ADVERTISING TO KIDS – RATIONALES & ISSUES

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Introduction

Advertising is a form of communication for marketing and used to encourage, persuade, or manipulate an audience (viewers, readers or listeners; sometimes a specific group) to continue or take some new action i.e., purchasing of a product or service. Advertising messages are usually paid for by sponsors and viewed via various traditional media; including indoor and outdoor media or new media such as blogs, social media, websites or mobile. Estimates suggest that children spend an average of 4 hours per day watching television and are exposed to as many as 25,000 commercials in a single year (Federal Communication commission, 2003; Kunkel, 2001). Approximately 88% of children between 5 and 14 years old use computers, and 53% have access to the Internet (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Advertising has become so integral part of human being and we cannot imagine any event, newspaper, magazine, TV serial, Cinema etc. without advertising. Advertising on Television is still the most common and significant way of communicating messages to customers and particularly to children in view of affecting their intent to buy. The Nielsen Media Research found out that, very young children as early as age two, watch television more than three hours per day (1998, in Singer & Singer, 2001) which makes the subject of how children understand advertising messages and what they do with these messages an important topic. The producers of advertising campaigns have still noticed the importance of children as a target group and the significant influence on their parents’ purchase. Furthermore children are “consumers of tomorrow”, consequently companies have to create awareness of their products and create preferences as well as brand loyalty in the very early stages of children’s consumerism. Kunkel and Gantz (1992, in Singer & Singer, 2001) found out that children typically viewed more than 40,000 advertisements on television per year in 1990. A child might see about 130 commercials a day, or more than 900 a week (Himmelstein, 1983, in van Evra, 1998). The primary goal of advertising is not necessarily direct persuasion, but to put awareness of a product in the viewers’ conscious mind and to have them associate it with something good or desirable (Cheney, 1993, in van Evra, 1998). The basic objective of any advertisement is to increase sales, directly or indirectly by trying to make tall/false claims about product performance. Besides Advertising gives reasons to buy a product. Organisations use advertisements to inform potential or existing consumers about existence, features and price of the product they offer. Marketers choose the media in which they advertise in part to maximize the repeat-purchase probability for his brand.

Advertising and Kids

Estimates suggest that children spend an average of 4 hours per day watching television and are exposed to as many as 25,000 commercials in a single year (Federal Communications Commission, 2003; Kunkel, 2001). There is a new way to attain the sales, i.e., targeting the kids through advertising. Children are more vulnerable to the advertisement. They consider advertisement as real. They don’t differentiate advertisement and reality. So the marketers are successful in their attempt of targeting the kids. Most parents buy the products requested by their kids. Marketers have long recognised the economic potential of the children’s market. Recent estimates suggest that children account for approximately $24 billion in direct spending each year, and influence an additional $500 billion in family purchases (McNeal, 1998). Children are also viewed as a future market, and are thus often the target of campaigns aimed at forging brand loyalties at an early age (e.g., Moore et al., 2002). By taking advantage of this trend marketers are invariably using the kids in their promotions especially in TVs.
Advertisers of Kids Products earlier used to appeal to the parents but now they appeal directly to children -- who do not have the emotional or cognitive tools to evaluate what's being sold to them. There is no universal definition of a child (although UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – defines early childhood as ages 0–8 years). But in this present, parents of kids whose age is under 12 is taken as the sample unit.

Children view between 20,000 and 40,000 commercial each year (strassburger, 2001). Today, companies spend nearly $17 billion annually marketing to kids. That is more than double what it was in 1992. In 1983, they spent $100 million. Children under 12 influence $500 billion in purchases per year. Marketing firms and advertisers are looking to a younger demographic, increasingly targeting tweens and even younger children. And these kids have huge control over the flow of parents' spending, statistics show 8- to 12-year-olds spend $30 billion of their own money each year and influence another $150 billion of their parents' spending.

Why children

Since the early 1980s, companies have pursued the children market after realizing its huge sizeand potential (Lusted, 2009). During the 1990s, expenditure for advertising targeting children increased twentyfold (Strasburger, 2001). Indeed, TV advertising targeted at children increased tenfold from 1983 to 1997, from $100 million to $1 billion (McClain, Meltzer & Truman, 2003). Children aged 4-12 made $30 billion in purchases in 2002, a remarkable increase from the $6.1 billion they spent in 1989. Children aged 12-19 spent $170 billion in 2002, a weekly average of $101 per teen. Children under 12 influence $500 billion of purchases per year(Campbell and Davis-Packard, 2000). This made the marketers target the children in their advertising campaign.

