

Backlash contre les prédateurs

Les agences de marketing états-uniennes qui ciblent les enfants rencontrent une résistance accrue

Backlash is growing against advertising aimed at children

By Allyce Bess, Of the Post-Dispatch, 06/19/2004

Whether watching television, reading magazines or surfing the Internet, children's brains are marinating in marketing. Sometimes the messages pop up in unlikely places. For example, the top-rated TV program among St. Louis teens is a 10-minute newscast on Channel One Network. It's beamed free daily to classrooms - along with an extra two minutes of commercials.

"It's incredibly hard to raise kids in a toxic environment where they are bombarded with advertising," said Betsy Taylor, president of the nonprofit Center for a New American Dream, which seeks to limit marketing aimed at children. It's easy to see why children are attractive targets. They have nearly \$84 billion a year in spending power, according to Yankelovich, a consulting firm. Advertisers spend an estimated \$12 billion to \$20 billion or more a year to reach them.

Marketers say children are savvy, demanding shoppers. But many parents fear they are vulnerable. The average child spends more time in front of a screen - whether computer or television - than doing anything else except sleeping, according to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Online games, dubbed "advergames," are designed with kid appeal. For example, Nabiscoworld.com offers a game of virtual hoops played with an Oreo. And the proliferation of cable channels for children - from Nickelodeon to the Cartoon Network - also makes it easier for advertisers to speak to them directly.

"All the marketing makes parenting much harder . . . If parents say no, (their children) think they're depriving them of happiness," said Diane Levin, a professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston.

Still, parents ultimately are responsible for policing what their children buy, said Daniel Jaffe, executive vice president of the Association of National Advertisers Inc. "You can't put all children off on some Gilligan's Island," said Jaffe. Marketers' forays into children's lives have sparked concerns with some teachers, too.

Patricia Wood, a family and consumer-science teacher at Lindbergh High School, is conflicted about corporate influences. Classroom discussions and activities often involve brand names. "Sometimes in my classes when I do a demonstration, I'll sing commercials . . . because it gets their attention," she said.

When students research recipes, they go to the Food Network Web site, because it's easier to do research online than at the library, Wood said. But there's a downside to the Internet, she said: It also increases her students' exposure to advertising. Marketing messengers Channel One Network, based in New York, has become a rallying point for parents and groups that want to eliminate marketing in schools. The network donates televisions, other equipment and a daily newscast to schools. The catch: Students also must sit through the commercials.

Several school districts nationwide have banned the network. Yet its daily newscasts are still part of the curriculum for one-third of students age 12 through high school, including

nearly 55,000 students in the St. Louis area.

According to Nielsen ratings, it is the highest-rated teen program in this market, said Kent Haehl, president of sales and marketing for Channel One. He said it's shortsighted to think of Channel One as an advertising delivery mechanism, noting that networks such as MTV have more commercial time. Advertising is delivered in other forms, too.

Cover Concepts Inc., based in New York City, offers schools free textbook covers, bookmarks, notebooks and other supplies emblazoned with corporate logos and cartoon characters. Cover Concepts is owned by Marvel Enterprises Inc., one of the world's leading comic-book publishers. Its materials are in 400 schools in the St. Louis area, reaching 225,000 to 230,000 students here, said Anita Murrmann, executive director.

"We found out that the average teacher spends over \$700 out of their own pocket to provide their students with (such) materials," Murrmann said, so the company is simply filling a need. However, some food companies are starting to cut down on advertising with Cover Concepts.

Such concerns haven't stopped Pizza Hut Inc., which since the 1980s has run one of the largest reading-motivation programs in the nation. When the children meet goals set by teachers or parents, the reward is a free 6-inch pizza.

Julie Hildebrand, a Pizza Hut spokeswoman, said it's a way to motivate students without "going overboard." The program is in 910,000 U.S. classrooms; she declined to say how many area schools participate.

"Way out of balance"

The nonprofit group Commercial Alert, based in Portland, Ore., has drafted a Parents Bill of Rights. The series of legislative proposals would ban advertising in schools, bring more accountability to advertising aimed at minors and prohibit advertising to children younger than age 12. Jim Metrock founded the Alabama-based, nonprofit Obligation Inc., largely to

> criticize Channel One. "I'm a very pro-business person," he said. "Advertising is absolutely

> necessary, but they're going way out of balance." Metrock objects to using taxpayer-financed schools to peddle products to students.

Another activist, the St. Louis area's Phyllis Schlafly, testified with consumer advocate Ralph Nader about the issue before a Senate committee hearing in 1999.

Schlafly said in a recent interview that taxpayer dollars shouldn't be used to expose children to advertising.

The American Psychological Association recently released a report calling for a ban on advertising to children younger than 8. One of the chief authors, Dale Kunkel, said young children can't fully comprehend advertisers' motives.

"If you believe the evidence about children's limited abilities - and if you really believe it's a concern - then you've got to believe government regulation is needed," Kunkel said.

Reporter Allyce Bess, E-mail: abess@post-dispatch.com Phone: 314-340-8157