

Target Marketing to Children – The Ethical Aspect

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Context

What do you call a consumer who wants to buy everything you have, doesn't care what it costs and is less than five feet tall? A marketer's dream? Nope. You call them kids. -- AdRelevance Intelligence Report, 2000

Children are becoming consumers at younger and younger ages, and a variety of influences and experiences shapes their consumer habits. Of particular interest and concern are factors that affect their food- and nutrition-related decisions and behavior. Many factors interplay to affect children's and teenage youths' consumer decision making skills and behavior that can directly influence their dietary choices and eating patterns. The family has been identified as one of the most influential environmental factors affecting food- and nutrition-related decisions and behavior, operating at the levels of parent modeling and parent-child interactions. Commercialism is broadly defined as the vehicle of communication that creates consumer awareness and induces the desire for specific products; its goal is to increase consumer demand and commercial profit¹. Commercial pressures on children and teenage youth may encourage continual consumption and acquisition at the expense of informed consumer decision making and environmental sensitivity². Children with poorly developed consumer decision-making skills are unprepared to make wise purchases as adults, a situation that has serious implications for the consumer habits and nutritional health of future generations.

Children constitute three different markets: the primary, the influencer, and the future market. Certain products are simply children's products for which they are the primary users/buyers. They sometimes either purchase a product themselves or select the product before the parents purchase it. For other products, such as ones, which are used by the entire family unit, they may influence purchases made by the parents. There are some products where children wield direct influence by overtly specifying their preferences and voicing them aloud. Decision-making in households is seen to change with the mere presence of children.

Introduction

Children in middle-class India take important decisions in the home, thereby contributing majorly to household budget contours. From buying white goods and cars, to cell phones and grocery and even insurance policies, children under the age of 13 are deciding which brands their parents should or should not buy. A study conducted by Cartoon Network and NFO across 14 A- and B-class cities in India with 6,436 respondents, which included kids in the age group of seven-14 years and mothers, reveals that children are now not mute spectators in major purchase decisions. Even in items not directly concerning they have strong preferences.

In cars, it was found that the preferred brand of kids was the Hyundai Santro and that around 32 per cent of kids accompany parents when they go buying a car. Among watches the favourite brand of kids was Titan, while in TV the preferred brand was LG. And in music systems it was Sony.

¹ Morton, L.W. 1994-95. Commercialism, materialism, and young consumers. Cornell Consumer Close-Ups 4:1-6. Department of Consumer Economics and Housing, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.

² Consumer's Union Education Services. 1990. Selling America's Kids: Commercial Pressure on Kids in the 90's. Consumers Union of the United States, Inc., NY.

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Among products that directly concern kids like colas, chocolates, biscuits and chips, children's preferences have changed somewhat. As against Pepsi some years ago, Coca-Cola has emerged as the favourite brand of fizzy drink for kids in India, while Britannia is the most favoured biscuit brand. In chocolates Cadbury's has beaten Nestle to being the kids' favourite brand. Among chips, the kids prefer PepsiCo's brand Lay's

Shift in target audience has happened on account of the fact that in middle and upper income families, television has come to occupy prime space. TV viewing has even replaced dinner table conversation. Nuclear families, working parents and latchkey kids in the metros mean that children get to spend very little time with either parent. Many spend their free time watching television or surfing the Internet. Driven by guilt, parents tend to lavish gifts on their children a little too often, and they give in to the demands of children more easily than they would have otherwise.

In the absence of a family support system and reliable domestics, parents find themselves unable to discipline children. The result? Most children in today's upwardly mobile families find it difficult to take 'no' for an answer. And buying decisions often do not reflect the requirements of the family; they are based more on the whims and fancies of immature children who might grow up to be unreasonable adults

Methodology

For the purpose of this article children and their parents were contacted to find the effect of advertising and targeting children for the purpose of marketing. An effort was also made to find the influence that children wield in decision-making at the time of purchase and how often they are able to influence parents in products that are not of direct use to them. Opinion of parents on the role of marketers and advertisers was also studied. For this purpose 30 children of age group 2.5 to 5.5 were selected along with their parents. 30 children of age group 5.5 to 8.5 were selected along with their parents. 30 children of age group 8.5 to 11.5 were selected along with their parents. 30 children of age group 11.5 to 14.5 were selected along with their parents. A total of 120 children and their parents were interviewed.

