

‘Out of the Mouth of Babes’

How should we be marketing to children?

Barbie Clarke and Joe Michael, Kids and Youth

Introduction

“One of the really notable achievements of the 20th Century has been to make the young old before their time.”
(Robertson Davies, Maclean’s, February 22 1993)

This paper seeks to answer a major question: what are the ethical considerations when marketing to children? With growing concern, and criticism, voiced in the international press in recent months about marketing, advertising, and carrying out research with children, it is important to look closely at the background, arguments, and issues that surround the many forms of marketing that involve children as its target. We are also looking at this from a unique perspective; the name of our company is, as they say, ‘what it says on the tin’. How can we justify looking at ‘pester power’ or the ‘nag factor’ that many clients request? It is a question we ask ourselves daily.

Whilst writing our paper for the ESOMAR Congress 2002 (Michael J, Clarke B ‘Catch them Young’, 2002) about the effects of sponsorship on children, we became increasingly fascinated by the arguments, for and against, that surround the area of marketing to children, and we feel it is an area worth opening for examination, and debate. To help our thinking on this contentious area, we consulted thirty marketing experts who are involved in marketing to children, and the results of this consultation are laid out in this paper.

What are the Concerns?

The level of concern, criticism, and alarm about marketing to children is high, but that is not surprising, given that any subject that involves that most difficult and emotive area, the next generation, our children, will always generate huge and understandable levels of anxiety about the most vulnerable members of our society. And it is of course important that these concerns are aired, and examined.

In the US, various conferences describing themselves as 'Marketing to Children' witnessed, last year (2002), demonstrations on the streets outside, of people objecting to such an event. An understandable extension perhaps of anti-global, anti-brand feeling, nevertheless the sense that such strong feelings are aroused should be considered carefully. Anti-brand high priestess, Naomi Klein (Klein N 'No Logo' 2000 p 72), refers to "cool hunters", and their unceasing quest to understand the youth market. Quoting from the brochure of the Fourth Annual Kid Power Marketing Conference, she describes the issue of marketing in schools as "crashing the school gate" (p 89), although ironically the copy she quotes is probably the question posed in many board rooms.

"You'll agree that the youth market is an untapped well spring of new revenue. You'll also agree that the youth market spends the majority of each day inside the schoolhouse. Now the problem is, how do you reach that market?" (p 87).

Increasingly in America, such overt commercialism is being challenged by organizations such as 'Commercial Alert' and the 'Center for a New American Dream', all of which are campaigning against the increased commercialization of children's lives.

The US based 'STOP' (Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children Coalition) represents health care professionals, parents, educators, businesses and

advocates who are alarmed about the recent escalation of corporate marketing directed at children. In 2001 it posted on its website the banner “Concerned About Marketing to Children? – protest the Golden Marble awards”. The Golden Marble awards celebrate excellence in children’s advertising, and STOP organized a rally outside “We’ll be outside, across the street from the Hyatt Hotel having fun and saying NO to making our kids into targets for consumerism”. A more emotive, and highly critical article appeared in the San Francisco Bay Guardian (A. Clay Thompson ‘Dot-com marketers descend on San Francisco’ September 21 2000) which began “If you have children, be afraid. Be very afraid. Internet marketing gurus are busy cooking up online schemes to drain kids’ piggy banks – not to mention their parents’ credit cards”. The article goes on to examine various dot.com companies that encourage e-commerce amongst children, and make web-based educational teaching tools. This is perhaps a perfect example at just how inflammatory such claims can be, and how easy a target anyone involved in marketing to children can be. Although this article appeared just over two years ago, it now sounds extremely dated, with educationalists around the world embracing e-learning, and in the West at least positively encouraging heightened financial knowledge amongst children as a means to counteract the effects of rampant consumerism. An example is found in The Times, (Saturday 11 January 2003) which ran an article based on children learning to research their parents’ utility bills, to find out what companies offered the best deals, and how much money could be saved; difficult to criticize this particular move.

Nevertheless, there has been genuine concern expressed about the level of marketing directed at children, exposure to companies marketing to children in schools, and advertising directed at children. In research carried out in 1998 by Axel Dammler at Icon Kids and Youth in Germany, it was shown that pre-school children can recall brands just from viewing the logo. Whilst arguing that young children can recognize the brand, Icon argues that children do not have the cognitive ability to assign abstract brand values to a tangible product until they

reach 8 or 9. We would agree with this. It is not uncommon to hear parents in qualitative research claim that their child could recognize the golden arches of McDonald's at 18 months old.

Criticism

In the UK too there has been widespread criticism about marketing to children. In the 90's, the long drawn out 'McLibel' trial was finally brought to a conclusion with Mr Justice Rodger Bell dubbing McDonald's as an "exploiter" of children. In the past few months, Labour MP Debra Shipley has been campaigning for tighter controls on marketing to children, and wants to see a ban on television advertising to the under-5's.

The newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams has recently criticized what he described as the corruption and premature sexualisation of children by a consumer society. In his book 'Lost Icons' (Continuum 2000) he wrote "Children must be free of the pressure to make adult choices if they are to learn how to make such choices while they are still children". In particular he singled out the Disney Corporation and its 'tie-ins' with confectionery, toys, comics and films, writing "The Disney empire has developed this to an unprecedented degree of professionalism." In its defence, Disney issued a statement "We are proud that over seven decades Disney has earned the trust and admiration of millions. Community, decency and optimism are the centerpiece of what the Walt Disney Company strives to achieve in all that we create." This too is an area examined in Neil Postman's book 'The Disappearance of Childhood' (1983) in which he argues that the very concept of childhood is being destroyed by children's love of television. He fears that it introduces them at too early an age to adult concepts and activities, altering their ability to think abstractly.

Most recently there has been much examination and criticism, in even such august publications as the Financial Times, an example perhaps of just how seriously the children and youth market is now taken. Richard Tomkins, in an excellent article entitled 'An Advertising Folly' (The Financial Times November 27 2002) writes:

“Now, as the Christmas shopping season moves into top gear, we are reminded that the commercialization of childhood is almost complete. Children are targeted for marketing from the age of two; billions of dollars are spent annually on selling them toys, sweets, fast food, soft drinks. Licensed merchandise and other branded products; and youth marketing agencies employ market researchers and child psychologists to study the most effective ways of penetrating their tiny minds.”

The phrase “the most effective ways of penetrating their tiny minds” should cause us all to step back, and consider what is going on here. Are we, as marketers, exploiting and manipulating children to buy, want, desire, or are we offering them choice, a choice that was lacking when their parents were small, and that, largely, is encouraged and sought by parents. It is not, after all, the child aged two who goes out with his money to buy the coveted toy or the fast food. If we are asked to look at the nature of pester power in families by clients, are we automatically assigning to that family a course where it will be impossible for them to make a choice between other products, or to resist the product in question? That may be the marketing director’s dream, but in reality parents, and children, are far more media savvy than that. David Benady, in an article in Marketing Week ('Deliver us not to Temptation', 1 August 2002 p 22) writes:

“(Dr Rowan) Williams’ disdain for marketing to children taps into a widely held view in society that advertising and marketing are rapacious, manipulative, untruthful, amoral, misleading and prepared to sacrifice all principles in pursuit of profit – even if it means damaging the interests of children. Fortunately for the industry, these views are generally muted and confined to down-page corners of the broadsheets.”

Extreme views are healthy, and challenge what we do, but they need to be considered in the context of what is happening in the real world, in this case what

is happening in the home of the average family. In an article in The Guardian (L Hollis 'She Know What She Wants' 6 November 2002) Ms Hollis describes the process of caving in to the demands of her daughter Charlotte age 3, who insists that the pink T shirt her mother is buying for her has to have the 'Barbie' logo on it, at a cost of a few extra pounds. She concludes:

“Generally, of course, it is the parent who has the ultimate veto – however much a company might spend on advertising. I could switch off the TV so that my daughter misses the ads, and I could refuse to buy the Barbie T-shirt. But as the canniest marketing executive knows, hell hath no fury like a thwarted three-year old.”

The growth of Marketing to Children

The Chartered Institute of Marketing estimates that the pre-school market alone is now worth around £4.3 billion a year (2002). It has been shown the children have an influence on their parents' choice of clothes, food, furniture, cars, computers, holiday, even houses, in a total market estimated at £30 billion. The combined annual pocket money income of children in the UK is £2.3 billion.

How has this change come about? The 1980's saw a growth in the amount spent on children's advertising. As more and more parents worked, the advantage was that greater income was generated, but the disadvantage was that children saw less of their parents. This created a two-way negotiating tool. Parents wanted to spend money on their children, otherwise, they asked themselves, what were they working for? Marketers saw the opportunity not just to sell traditional children's products such as fast food, toys, and confectionery, but to encourage families to make the most of 'quality time', in the form of holidays, cars, in-home media entertainment. Many major advertising agencies now have a children's division, and there has been a growth in the number of companies such as our own that specializes entirely in the kids and youth markets.

Naomi Klein (2000) claims that the rise in youth marketing came about in the 1990's, with 1992 seeing an increase in the population of teenagers (the first since 1975). The recession of the early 90's had a devastating effect on the economy in the US, and in Europe, but the brands that remained successful, and were first to pull out of recession, were the youth brands: soft drinks, trainers, fast food, chewing gum etc. As teenagers became a viable market, so too did children.

The Dilemma – kids dictate the market?