Advertising’s impacts on children

At the root of the children’s advertising debate is the question of children’s unique vulnerabilities. Concerns about young children range from their inability to resist specific selling efforts to a fear that without benefit of well-developed critical thinking skills they may learn undesirable social values such as materialism (Macklin, 2003). The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) has recently issued a detailed report arguing that growing health problems such as childhood obesity and poor diets can be linked to the advertising of high fat, high sugar foods aimed at this young audience (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2003). By about age five, most children can make a perceptual distinction between commercials and television programs (e.g., Blatt et al., 1972). Young children can articulate that commercials are “shorter” or “funnier” than programs. By approximately 8 years of age most children have at least an initial understanding that advertising aims to sell products (e.g., Macklin, 1987; Roberts, 1982). Traditionally, it has been assumed that once children understand the persuasive purpose of advertising that they become more skeptical and are then capable of resisting its appeal (Federal Trade Commission, 1978; Rossiter and Robertson, 1974).

Television viewing has been identified as a factor contributing to the problem of childhood overweight and obesity. Television viewing is a significant component of total sedentary behaviour and has been found to be positively correlated with total caloric intake and the consumption of snack foods. Exposure to advertising of unhealthy food products is one of the means by which television viewing contributes to overweight and obesity. Television food advertisements have been linked to children’s food preferences, at both brand and category levels. Advertisers target kids in their advertisement because kids have pester power. Kids represent an important demographic to marketers because in addition to their own purchasing power (which is considerable) they influence their parents’ buying decisions and are the adult consumers of the future.

According to the 2008 YTV Kids and Tweens Report, kids influence:
Breakfast choices (97% of the time) and lunch choices (95% of the time).
Where to go for casual family meals (98% of the time) (with 34% of kids always having a say on the choice of casual restaurant).
Clothing purchases (95% of the time).
Software purchases (76% of the time) and computer purchases (60% of the time).
Family entertainment choices (98% of the time) and family trips and excursions (94% of the time) Poulton, Terry (2008).

As a result, industry spending on advertising to children has exploded over the past two decades. In the United States alone, companies spent over $17 billion doing this in 2009 – more than double what was spent in 1992.

Methodology

In the present study, a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with parents of kids were undertaken. These interviews involved flexible questioning set around key themes (Gardner, 1978). As noted earlier, the objectives of these interviews were to find out the issues in advertising to kids and to find out the strategies to reduce the impact on kids. Totally 30 parents were met for the purpose of interview. The responses were accumulated and presented.

Rationales for using kids

- Attract customers more easily:
- When a child features in an advertisement, it always looks more natural and not as an actor.
- It stimulates pester power: Marketers would immensely benefit because of using kids or targeting kids in the advertisement as they will force their parents to purchase the products whose advertisements are seen by them. So the parents are reluctantly buying the products because their kids force them to do so.
- When you target the kids in the advertisements, the kids compels their parents not only for kids oriented products but also for non-kids products.
- To grab adult attention through kids is a sound strategy
- Featuring children helps companies get rid of boring and cliché methods

Children and Advertising - Issues and concerns

The effect of advertising on children and their portrayal in advertisements are sensitive issues. Some of the issues are:

1. **Children do not differentiate TV programme and advertisement**

In a pilot study conducted by Blatt, Spencer, and Ward (1972), 20 children ranging in age from 5 to 12 years, were exposed to a video tape of typical Saturday morning programming and commercials and then interviewed the following day about what they had viewed. The authors found that although the children in all age groups could identify the term "commercials," the younger (kindergarten) children exhibited some confusion about the concept and judged the relationship between commercials and programs on the basis either of affect ("commercials are more funny") or of coincidential reasoning ("commercials are shorter than programs"). Subsequent research extended and confirmed the findings of this exploratory effort (Ward, Reale, and Levinson; 1972, Ward and Wackman, 1973) Personal in-home interviews were administered to a sample of 67 children, ranging in age from 5 to 12 years. Children's responses to the direct question,"What is the difference between a TV program and aTV
commercial?” revealed clear differences between younger (5-8) and older (9-12) children in the degree of verbalized discrimination between programs and commercials. Younger children generally exhibited a low level of differentiation, often based on recognition of different perceptual cues, (e.g., “commercials are short and programs are long”). In contrast, most of the older children's responses indicated a high level of differentiation, based upon some understanding of the meaning of the message (e.g., “programs are supposed to enter,-tam,” “commercials try to sell things”)

2. Making children desire things which their parents cannot afford or which they (children) will not be able to use.

In many cases, advertisers target the children for selling products which the parent either may not afford to buy them or they may not use the products.

3. Pester power: Encouraging children to pester their parents for advertised product or service. Pester power is the ability possessed by a child to nag a parent relentlessly until the parent succumbs and agrees to the child's request. In other words, it is the ability that children have to make their parents buy something, by asking for it many times until they get it: Advertisers know how powerful pester power can be. A Californian mother-of-two officially declared war on the Happy Meal from McDonald. Monet Parham, backed by a group called the Centre for Science in the Public Interest, argues that the only reason her six-year-old daughter Maya nag her to go to McDonald's is because she likes the free toys. This is the power of pester power.

Drivers of Pester Power

- More working women and consequently more dual income families.
- Grand parents’ increasing role in bringing up children because of working mothers. Grand parents’ are the fastest growing income sources for the children.
- Rise in the number of single parent households
  Research supports that children in single parent households make their first purchases almost a year earlier than their two-parent household counterparts.