Children and Marketing

Marketers across the world and in India have are targeting children for marketing of their products. Kids represent an important demographic to marketers because they have their own purchasing power, they influence their parents' buying decisions and they're the adult consumers of the future. Parents today are willing to buy more for their kids because trends such as smaller family size, dual incomes and postponing children until later in life mean that families have more disposable income. As well, guilt can play a role in spending decisions as time-stressed parents substitute material goods for time spent with their kids.

A child wakes up in Disney character pajamas; the toothbrush, toothpaste and perhaps even the soap are covered in cute licensed characters. They have highly advertised cereals for breakfast. Gather their Pokemon or Power Ranger cards and strap on their Nike backpack, wear branded shoes like Reebok and head off to school.

Children in the sample were of the opinion that they should know what the world had in offer for them and that advertisers were not creating any undue effect on them. The sample between 8.5 to 15.5 felt they could not be swayed by anything and they surfed the net to get information on products and their features and the high point was when one youngster of age 10 rattled off the features of the latest Honda Civic he wanted his father to buy and how it was better than the other car in the section including what was the engine power etc.

Parents on the other hand have a different opinion according to them the excessive information and products thrown at them via the media, print and visual, spoiled the children. Most marketers were targeting kids even for products that had nothing to do with children. Since most middle

class families have both parents working the marketer tries to work through the children on the guilt of the parents and thus encourage children to make very unreasonable demands.

Schools and Marketing

The commercialism does not stop in the schoolyard. School used to be a place where children were protected from the advertising and consumer messages that permeated their world. The schools welcome with a highly commercialized energy drink like Milo or Bonvita etc. They go to the classroom and open books that are published by Disney that have cover page of Disney characters or books that have commercialized the covers for advertising of goods. Companies have seen that their results work 20 times the norm for print advertising when they started selling ad space on the textbooks and notebooks.

Corporations realize the power of the school environment for promoting their name and products. A school setting delivers a captive youth audience. Marketers are eagerly exploiting this medium in a number of ways, including:

- Sponsored educational materials: for example HLL has been going to school and taking to girl students on the menstrual cycles and health care after which they promote their sanitary towels and tell the girls on how it is the best along with which they give free samples. They are targeting young girls in the age group of 9 to 11 and capturing a young market.
- Advertising posted in classrooms, school buses, for health drinks of particular brands in exchange of sponsoring events or money.
- Contests and incentive programs: Many marketers advertise their products by sponsoring sports events or cultural events in schools. They may also hold competitions for e.g. Camel has been conducting drawing competitions in schools for decades where they advertise their product. ICICI bank a company that does not have a product range that is for kids have been holding contests through which they get names and contact numbers of the parents whom they then contact.

Role of Children in Decision Making

Today's kids have more autonomy and power in decision-making within the family and are vocal about what they want their parents to buy. "Pester power" refers to children's ability to nag their parents into purchasing items they may not otherwise buy. Marketing to children is all about creating pester power, because advertisers know what a powerful force it can be.

For the second year running, McDonald's has won the Pester Power Award in the Parents Jury Children's Television Food Advertising Awards. More than 1400 parents voted in the awards, which highlight the role played by marketing and advertising in the childhood obesity epidemic.

McDonald's won the Pester Power Award for its Happy Meals advertisements, which the Parents Jury said use the promise of free toys to encourage children to pester their parents to take them to the fast food chain.

Recent studies have shown that the influence children exert on the purchasing decisions in households is extensive and on the increase. Some of the factors cited are as follows:

1. Parents are having fewer children and thus spending more on each child;
2. Parents are having children later, at a time when they are beyond the struggle phase in their career;
3. Young professionals purchase presents for children to compensate for the lack of time they are able to spend with them;

Children are known to have strong tastes and preferences, and advertising surely has an impact on them. Today, most toothpaste advertising has started revolving around children, far from the time when the family was shown brushing together. Children decide on the toothpaste that the family will use.