So what do we want for our children? Surely it falls into three areas: Fun, Freedom, and Protection. In post-war years, some fifty years ago, the television was new, and in Britain at least did not include commercial television. As television advertising began to develop and with it the increase in marketing, it was families, mothers and fathers, that were targeted, not their children. After the deprivation and horror of the war years, families were encouraged by governments to grow and develop in a way that would bring stability to the western world. The baby boom years began, and mothers, most of whom had taken an active role in the war, were encouraged to stay at home and concentrate on bringing up the next generation. The generation they raised subsequently rebelled against the constraints of their post-war upbringing, and we saw the rise of feminism, post-feminism, student protest, hippies, rock music, punk etc etc.

The result of all of this saw a loss of innocence. No longer were 'traditional values' accepted, and families began to re-group and re-form with divorce, single parent families, co-habitation, gay marriages and parenthood becoming commonplace, and to a large extent, accepted. Planned parenthood became possible with the introduction of the pill in the 1960's. Children are still the mainstream in the 'family', but their role is very different. They are not necessarily the inevitable outcome of a coupling; couples can choose to have a

child or not, and many successful working women today are opting not to have children, or at least not have them until they are in their mid or late 30's. Children in the Western world today are, in the most part, loved, wanted, and there to be cherished, in a way that post war was not possible; parents at that time did not have the means to indulge their children much, everyday living was an end in itself.

As the economy has grown, with many families becoming more affluent, it is perhaps not surprising that children have taken on a different role. Parents themselves are different; the baby boomers refuse to grow up, dressing in the same clothes as their sons and daughters. The 'seen and not heard' thinking of the Victorian era has been replaced by child as friend. Many parents speak of their children as being their best friend, jokingly referring to them as more sensible and wise than they are, and are including them in family decision making. This is empowering for children, and gives them a sense of 'self' and confidence probably not experienced by previous generations.

Currently the 'must have' accessory for kids and young people is the mobile phone. Many marketers are actively considering the use of text messaging to reach children and young people. And yet the government announced, after the publication of the Stewart Report (2000) that looked into the health and safety of mobile phones, that the potential harm of R F radiation meant that "the independent experts consider that children less than 16 years of age should be discouraged from using mobile phones.". Technology moves on fast, and we need, as an industry, need to keep up.

Psychology and Development

Many studies have been carried out to criticize, or support, advertising to children, and examining the cognitive and developmental stages to find out what effect marketing techniques have on them. It is however important not to over-

sentimentalise childhood, and to be aware that in many ways the lives of Western children today are better, and more protected, than they have ever been in the past. It is also important to recognize that childhood is not a state of its own, but a progression of development, passing from helpless infant to self-sufficient and self-determining adult. In his paper 'The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions' (W Kessen 1979 Child Development ed Claudio Violato 1996) William Kessen writes:

"Child psychologists ... have taken the Romantic notion of childish innocence and openness a long way toward the several forms of 'If only we could make matters right with the child, the world would be a better place'. The child became the carrier of political progressivism and the optimism of reformers. From agitation for child labor reform in the 1890's to (today), American children have been saviors of the nation. The romantic inheritance of purity and perfectibility may, in fact have misled us about the proper unit of developmental study and about the major forces influencing human growth and change."

Studies of youth culture can also be confused with the needs and wishes of the adults who commission them. In their paper 'Culture, Mass Media and Youth' (Travis L and Violato C 1996) educational psychologists LeRoy Travis and Claudio Violato point out that the increasing popularity of 'youth culture' and the trend to market to youth is in part a wish for clients themselves to remain young and in the mainstream of popular culture. Witness the wide age range that shops at Gap, or Ikea, or visits Starbucks. Older people are refusing to grow old; and with that comes an idealization of the state of childhood.

"This (youth culture) is also aimed at the youths' more elderly counterparts who frequently reflect a sense of nostalgia for their lost youth and a fear of death in ways they imitate in dress, language and behaviour generally, the attractive young."
'Culture, Mass Media and Youth' (Travis L and Violato C 1996)

Travis and Violato (1996) cite the growth of youth culture that has had such an influence on marketing to children as being a gradual process over the last century. When considering the decline of adult influence, and the greater

influence of peers, they argue that in fact power has not shifted from adults entirely, but has instead shifted from traditional influencers, ie parents and teachers, to others who have considerable influence, notably sports heroes, entertainers, and other entrepreneurs. Each decade has brought its own particular culture, from the 1950's troubled adolescent portrayed by James Dean in 'Rebel Without a Cause', to the 'Young Fogies' of the 1990's : "world weary, living in broken families, AIDS, a drug abuse epidemic, environmental degradation, economic uncertainty, a collapsing world order, and a bleak future generally."

