

Consumer kids: How TV advertisers get into the minds of children



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What parent hasn't worried at some time or another about how much TV their child is watching?

These worries may come to the fore when 'pester power' is exerted. Pester power is when your three-year old throws a tantrum in the supermarket because you won't buy the breakfast cereal with the free gift shown on TV. Or your teenager will only wear *the* brand of celebrity-endorsed trainers, which happen to cost twice as much as all the others. Children are taught to be consumers from a very early age and our research has looked at how advertisers find their way into the minds of children.

An enduring challenge for psychologists has always been how to measure the effects of advertising on children. We found a novel way around this that has uncovered some interesting findings. In our research we have looked closely at what children ask for in their letters to Santa and how many request toys advertised on TV. We've also monitored toy advertising on TV in the six weeks prior to Christmas to see what is advertised. And we've interviewed the children in our studies about how much TV they watch, and which TV channels (the BBC channels in the UK still do not carry advertising though there are many commercial channels). Then we've looked at the links between these elements.

Our studies show that the more TV children watch, the more toys they ask for in their letters to Santa. Children of 4 or 5 ask for more toys but don't usually

mention 'brand' names. So they'll ask for a 'baby doll' but not 'Baby Annabel' by name. By the time kids are 6 to 8 years old though, they're not only asking for the advertised toys by brand name, they're even telling Santa which stores he can buy it from and the retail price. In this age group, we found a strong link between the amount of commercial TV children watched, and the number of requests they made to Santa. More TV watching seems to be associated with wanting more. In both studies girls asked for more than boys. This may be because they are more verbal than boys at this age. Or because they are better senders and receivers of emotional messages, so are more able to process the persuasive content of adverts. Or maybe girls are socialized from an early age to shop and to believe that 'you are what you own'. Advertisers certainly target girls more than boys; twice as many adverts for girls' than boys' toys appeared during the time period we studied.

Our research shows that advertisers' messages are getting through loud and clear to young children. Kids know what they want and where to get it from. What they don't know, though, is something very fundamental about advertising and something that distinguishes us, as adults, from young children.

Kids don't know that advertisers are after your money.

Children are not consumer literate until the age of about 10 to 12. Younger children don't understand that behind every advert there's a marketing campaign and a drive for profit. These kids, when we ask them, actually think ads are a kind of 'public information' service. They think ads are shown to provide a comfort break between programs, or simply to tell us about what's in the shops. We asked 180 children aged 4 to 8 about the purpose of adverts. Only *one* child mentioned the selling motive of the advertiser. The rest all quoted the

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benign and harmless reasons mentioned above.

Add to this children's trust in adults and an unshakeable belief that adults are always right, and their vulnerability to persuasive messages comes into sharp focus. No kid is going to question the veracity of a statement delivered by an authoritative adult. They're also prey, just like you and I, to ads that suggest they'll be more popular if they own a particular product. Advertisers exploit this by showing the child with the toy playing with a happy group of friends. Children also look up to, and want to be like, older children. That's why advertisers will often show a child slightly older than their target market playing with the toy. Cartoons are ubiquitous in ads too. Kids love their fast, bright, snappy style and advertisers know this. Even though research has shown cartoons can diminish a child's attention span in the longer term, advertisers will always put their sales figures before your child's welfare.

We must not overlook too, the passive state that television induces in viewers. As they sit back, relax and absorb, people also become more unresisting. Sociologist Bernard McGrane, from Chapman University, California, goes so far as to say that TV:

- Trains the mind to shorten its attention span
- Makes ordinary life appear dull
- Injects a hypnotic quality into ordinary awareness
- Coerces us into its reality

All of these are undesirable states for the young mind, because they will inhibit thinking and dampen the drive to pursue direct experience. It is direct experience that promotes healthy development in children. Psychologists as far back as Jean Piaget in the 1950's have known that children learn by discovering things for themselves. They need to interact with their physical environment, not passively watch it portrayed on a screen. But with TV

such a dominant force in today's society what can parents do to immunize their children against its effects and protect them from the allure of advertisers?

There's always the 'off' button, which I highly recommend, but short of that here are a few tips:

1. Make sure your kids know what an ad is. Make it a game, "Spot the commercial" so they can tell the difference between being entertained and being sold to.
2. Tell them the people in the ads want Mom and Dad's money, that's what ads are for (but that Mom and Dad will decide where it's best to spend their money).
3. Introduce an air of healthy skepticism into commercial watching. Point out if you've tried a product and what happened, "It sure didn't get my floor *that* clean". We don't want to tell kids that TV lies, simply make them less accepting of inflated claims.
4. Don't cave in when your child pesters you for something. As long as you always hold firm, they'll learn that it doesn't get them anywhere.
5. Tape kids' programs ahead of time and show them how to fast-forward without ads (or use the facility to record without ads, if you have it).
6. Minimize the time your child spends watching TV alone (our research has shown that lone-viewers are most vulnerable to ads).
7. Involve children in buying decisions. Set a clear budget when shopping for items and teach them to look for good value for money.
8. Encourage your children in all their non-TV related activities by getting out or engaging in hobbies, cooking, crafts and other activities with them.

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