Pester power is considered to be worst when it is used to decide the food that is to be consumed. Children have been bombarded with advertisements on Burgers and Cola of Pizza and cola.

Their preference for any meal is high on fat and sugar and low on nutrients. Influences created by marketers on children may be harmful but the one created on food and hygiene are the worst. The sample between 2.5 to 5.5 used pester power with parents to buy toys or to get their TV time. Those in the age group 5.5 to 8.5 used it to get themselves new gizmos, decide on places to eat out, the clothes they would buy and TV time and programmes. Those in the age group of 8.5 to 11.5 use their pester power for new gizmos, mobile phones, video games, clothes, choice of food, choice of holiday destinations, TV time and programmes. Those between 11.5 to 14.5 used it to decide what the family would buy in terms of electronic stuff like TV brands, Music system brands, computer brands, mobile phones, car brands etc, they also decided on what their parents would wear and the places they would visit. Some admit to advising their parents on the friends they should keep and the investments they should make.

Parents in the sample opined that pester power had created havoc in their lives. The day long wining by the child to get a particular toy or gizmo that his friends have or he has seen in an advertisement could be very straining for a parent who has a high demanding job. Parents feel that children have mastered the knack to continuously asking for what they want and change their persuasion techniques from pleading to crying to threatening. Parents who are tired or stressed feel the easy way out is to give in to the child's demands thus contributing to increasing the 'Pester Power'

Children and Brand Recognition

Marketers plant the seeds of brand recognition in very young children, in the hopes that the seeds will grow into lifetime relationships. Brand loyalties can be established as early as age two, and by the time children head off to school most can recognize hundreds of brand logos.

While fast food, toy and clothing companies have been cultivating brand recognition in children for years, adult-oriented businesses such as banks and automakers are now getting in on the act. A study conducted by Patti Valkenburg and Moniek Buijzen of the Amsterdam School of Communications Research shows that children as young as two years old easily recognise brand logos. Infants as young as two were able to recognise 8 out of 12 brands they were shown, and the more TV they had been exposed to, the more brands they recognised.³ Long before they can understand half of what their parents are saying to them, advertisers and broadcasters are approaching infants.

Research has shown that children between the ages of two and five cannot differentiate between regular TV programming and commercials. Young children are especially vulnerable to misleading advertising and don't begin to understand that advertisements are not always true until they're eight.

Respondents between the age group of 8.5 to 14.5 were considered to be highly brand conscious. They were aware of brand names in all commodities and also the brand leaders in all categories. They admitted that they advised their parent's use of brands for almost every thing even detergents ??? This really is the height of consumerism. 85% of the respondents admitted that they would never use an unbranded product and it was a matter of pride to admit among peer the use of a branded product. Respondents in this age group were very savvy about imported brands too. Respondents in the age group 2.5 to 8.0 did not share the same brand savviness. They were aware if brands that were well advertised on Cartoon Network or Animal Planet and Discovery. Their brand awareness was limited to toys, chocolates, cookies and brands that aimed mainly at them like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Maggi and McDonald's. A few respondents in the age group of 1.5 to 2.5 were selected to study their level of brand recognition and the brands used were Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Maggi and McDonald's on one hands and Amul milk, Pampers and Parle G Biscuits . 85%

³ Identifying determinants of young children's brand awareness: Television, parents and peers" by Patti Valkenburg and Moniek Buijzen of the Amsterdam School of Communications Research -Journal Applied Developmental Psychology

if the children as young as 1.5 could recognize brands like Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Maggi but could not recognize brands of milk or other items used by their mother daily.

Advertisement and food habits

Most food advertising on children's TV shows is for fast foods, soft drinks, candy, bubble gums and pre-sweetened cereals. Fast food chains spend more than 3 billion dollars a year on advertising, much of it aimed at children. To directly target children, the fast food industry uses different modes like giving away of free toy or a cartoon character or game. Mc Donald's happy meal is a way to keep the kids hooked when they display the toys that will come next and the children pesters their parents to get the same.

