

COVER STORY

Driving teen egos--and buying--through 'branding'

A glut of marketing messages encourages teens to tie brand choices to their personal identity.

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America has seen a sharp upswing in marketing geared to teens since the 1980s, when research documented their significant buying power, thanks to after-school and summer jobs, not to mention increasing sway over parents.

Moreover, notes psychologist Susan Linn, EdD, of the Harvard Medical School, in her book, "Consuming Kids," published by The New Press last month, U.S. companies market to adolescents and children with an annual budget of over \$15 billion, or about two and a half times more than was spent in 1992. They now influence over \$600 billion worth of spending.

As a result, teens are inundated with so much marketing about the importance of brands to identity and image, it has changed the way they socialize with each other, interact with adults and view themselves and the world, says child psychologist Allen Kanner, PhD, whose book "Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Material-istic World," co-edited with Knox College's Tim Kasser, PhD, is being published by APA this year. To back his point, Kanner cites research on the effects of branding on teenagers, including how it increases their spending, by psychologists such as Velma LaPoint, PhD, of Howard University in Washington, D.C.

"It's the meta-message that you can solve all of life's problems by purchasing the right products that's having the most profound effect," Kanner explains.

So with that in mind, psychologists, including Kanner, are pushing for increased research on the effects of marketing to teens--an area where little empirical work has been done--arguing for a change in the political and social culture that would wipe out marketing's identity-molding effects for increased influence of parents and other role models in teenagers' communities.

Seeking teen cash

The need for such a shift is pressing given marketing's constantly increasing forcefulness, says Linn.

"Comparing the marketing of today with the marketing of yesteryear is like comparing a BB gun to a smart bomb; it's enhanced by technology, honed by child psychologists and brought to us by billion of dollars," she comments. "In the new millennium, marketing executives are insinuating their brands into the fabric of children's lives. They want--to use industry terms--'cradle to grave' brand loyalty and to 'own' children."

By the time children reach their teens, a developmental stage when they're naturally insecure and searching for a personal identity, they've been taught that material possessions are what matter, Kanner says. Advertisers understand the teen's desire to be "cool," and manipulate it to sell their wares, a concept that's been offered to marketers by psychologists including James McNeal, PhD, who wrote "Kids As Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children," published in 1992 by Lexington Books.

"Teens want to identify with their peer group and in a certain sense, that is a vulnerability," Kanner says. Indeed, teens and tweens, children between the ages of 12 and 14, are attracted to the prestige they believe brand-name clothing provides them, according to a 1998 article in the journal *Adolescence* (Vol. 33, No. 131) by economist Linda Simpson, PhD, of Eastern Illinois University. The attraction to prestige brands develops in adolescent years because it's a time when peer pressure and fitting in are very important, she notes.

The problem, says Kanner, is that marketers manipulate that attraction, encouraging teens to use materialistic values to define

who they are and aren't. In doing that, marketers distort the organic process of developing an identity by hooking self-value to brands, he adds. "More naturally, you might develop your identity around, for example, doing good in the world or building a career out of an interest," he explains.

And even when good bubbles up, or creativity flourishes on its own, it's likely to be co-opted by advertisers looking to keep up with trends among teens, says Linn. For example, advertisers use hip-hop culture to sell products such as Sprite, and the emergence of extreme sports coincided with the branding of associated products such as skateboarding.

Identity-oriented branding also encourages disapproval of anything different, be it a different generation, different cultural group or different school clique, says Linn. The way advertising separates kids from their parents is particularly insidious, Kanner says. Essentially, advertisers encourage rejection of the older generation's preferences to the point of trying to create an official statement about what is cool for teenagers, Kanner says, citing 20 years of clinical work as a child psychologist in California. The message that doesn't reach teens, he says, is that what is important is "how you think, what you like...and who you are."

Targeting teen girls

Who you are includes how you fulfill your gender role, which with the intensity of marketing to teens, can't help but be defined by products and images, Linn says. Although damaging to both sexes--men often encounter pressure to look and behave in hyper-masculine ways that influence identity--teen-age girls bear a particularly high burden of intense advertising, according to Linn.

Constant exposure to commercials promising the world--beauty, popularity, peace-of-mind, self-confidence, great relationships--turns many young girls into insatiable consumers, agrees psychologist Margo Maine, PhD, who treats eating disorders and founded the Eating Disorder Coalition for Research. Teenage girls spend over \$9 billion on makeup and skin products alone, an example of advertisers successfully selling the "quick fix," she says. But that kind of purchase robs them of self-determination, self-awareness and self-esteem, Maine believes.

"Encouraged to look outside of themselves for comfort, values and direction, girls become easy prey to addictive behaviors and unrealistic images that ads promote," she says. "The diet, tobacco and alcohol industries target girls, capitalizing on the body image, weight concerns and beauty ideals that make them most vulnerable."

Psychology's role

Many teens are feeling the pressure, Kanner says. Some who he sees have trouble distinguishing between what they truly like and what marketers have told them to like.

And many teens believe that they are impervious to marketing manipulation, a topic that is very difficult to address in the therapy room. Instead, suggests Kanner, "the bulk of psychologist effort needs to be focused on the source of the problem--corporate advertising--rather than going along with the industry's cynical attempts to shift the responsibility primarily onto teens and their parents."

So, Linn says, parents and others who care about children need to take baby steps in several arenas to turn the materialistic tide:

- At home, find ways for children to spend time away from advertising and talk to them about why and how ads are produced.
- In communities, share concerns with parents and community leaders who can work together to change teen views of marketing.
- In schools, work to stop the influx of advertising messages in school buildings.
- In the marketplace, join advocacy groups, such as the Coalition to Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children, that lobby politicians and companies to be responsible marketers. Also, support foundations that fund research on marketing effects on children.

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