So coming to the 00's what will the influences on children and youth? September 11 has had an unsettling affect on us all, causing, we detect, a swing back from blatant commercialism to family values, increased individualization, an increase in home working and self employment. This in turn will affect our children, and already we are detecting a growing tendency for them to feel they do not have to claim to follow the latest trend, to have the confidence to say the people they admire most are not necessarily Michael Owen or David Beckham, but instead their parents.

Legislation and Protection

Over the last year public anxiety in the UK about children and child protection has been high; children are seen as immensely vulnerable. There seems to be a drive to 'do something' to protect children, and it may be that this collective unease about children and their role in our society has equally stirred concern about the level of marketing directed at them. The last year has seen, sadly, the report into the official enquiry of the death of Victoria Clumbie, the murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, the resulting paedophile panic, and the rush to register adults that look after children. As a community we are afraid for our children; for if our children are unsafe, or threatened, the fabric of society itself is unsettled and uncertain. Mary Marsh, Director of the National Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Children has voiced this uncertainty about child protection that currently pervades in the UK, and is reflected to a great extent in the US:

“I think the view of the child as a victim will be a very unfortunate one. We need to see children as being independent people who have a right to life, freedom of expression, and freedom of experience. They also have a right to be protected from violence and fear, and that is why there is a community responsibility and that is why the protection of children is everyone’s responsibility. It doesn’t fall to their direct parents or carers or people in a statutory position of authority. Protection of our children belongs to all of us across the whole community.”
Mary Marsh, Analysis, BBC R4 14 November 2002

As a marketing community, we need to take this responsibility very seriously. Legislation does of course exist to protect children. The UK, and most civilized countries, adhere to the UN Convention on the rights of a child. In the UK The Children’s Act of 1989 brought together Private and Public law about children, and replaced complex and fragmented legislation with a single statute. It was the first time that significant recognition of the individuality of the children over and against both their parents and the state has occurred. And in 2001 the UK’s first official advocate for children was appointed in Wales.

Each body that exists in our marketing community must comply with the Children’s Act, and has its own rules, regulations, and Codes of Conduct. The MRS in the UK, and ESOMAR worldwide have strict guidelines about carrying out research with children. In the US COPPA, The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, came into effect in April 2000, and applies to the online collection of personal information from children under 13. Basically before collecting, using or disclosing personal information from a child, verifiable parental consent from the child’s parent must be collected, and this applies to all on-line data collected globally.

The UK Data Protection Act 1998 stipulates that a person can only be marketed to with their consent. This creates fraught issues when considering children; an age old principle of law is that a person who has not reached the age of majority (ie under 18) cannot be bound by a contract, therefore the giving of consent for this age group becomes an issue. Most marketers, and Codes of Conduct, get around this by stipulating that Children under the age of 13 should not be marketed to all unless their parent or guardian has given consent.

We would argue that limiting the parental consent to under 13 is too young, especially for any marketing that directly targets children (e.g. on-line research), and to be safe, at Kids and Youth, we recommend to clients that parental consent is sought for all research carried out on-line in the UK, and internationally, for anyone under the age of 17. The Direct Marketing Association makes suggestions about what products and services should not be targeted at children, that include credit cards and alcohol, and it reminds members that children are 'less sophisticated consumers' than adults.

In the recent report from the Advertising Standard Authority (Serious Offence in non-broadcast Advertising July 2002) on what advertising is most likely to offend, not surprisingly, those that target children is cited. The ASA recommends that companies or organisations considering marketing direct to children should seek guidance from their industry body, and from a solicitor specialized in this area. This perhaps reflects the level of concern that exists amongst companies that target children; it is truly a can of worms. And yet the checks and balances that exist are important, and necessary.

Concerns about children using the Internet, and e-mail, and the potential danger posed to children through possible contact with paedophiles runs a chill through any parent who's child is on-line. We know that the Internet, and e-mail is the new 'learning tool' for children, and is actively encouraged as such by Governments. Increasingly many companies are carrying out on-line research

with children; many children's products, including food and drink brands, have a dedicated web-site. The introduction of COPPA in the US has had an impact on all companies that target children through their web-site. Barbie Clarke sat on the MRS Professional Standards working party looking at new guidelines for the Code of Conduct for conducting research with children in 1998/9. At that time, whilst we considered on-line research, we underestimated the extent to which this methodology would grow, and the problems of obtaining parental consent through sites that are only targeted to children. We did not look at SMS as a research tool at all; incredible as it seems, children, mobile phones and text messaging were not then an issue. Clearly, to protect children, our checks and balances, rules and regulations and Codes of Conduct need to be revisited on a regular basis, and we would suggest that any organization that is involved in marketing, the MRS included, has an on-going working party of industry experts that is dedicated to reviewing best practices, and Codes of Conduct in relation to children.

Advertising to Children

A recent, and well researched book 'Fast Food Nation' (Eric Schlosser Penguin 2001) quotes the American Academy of Pediatrics 1995 as saying "advertising directed at children is inherently deceptive and exploits children under eight years of age". It goes on to say though that it does not recommend banning advertising because of impracticalities and infringement of advertisers' freedom of speech. In Europe debate about advertising to children, brought about by the ban on children's advertising in Sweden, continues. Protection of the consumer is fundamental in Swedish law. There is a ban on all colouring agents in food, a ban on alcohol and tobacco advertising, and there are no TV ads aimed at children under the age of 12. The Swedish ban on advertising to children under 12 has been in place for 11 years. Denmark bans ads five minutes before and after children's programming. Belgium bans ads to all children, Italy during the cartoons. Greece bans TV stations from advertising toys to children between 7

am – 10 pm. Quebec restricts all televising advertising directed at children under the age of 13.

There is a push from Sweden to ban all EU TV ads that target children, which will effectively bring an end to kids favourite TV characters being used to promote products. On the whole the EU is opposed to a ban, but is researching the effects of advertising on children. Views differ widely from country to country. Out of the 15 EU countries, only 4 – France, Ireland, Holland and the UK do not consider advertising aimed at children as harmful, and Spain considers a ban undemocratic. In the US, whilst there is much debate about the effects on advertising on children, marketing products to children is broadly viewed as a First Amendment right.

Food Advertising

Under attack especially in the area of marketing to children are food marketers, and especially those that advertise. European Union's obesity figures show an alarming rise in childhood obesity. Last year at a summit in Copenhagen a proposal was presented by a team of medical experts (The International Obesity Task Force) to ban advertisements for sugary drinks and junk food targeting children within EU countries. The task force has called for the introduction of measures similar to the restrictions on tobacco advertising. It also called for the installation of soft-drinks vending machines in schools to be stopped. Demos, the UK's independent think tank, recommended last July that a 'fat tax' be levied on the advertising of processed and fatty foods to combat the growing rates of obesity among the young. The Committee of Public Accounts published a report in January 2002 stating that more effective action must be taken to look at the problem of obesity rates amongst children. The Committee recommended that the government issue guidance for school to "assess offers from commercial sponsors" and "evaluate schemes that might encourage consumption of snack foods".

Educating Children about Marketing

In France advertisements are seen as part of preparing children for future life in a consumer society, and much of the debate around banning advertising to children centres on this. The rules and regulations that exist in the UK are regulated by the Independent Television Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority, and allow both bodies to take action against ads that “damage the physical, mental or moral development of children”(ITC). This somewhat loose definition of what makes acceptable children’s TV advertising at least allows space for children to be educated about the commercial intentions of companies at an age when they can begin to rationalise, and develop critical sense.

In Canada, a country clearly heightened in its awareness of these issues (Naomi Klein is Canadian), a scheme is in place called ‘TV and Me’ run by an organization called Concerned Children’s Advertisers, and has been running for 12 years. It produces regular TV ads and education packs on children’s issues such as bullying and the stereotyping of girls, and one of its aims is “helping children to build healthy lives.” CCA has formed the model for the launch in the UK last November (2002) of Media Smart. Media Smart is a media literacy initiative developed in association with teachers, parents and the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations. Aimed at primary school children aged 6 – 11 years old, Media Smart uses a range of teaching and advertising materials to explain the purpose of advertising and how advertisements are made. The materials include a national TV and print campaign, an information and educational website with dedicated areas for parents, children and teachers. It also provides a teaching resource, ‘Be Adwise’, which includes an in-school video, teachers’ notes, classroom activity sheets, poster and parents’ leaflet.

Media Smart seems to us to be a realistic and positive means of enlightenment through information and explanation in a world where it is almost impossible to protect children from multi media messages. As a means to counteract critics of advertising to children, Media Smart is a useful industry voice, and it had a major coup through the endorsement of Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who spoke at its launch. She said:

“(Children) need help to decode the messages that they are sent by an increasingly diverse media so they can make informed judgments. That is why I welcome the work you are doing to help young people deconstruct and understand the adverts that are aimed at them. Advertising is not bad in itself – of course it isn’t. It is a given of modern life. In fact loss of advertising funding of children’s programming would have an undeniably negative impact on its availability and quality. But it aims to persuade. That is the point of it. ... Media Smart acknowledges the power of advertising and attempts to empower the consumer .. it is an example of an industry taking responsibility for its own actions.”

Trade bodies ISBA, (Incorporated Society of British Advertisers), and the Advertising Association have backed the initiative, and BSkyB and GMTV are reported to be providing free media space.