The results of all this aggressive marketing of fast food, soft drinks and candy to children is a country of overweight children. China with their growing incomes and one child policy has found that the 'little emperors/empresses' have gone into excessive junk food eating and 40% of the child population is excessively obese. Inappropriate advertising contributes to many kids' ills, from obesity to anorexia, to drinking booze and having sex too soon. Young people view more than 40,000 ads per year on television alone and increasingly are being exposed to advertising on the Internet, in magazines, and in schools,

95% parents in the sample believe that advertisers were doing a big disservice to society as well as the country. They believed that if the younger generation ate wrong/unhealthy food they were likely to be unhealthy adults who would be a big burden on the society that would be spending a lot on health. Parents believe that the Government must put restriction on advertisements of unhealthy food and beverages. The pervasiveness of marketing campaigns aimed at children is very high, but what is scary is the skill with which the advertisers are wielding their charm at children. Advertisers are making their pitches to younger and younger audiences.

The children in the sample were highly aware of the brands of food advertised. Due to the perseverance of the advertiser the brand recall was also very high. Lays, Kurkure, Cheetos, Maggi, Mc Donald's Happy Meal, Coca Cola, Pepsi, Sun feast Biscuits etc. have high recall due to either the free bees given with the product or the use of either popular sports stars or film stars used in the advertisements. The recall was higher in bigger children and lesser in younger ones. The pester power used to consume these foods was also higher in the bigger children as compared to the younger ones.

Children in the sample were aware that most of the food categories advertised by marketers were not good for their health, because their parents said so, but none the less they continue to consume it because most of this category food is highly addictive thus being highly dangerous health wise.

Does the government care?

Some countries are taking steps towards protecting children from ads. Many European governments have placed restrictions on television commercials targeting kids. But in India we do not seem to understand the problem. Unfortunately the Government of India is using children to get its message through to the people. The IR department has shamelessly used kids in their mass message to parents on tax evasion. The results have been quite traumatic for some parents and their children because the children wanted to know if the parents paid "Service Tax". Any amount of explanation by the parents on the non applicability of the tax could not pacify the children because they thought their parents were criminals and likely to be arrested. The children pleaded with their parents to pay up the "Service Tax" and fulfill their duty of being a good citizen.

The problem is not just the pervasiveness of marketing campaigns aimed at children, but the skill with which they wield their charms. As advertisers are making their pitches to younger and younger audiences, many of whom are just learning to walk, companies are beckoning to psychologists for assistance.

Parents feel that the Government must bring in regulation on what the advertise can show and whom the marketer can target. Parents feel that using a child to market every thing from diapers to houses is very wrong. Advertisers have time and again used children in the advertisements and portrayed them as having a say in every decision taken by the parents. This portrait gives a false impression to children that their parents must involve them in all important decision in the family and if the parents did not do it they took it as a sign of neglect by the parents. The Governments use of children in advertisement has generated a lot of resentment among parents who feel that the Government must be a regulator and should not become a violator itself.

Conclusion

In India it has always been a belief that a healthy society raises children to be responsible citizens rather than just consumers. Creating healthy, happy families means spending time together rather than spending money. It's probably impossible to completely shield children from marketing messages. However you feel about it, marketing is an inevitable part of the world we live in. Still, parents can give their children tools to help them cope with the barrage. The Government can also help by coming out with few regulations that will ensure that unethical targeting is stopped. Special care needs to be taken in case of the food and beverage industry, entertainment industry and advertisement in education.

Indian parents are luckier than their counter parts in the world because due to our tradition our children still respect their elders and listen to their parents and therefore, when explained the ill effects of certain commodities children are likely to listen. This counseling requires a lot of time and patience, which most working parents lack. An over worked parents does not have the time to reinforce every day the ills of aggressive marketing to the children and tend to give in on days when they are tired. A supportive family system also means that grandparents, uncles and aunts play a very vital role in ensuring that children do not fall prey to advertisement and marketing gimmicks very easily.

It is a war between marketers and the family where the marketer is using is money and resources to entice children and the family its strength and values to protect the children. We can continue to hope the family wins.