

Mum's the Word – the importance of including mums when researching products targeted to children

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Not long ago, the main objective of most marketers with products aimed at children was to generate 'pester power'. If it appealed to children, marketers knew their product would be successful; children would become the most convincing sales people on the planet employing a vast array of techniques ranging from the 'I want...' of younger children to the more advanced technique of bargaining and negotiation of older children. 'Kid power' or 'pester power' was at its height, parents ceding to their children's demands with apparent enthusiasm. And the reason for this acquiescence was fairly simple. More mums were working than ever before, and many felt guilt at not spending enough time with their children. The understandable desire of working mums to spend quality time with children by avoiding conflict, coupled with a desire to make them happy meant that children could be indulged. This was recognised by marketers; it was not unusual to receive a research brief that included research only with children, not mums at all.

What naïve days. Marketers have had to rapidly change track, with increasing criticism appearing about the whole concept of marketing to children. Pester Power is now a taboo phrase, and consumer groups around the world are increasingly critical of the way in which children are targeted as consumers. The journal previously called 'The International Journal of Advertising and Marketing to Children' has changed its title to the more appropriate title 'Young Consumers'.

The general disquiet about marketing to children has coincided with a power struggle within the family with mum seen to be gaining the upper hand when it comes to decision making about what children consume. Particularly apparent in the area of food and drink products, mums are under growing pressure from the media, schools and government to provide a healthy diet for their children, and, inevitably, feel increasingly guilty if they fail to deliver. After programmes such as 'Jamie's School Dinners', and 'You are what you eat', mums are now sceptical about the nutritional content of food marketed to their children. It is now crucial for any new product aimed at children to gain mum approval.

The obesity crisis has focused the spotlight on many of the food and drink manufacturers with products aimed at children and there is an increasing threat to impose restrictions on the advertising of those products that may undermine a healthy lifestyle. Last November in its white paper 'Choosing Health' the Government warned of political intervention in this area if the industry did not market food and drink to children responsibly. This is coupled with a heightened awareness of how children are targeted as consumers. A recently published report from National Consumer Council (NCC) describes research that revealed the disturbing and worrying finding that children and young people are experiencing stress from the scale and extent of

commercial marketing. This is a big leap from the previously held notion among some marketers that children are advertising savvy at a young age.

Where previously the vast majority of children's NPD focused on achieving the right marketing mix for the child, virtually ignoring the person most likely to buy the product, ie mum, it is now she who is the prime focus. For example, a few years back NPD for a successful children's cheese brand focused qualitative research almost entirely on children, with only a token couple of groups with mums. Now a similar NPD project for children's sauces finds us carrying out as much research with mums, as with the end user, the child. Responsible food manufacturers recognise that while it is essential that the product is attractive to children, it must also appeal to mums in terms of nutrition, health, and informative labelling.

There is now a growing recognition in the advertising industry that children are vulnerable consumers. The industry has its own set of codes that relate specifically to children. There are several excellent organisations that are funded by the advertising and marketing industry to educate children about the reality of marketing and advertising. Led by Concerned Children's Advertisers in Canada, and adopted by Media Smart in the UK, the initiative is now rolling out across Europe.

Meanwhile there is a growing trend towards more inclusive advertising, reflecting the blurring of age and life stage that is emerging in the 21st Century. Where the average teenager used to hate their parents, separate themselves from their parents' lives, and move on, and out, children we find now actually like their parents, and do not move out. Adult fashion and age groups are increasingly indistinguishable, and parents themselves are reluctant to be labelled 'middle aged'. So we see advertising where the child plays the sensible adult, and the parent is portrayed as the child, well illustrated in ads such as Haribo sweets and Vauxhall. This witty play on who holds the decision making power within the family is one that many parents recognise and can identify with, but, like all good advertising, the humour is in what is alluded to, not what is the reality. Children of course are not adult, and in terms of marketing products directly to them should not be treated as such.

Children do though have strong views, and should not be excluded from research. They still play a vital role in identifying products that appeal to them, often learnt from viral marketing in the playground. Children also have vivid imaginations; they are able to think creatively, with no pre-conceived ideas, and many clients have learnt a great deal about product perception from taking part in creative workshops with children. But most companies that have children as end consumers, and especially those in the food and drink industry, realise that mums must buy into the product first, and should feature in any marketing campaign. Mums now feel they have the power and confidence to veto products, as well as influence the frequency with which products are bought, and they are exerting that power with enthusiasm.

So the balance has changed, and research in the children's world is reflecting this. Mums are a mine of information about their children's habits, behaviour

and attitudes, often able to fill in some of the details that children are either unaware of, or are unable to articulate. Children, especially young children, can have a very hazy concept of time and tend to live their lives in the present, making it difficult to gain more than a snapshot of their current behaviour. Although there are many methods in the youth researcher's toolbox that we can use to overcome this, methods such as role play, ethnography, photos, cameras, picture diaries, we find it is invaluable to have mums, as well as children, commenting on the outcome of such methods.

It is of course obvious, but surprisingly often overlooked, that children do in fact live within the family unit. More than any other consumer, the circumstances in which children live will have a profound influence on the products they consume. To isolate them as consumers does not reflect the reality of their lives. Children do not go to the supermarket by themselves, nor do they walk into fast food restaurants alone. Peer pressure is important, but does not become an over riding influence until children reach secondary school, at around 11 or 12, and even then family influence still plays a large part in their lives. Children have to compete for attention with other family members and when it comes to decision making about children's products, it is mum who usually makes the final decision. We are not forgetting dads here of course, but it is surprising how often dad, in our experience, defers to mum when it comes to children's products.

If advertising and marketing to children is coming under attack, as researchers we must ensure that clients are aware of the level of concern from consumer organisations, government, and parents. As 'pester power' dies, parent power increases, and mums will, and indeed should feature increasingly in the research and marketing of any child's product. Responsible marketing to children is becoming the much used phrase which is replacing 'pester power'. There will always be products targeted to children, and research with children and mums will always have an important role to play in the development of those products. The smart brands recognise the importance of producing and marketing products that appeal to children but that equally are endorsed by mums. In the future, the children's brands that will endure are those that develop and maintain a dialogue with mum, are responsive to her needs, while ensuring that her child's desires are met. Those that focus solely on the child will fade.