How should marketing professionals market to children

Other trade bodies are equally concerned about criticism that makes marketing professionals appear to be potential abusers of children’s rights. Recent work carried out by CIM (The Chartered Institute of Marketing) showed that the growing influence of children has led to some firms spending more than £500,000 looking at trends in the child marketplace. In November (2002) the CIM carried out research using Capibus with 973 adults about the issue of marketing and advertising to children, and it was able to compare results with research carried out two years previously. Whilst 75% of respondents felt that children see too much advertising, this figure had fallen by 5% compared to two years ago. Nearly three-quarters of the sample (73%) felt that the laws governing advertising and targeting children should be strengthened, only a 2% fall from two years ago.

The same number (73%) believed that advertising makes children want the things they see promoted, and this is a drop of 7% compared to two years ago. Further CIM research was carried out with Salford University. In-depth interviews were carried out with the parents of young children aged between five and eleven. The research showed that there is a general consensus among parents that they should provide guidance and tell children that adverts provide useful information, but they cannot have everything they see advertised. Some parents in the research claimed that advertising helps them to see what their children like and tailor purchases accordingly.

This research will form the basis of a CIM Policy Unit to be launched in Spring 2003 that will look at the marketing professions' policy on marketing to children, and this seems to us to be an important initiative.

What Leading Marketers Think

To help us prepare this paper, we spoke to over 30 leading global marketers whose companies market entirely, or partly, to children. We asked them to describe their company policy, and to give their own personal views on the issue of marketing to children, and we would like to acknowledge, and thank, those who participated and gave up their time to take part in this exercise. Research was carried out face to face and on-line. In summary the research found:

- Most companies do not have a specific policy in their marketing activity with children, but adhere strictly to industry codes and practices, and believe it ethical to do so. For many companies that will include several bodies such as ASA, ESOMAR, MRS, DMA, Advertising Association, Advertising Education Forum were amongst those mentioned. Sometimes there is an issue in consistency, with different organizations conflicting to some extent. It would seem that organizations marketing to children need to work together to maintain a common policy.

- There is a somewhat inconsistent view on the possibility of television advertising to children being restricted or banned. Some clients are remarkably unaware that there is an issue, and these companies appear to rely on their advertising agency entirely to keep them informed which some do better than others. Other companies, often those with a strong international market, are extremely well informed and aware. These companies are actively looking at other forms of communication should advertising to children become restricted.

“Sweden’s time as chair of the EU has raised this debate (advertising to children), and I don’t think it will go away. I expect there may be some sort of restrictive legislation covering communication activities allowable to children under 5, or even under 12!”

“Potentially (ban on advertising) could increase the use of CRM activity and sms could play a major part here. For example a major children’s publisher could invite people (through book covers etc) to text in, to receive notification of new book launches etc.”

“I think it is largely a bad thing. The Direct Marketing industry is well regulated at the 14/16 year old threshold, but other advertising media (TV, print etc) seems less so.”

“We should not mislead (children), and they should not be exposed to advertising all the time. E.g. I don’t believe schools should have excessive advertising.”

“I have yet to see compelling data that proves advertising and marketing to kids is a bad idea. There are many deeper reasons why this has now become an issue such as lifestyles, lack of parental time etc, and I believe this needs to be explored first.”

- All the companies we spoke to felt it was most important to work with suppliers – researchers, marketing companies, advertisers – that had a strong background and knowledge of the children’s market, not least because much of the learning was already there. It was also felt to be more important now than ever before, simply because the area of marketing to children has become so contentious, therefore it was

imperative that practitioners should be well versed in legislation and codes of practice, and that individuals having direct contact with children had wide and knowledgeable experience.

“We’d always use specialists, no question.”

“We want to learn from the extra knowledge and experience that (specialists) have. It is also important that they are good at what they do – research, promotions etc. To be a specialist in children alone would not be sufficient.”

“Sometimes having direct experience of working with children is more important than experience of marketing, and sometimes the other way around. Direct experience is easily overrated. It is likely to reinforce existing perceptions and knowledge, not bring change.”

“We would only work with companies that have experience of marketing to children because 1. they have inherent understanding and obligation to abide by relevant legislation and codes of practice, and 2. they recognize how to address and market to children in a relevant, motivating and efficient way.”

- Marketers were split between their own personal feelings about the ethics of marketing to children, and what they saw as practical and viable for their company. Without doubt, all have a highly responsible attitude and are more likely to be conservative in their decision making if there is the slightest risk that children could be harmed or affected adversely by the marketing of their brand. There was also a sense that parents, to some extent, need help and support. Whilst all felt qualms about ‘harmful’ products being marketed – tobacco being the obvious one cited – many also felt that it was positive to give children the choice to decide what they were going to have in their lunchbox, or what they were going to have for Christmas through responsible marketing and advertising.

“I guess it depends a lot on the product. I doubt anyone is upset if more kids want to read Harry Potter, but few are keen on alco-pops or fags. I’m not sure how you work this.”