- Delayed parenthood
  This results in parents with more disposable incomes at the time their children are born. A 2000 study of 50 older couples by SNDT University showed that most of them had kids after they turned 35. “The average age of career women starting a family may well have touched the mid-30s,” says gynecologist Dr Duru Shah.
- Greater exposure to kids
  There is an ever-increasing exposure to kids both in terms of technology and mass media.

- The pang and guilt of not being able to spend much quality time with children is compensated by smothering them with material goods.
- Hurried Child Syndrome and Hyper parenting
  Parents today overscheduled their children’s’ life with a heavy dose of academics and extracurricular activities, forcing the little adults to excel both at school and extra academics.
- David Elkind, a child psychologist, first proposed this in 1981 in his book The Hurried Child: Growing up too fast.
- The ‘Askable’ Parent
  The great authoritarian divide between parents and children is inexistent. ‘Parenting’ is out and being pals/friends to the children is the in thing. Communication between parents and children has opened up considerably and the stereotypical roles have become rarer. This endearment encouraged the wanton kids to ask for material pleasures which they know would never be denied by their parent turned pal.
- Growth of retail sector
There appears to be a high positive correlation between the growth of the retail sector and the development of the kids market. There are opportunities galore. Every departmental has a space assigned exclusively for kids merchandise ranging from Kriish apparels to Power Ranger bikes. A perfect example is the growth of indoor amusement centres in malls targeted to children.

- **Kids channels-a newer phenomenon**
  The dedicated channels to kids programming target kids in two ways—‘eyeballs’ on channels that is, **viewing and brand promotions**. Cartoon Network and Disney lead the pack.

4. Showing children in unsafe or dangerous situations which the kids may emulate. Child rights activists are up in arms against MTV and Pepsi for depicting children in a negative light and endorsing child labor in their advertisements. The NGOs are especially peeved with the Pepsi commercial as, they say, it glorifies child labor. The ad shows a child negotiating a dangerous route to reach the Indian cricket team that is waiting for their drinks. The protestors believe that by featuring the entire Indian cricket team, the multinational was depicting India as a whole as endorsing child labor.

5. Making children feel inferior, especially if they don’t buy products and services shown in the ads. Advertising may affect the self-esteem of kids, as they feel inferior to others if they do not possess an endless array of products which are shown in the television.

6. Showing children in a sexual way, i.e. wearing make-up and glamorous clothes.

7. Advertising soft drinks and high fat/sugar contents to kids.

8. The more time children spend glued to television commercials, the less time they get to socialize, play, read and exercise, which are essential for the overall development of the kids.

9. Studies have shown that, those kids who watch fast-paced television advertisements find it difficult to do tasks that take a much longer time, such as solving puzzles and reading.

10. Some of the advertisements portray women as sex objects through flashy images, which creates a bad impact on the children.

11. The advertisements shown in the television are sometimes related to the use of tobacco, alcohol which adversely affects the kids (Though cigarette and liquor advertisements in India are banned, marketers wisely adopts the technique of Surragatory advertisements). It makes the perception that, drinking beer makes you a cool person. The vulnerability of the kids towards these advertisements is a major concern.

12. Junk foods, such as pizzas, burgers and soft drinks, are heavily promoted during children’s programs. This develops a craving for fatty, sugary and fast foods in kids, thereby affecting their health adversely. These unhealthy eating habits lead to diseases, such as obesity. It even influences the way the kids think about the actual taste of food.

13. Many advertisements in the present times include dangerous stunts, which can be performed only by experts. Even though, the commercials broadcast the statutory warnings with the advertisement, the kids often try to imitate the stunts at home, with fatal results.

14. Children often tend to misinterpret the messages conveyed in commercials. They overlook the positive side and concentrate more on the negatives.

**Conclusion**

The marketers, as adults, have the responsibility to depict children in the advertisements in a more responsible and responsive manner. But they use/target the children to sell their products and services. Images of children often appear in advertisements, both those designed to sell children’s products and those designed to persuade adults to buy anything from car insurance to carpets. Children are the vulnerable members of the society. So use of children in the advertisement is to be regulated. Children are an impressionable market segment and taking advantage of their lack of knowledge regarding advertising may be unethical. Also, at such a young age, children's cognitive development has not reached the stage where they can form logical rational judgments. Their knowledge of the world is also limited and sometimes, they may not be able to tell fact from fiction. Taking advantage of these vulnerabilities raises ethical issues. Although parents and society want to protect them from...
advertising and other influences they deem negative in these sensitive, habit-forming years, the pervasiveness of advertisements and children-directed marketing makes this an extremely difficult endeavor. Negative impact on children also impacts society as they are future adults and will therefore have bigger roles in society. The unethical practices such as misinformation by association and confusion, as well as the entire practice of advertising to very young children lead to various social problems that marketers should consider.

References:


