning the amount of youth marketing was relatively confined and inexpensive.
- Things began to change in the early 1980s, as a result of a long battle between government regulators and businesses over policies designed to protect kids from excessive advertising.
- In a nutshell: The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) had tried to ban all advertising aimed at children eight and under, but the toy and cereal industries fought back and eventually won, convincing Congress to pass the FTC Improvement Act of 1980.
- The FTC Improvement Act actually did the opposite of banning advertising to kids: it mandated that the FTC would no longer have *any* authority whatsoever to regulate advertising and marketing to children, leaving marketers virtually free to target kids as they saw fit.
- By 1984, the Reagan administration had succeeded in dismantling the last vestiges of government oversight, completely deregulating children's television.
- One result of deregulation was that it became possible to create a television program for the sole purpose of selling a toy, essentially turning kids' shows into program-length toy commercials. And sure enough, the year after deregulation, all ten of the best selling toys were based on media: Transformers, G.I. Joe, Carebears, Voltron, Mask, Cabbage Patch Kids, He-Man, Super Gobots, WWF Figures, and My Little Pony.
- The numbers show the overall impact of deregulation: In the two decades prior to deregulation, kids' consumer spending increased at a modest rate of roughly 4% a year. Since deregulation, it has grown a remarkable 35% every year, from 4.2 billion dollars in

1984 to 40 billion dollars in 2008 – an 852% increase.

Key Points

Beyond advertising specific products, marketers try to win kids' loyalty by injecting brands into the very fabric of their emotional lives.

- Marketers take advantage of the powerful emotional attachment children have to their favorite characters, leveraging the stability and continuity and sense of belonging they get from these characters to make money.
- Marketers have also begun using product placement in kids' entertainment, weaving products directly into programming without adequate disclosure.
- Given that some five million kids between the ages of 8 and 12 now have cell phones, this too has become a prime mechanism for marketers looking to sell kids products.
- But perhaps the most promising and lucrative tool is the internet. And with more than 40 million kids online daily, marketers are targeting kids with particular force on social networking sites like Webkinz.
- One of the reasons marketers find these social networking sites so appealing is because of their ability to gather valuable personal information from kids.
- Finally, in what may be the last frontier of youth marketing, the commercialization of childhood has now penetrated our schools – the very place where one would expect kids to be thinking critically about and independently of commercialism and corporate manipulation.

Key Points

- Marketers solicit the help of psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and behavioral scientists to help shape and cement children's brand preferences.
- Marketers employ psychologists to understand children's developmental differences in order to fine-tune their marketing and communicate their messages more effectively.
- Marketers also organize focus groups and other kinds of ethnographic research to observe how children respond to and interact with products on the most personal levels.
- One particularly striking example of how marketers have designed sophisticated ways to study kids' reactions to products and brands is The Girls Intelligence Agency (GIA) – a marketing firm that recruits girls as “secret agents” to push product or conduct focus groups with their unsuspecting friends.
- Other more scientifically advanced forms of marketing research include such things as brain scans and blink tests, where experts study the brain activity and eye movements of kids as they watch programs to see how they react to certain colors, characters, and movement.
- Concerns about the ethics of these kinds of methods, and marketing to children more generally, usually take a back seat to the primary goal of marketers: to sell kids stuff as effectively as possible.

Key Points

- Companies have moved increasingly away from advertising products based on their actual characteristics to a new kind of symbolic advertising that emphasizes the alleged social meaning of products.

- In the process of trying to push the social meaning of products, marketers have also begun to push a specific set of highly materialistic values about what it means to be “cool.”
- Kids toys, games, and products have become more and more expensive and sophisticated, and values embedded in the marketing messages to children glamorize self-indulgence, instant gratification, and narcissism.
- Child psychologists have noted that children’s top aspiration today, increasingly, is to be rich, to make a lot of money, and to have a lot of stuff – a vast change from the goals of kids in the past to be a nurse, an astronaut, or a teacher.

Key Points

- As the size and scale of advertising to kids has accelerated, so has the drive by marketers to reach kids at younger and younger ages.
- To build brand loyalty as early as possible, youth marketers use a technique known as “age compression,” meaning that they take advantage of a child’s natural developmental urge to be older and more mature than they actually are.
- A prime example of age compression is the industry invention of so-called “tweens,” kids who are seen as “in between” childhood and adolescence and are now among the most coveted marketing demographics.
- Through the process of “tweening,” children as young as four years old are targeted with teen and adult products and entertainment.
- One of the most disturbing consequences of this sort of age compression is that kids are getting bombarded with adult content and messages that carry specific ideas not about childhood or being a kid, but about what it means to be a *man* or a *woman*.
- A Federal Trade Commission (FTC) report on marketing media to children found that the media industry was marketing material to children that even their own rating systems said were too young for the material.
- In addition, Hollywood films and other entertainment programming rated for older viewers are often accompanied by entire lines of toys and products that are in turn marketed to children 3, 4, and 5 years old.
- Age compression has now become so extreme that marketers have begun explicitly targeting babies virtually from birth, so that children as young as six months of age can now recognize brands.

Key Points

- The last decade has seen explosive growth in infant DVDs and other multimedia “learning systems” that purport to be educational.
- But there is little to no credible scientific evidence that educational DVDs, such as “Baby Einstein” or “Brainy Baby,” actually teach children anything of value, or enrich their ability to learn.
- In fact, directly contradicting the claims made by even reputable proponents of these kinds of “educational” media products, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that there be no screen media use for children under the age of 2.
- During the first two years of life, as a child’s brain rapidly develops, research has shown that basic interaction with other human beings and creative play are far better for kids than the best ‘edutainment’ software.

- A recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics found that the amount of time 6 to 12 year olds spend playing creatively has been declining dramatically over the past decade.
- Increasingly, when children do play, they play with toys linked to media products – which research has shown leads to less creative, imitative play.

Key Points

- The rise of children's media, and kids' increasing involvement with consumer culture, have been linked to a growing number of health problems in children, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, hypertension, obesity, diabetes, anxiety, and depression.
- Over the last two decades, obesity rates have doubled in children and tripled in teenagers, and the life expectancy of kids is now shorter than that of their parents – the first such decline in modern times.
- Juliet Schor argues that policy changes are needed, and increased regulation, as in other areas involving child safety.
- Susan Linn challenges the common marketing industry spin that “it’s all up to parents” and that “parents should be the sole gatekeepers” when it comes to possible harm to children caused by youth marketers, pointing out that it’s a \$15 billion industry that works relentlessly – and often explicitly – to undermine parental authority.
- Child advocates have likewise challenged the industry’s repeated claim that regulating how they target kids would violate marketers’ free speech rights, and that they are the ones who can best regulate themselves.
- When it comes to protecting kids from aggressive child marketing practices, the U.S. lags far behind other industrialized countries.