“It depends on what is being marketed and how it is being done. For example marketing cigarettes to under 12’s I would not accept, but marketing a toy which has an obvious education benefit, or promoting reading / learning skills in a desirable way I would strongly endorse.”

“I’m concerned that generic global culture almost becomes an inevitability if people are trained from a very early age to respond to advertising.”

“Adults think children are stupid. They are not. Children often are far more clued up about marketing than adults. Children can see straight to the heart of something much more quickly than many adults whereas adults can be much more gullible because of their vanity and self-perception; it’s the adults who are often the more stupid.”

“I am concerned that pester power generated by advertising to children interferes with parents’ ability to make quality decisions in purchasing products for the children, especially relevant when limited income is available to make these purchases.”

“The kids I have met in research groups are incredibly savvy and brand aware. They are not fools. The explosion in information, communication, distribution brought about by the internet and continued desire of consumers for immediate and constant satisfaction of consumables often means that manufactures, suppliers, advertisers struggle to keep up with the needs of kids today.”

“Personally I think that kids aged 8 and above are nowadays pretty media literate and can cope with the amount of marketing messages aimed at them. Personally I feel it would be wrong to ban them for toys and games - part of being a kids is about pestering your parents for new toys at Xmas and birthdays anyway! How else would they know what’s available?!”

Summary

In this paper we have examined the ethics of marketing to children, with consideration of the rights and protection of children (including the Children's Act, the MRS and ESOMAR code of conduct, and COPPA). We believe that the methods of communicating marketing messages to children should be constantly reviewed, and further examination made to the age for which parental consent is sought, especially on-line, SMS and other electronically delivered media that targets a child or young person directly. We have looked at how marketing to children has evolved over the last twenty years, and we have considered the thorny issue of advertising to children, for which there are different arguments for and against across different countries. We believe education and information is better than attempting to cocoon children from the commercial world. We have also looked at the way in which responsible marketers, both in Europe and the US perceive the degree to which viewing the child as a target consumer can be equated with protecting them.

We hope that this paper will open up a debate about marketing and the nature of childhood. The ethics, dilemmas, and the ambiguity about how we feel as marketers, researchers, and parents should be examined. We believe we need to monitor how we can best protect children's intellectual and physical wellbeing by responsible marketing. We would argue that the overall position of children has moved on considerably over the last century, and whilst there is still plenty to do in terms of ensuring Codes of Practice are consistent, and up to date, nevertheless, children are better protected now than ever before. At the same time their world has opened up through greater access to technology, and they have access to a wide range of stimuli. Colin Hayward from Nottingham University sums it up well:

“Children had to create their own entertainment, their own toys, go out into the fields and woods and amuse themselves. Perhaps this could be quite violent ways of killing little animals ..Whilst nowadays there is a

much more elaborate selection of toys, children's programmes on television, games for computers. Also .. children had a very narrow vision of the world that they would know – their village, their neighbourhood of a town, they would know a lot about the wildlife in their area, how to raise crops and so on. But their wider knowledge of the nation, what was going on abroad, new developments and so on, was just not available to them.”
(Analysis, 'Children', Radio 4, 14.11.02)

Consider, finally, this advice given to parents 250 year ago, and 100 year ago:

“The first duties of Children are in great measure mechanical: an obedient Child makes a Bow, comes and goes, speaks, or is silent, just as he is bid, before he knows any other reason for so doing than he is bid.”
(Nelson 1753 An essay on the government of children under three general headings: health, manners and education, London - no publisher)

“The rule that parents should not play with their children may seem hard but it is without doubt a safe one.”
(West M, Infant Care, US Children's Bureau 1914)

Conclusions

- Children are highly media savvy and parents often encourage this. Informed advice is better than cocooning children from making their own decisions.
- Parents need support and help in resisting their children's pleas for more and more products. They also need to be informed about Data Protection and their children's rights generally. As marketing professionals it is our duty to do this.
- With the growth of multi-media households that have access to channels from other countries the marketing industry must strive to have global consistency, but this is difficult when taking into account differences in cultures (e.g. Sweden, France, Spain, US etc).
- Senior Marketing personnel consulted for this paper are not glib about the importance of the issues relating to marketing to children, and it is important that they in turn inform and educate the more junior members of their marketing teams.
- Codes of Practice are closely adhered to but often more than one industry body applies. Therefore we need an industry-wide co-operation to determine best practice.
- Sometimes the critics forget that children in the west are better protected and are generally better off than ever before in terms of living conditions, rights, and general public awareness of their well-being.
- Initiatives such as Media Smart are a positive way to get the message across about commercialism and the impact of advertising at an early age.
- As an industry we need to be constantly updating and re-visiting our Codes of Practice. The Market Research industry should take the lead in this.

Contact: Barbie Clarke, Kids and Youth
Tel: + 44 (0)1923 858438
Cell: +44 (0)7802 216 317
Email: barbie@kidsandyouth.com
P.O. Box 25, 122 Watling Street, Radlett, Herts, WD7 8QR, UK

Joe Michael, Kids and Youth
Tel: +44 (0)208 746 3690
Cell: +44 (0)771 434 5790
Email: joe@kidsandyouth.com

Barbie Clarke set up Kids and Youth Research and Consultancy in January 2002. A youth researcher for 18 years, she was brought into NOP World to set up and run the Family division in 1997 where she stayed until the end of 2001. An English graduate, with a post-graduate qualification in psycho-dynamic counselling, Barbie has worked in a therapeutic setting with young people in prison, and in school. She is about to embark on further training in Child Art Psychotherapy attached to Guy's, King's and St Thomas' School of Medicine. An accomplished and experienced speaker, she regularly gives papers at international conferences, writes articles, and appears on TV and radio commenting on youth research. She has previously spoken at ESOMAR Youth Power Conference, Beijing (1999), ESOMAR Congress, Vienna (2000), and ESOMAR Net Effects, Berlin (2002), and ESOMAR Congress, Barcelona (2002).

Joe Michael helped set up Kids and Youth Research and Consultancy in January 2002. Formerly with NOP World, Joe founded and headed NOP's New Media Division and is an acknowledged media and new media specialist. With 16 years research experience at AGB, BMRB, Gallup Australia, and NOP World, Joe has a keen interest in brands and sponsorship. He has introduced and implemented innovative on-line and interactive research methodologies and run several seminars on the subject. A regular and experienced conference speaker, Joe gave a paper at the ESOMAR Net Effects conference in Dublin in 2000, and ESOMAR Congress, Barcelona (2002).

References

BBC Analysis Programme (14.11.02) 'Report on the threat to Children', Radio 4,

ASA (Advertising Standard Authority) (July 2002) 'Serious Offence in Non-Broadcast Advertising

Banady D (1.8.02) 'Deliver us not to Temptation' Marketing Week

Bonnett M (1994) Children's Thinking, Cassell

CIM (The Chartered Institute of Marketing) Marketing to Kids Winter 2002, (11.11.02) 'Drop in number of adults supporting restrictions on advertising to children' (14.11.02) 'Pester Power in an inevitable Part of Family Life', (9.12.02) 'Engaging Parents and Children with a Strong Brand'

Clarke B & Michael J (2002) Catch them young and keep them long, ESOMAR Congress Barcelona September 2002

Clarke B (2002) Do U Know Wuzzup? ESOMAR Net Effects Conference Berlin January 2002

Clarke B (1999) Kids and Technology ESOMAR Youth Power Conference Beijing, 1999

Committee of Public Accounts (16.1.02) 'Tackling Obesity in England', House of Commons

Dammler A and Middlelmann A (January 2001) 'I want the one with Harry Potter on it' Advertising & Marketing to Children, Volume 3 Issue 2 WARC

Holden J, Howland L, Stedman D (July 2002) Foodstuff: Living in an age of feast and famine DEMOS

Hollis L (6.11.02) 'She knows what she wants' The Guardian

IEGMP (Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones) (11.5.00) 'Mobile Phones & Health' report on the Stewart Report that looked into the safety of mobile phones

International Obesity Task Force (2002) report of summit on child obesity in Europe

Kessen W (1979) 'The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions' p 8 in Child Development (1996) ed Violato C, Detselig Enterprises

Jones HA (16.12.02) 'What are they playing at? Financial Times

Klein N (2000). No Logo. Flamingo

Media Smart (November 2002) 'Kids Get Smart as UK Initiative is Launched'
Media Smart, London

Postman Neil (1983) The Disappearance of Childhood, W H Allan

Schloser E (2001) Fast Food Nation, Penguin

The Times: (11.1.03) 'Energy Savings as Easy as ABC' The Times, Money

Thompson A.C. (21.11.2000) 'Dot-com marketers descend on San Francisco'.
San Francisco Bay Guardian

Tomkins R (27.11.2002) 'An Advertising Folly' The Financial Times

Travis L and Violato C (1996) 'Culture, Mass Media and Youth' p 16 in Child
Development (1996) ed Violato C, Detselig Enterprises

USA Today (20.6.97) 'McDonald's wins record-setting libel case' report on
'McLibel' case

Williams Dr R, (2000) Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement,
Continuum

ed Violato C (1996), Child Development, Detselig Enterprises, 'Nelson (1753)
London, West M (1914) 'Infant Care' (US children's Bureau) in Travis L and
Violato C (1996) 'Culture, Mass Media and Youth'