The Advertising Game

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Television advertising provides children with early and frequent exposure to the marketplace. Children use various sources of information in deciding whether or not to buy a particular item or to ask their parents to buy it for them. Besides television, other information sources available to children are radio, newspapers, magazines, catalogues, parents, peers, and in-store displays. However, children's frequent exposure to television programs, and thus commercials, makes television a primary information source.

**Commercial power**

Out of a total television advertising budget of $6 billion a year, about $600 million is spent on advertising directed toward children. On a typical Saturday morning, the average young viewer may see as many as 100 commercials. Including advertising directed specifically at them, children see as many as 10,000 food and beverage commercials a year, almost two-thirds of which are for snacks, candy and breakfast foods.

While the exposure to commercials is extensive, the range of products which sellers promote directly to children over television is fairly limited. Twenty-five percent of this advertising is for candy and other sweets (cakes, cookies, fruit drinks) and another 25 percent is for cereals, many of which contain more sugar than most candies. Another 10 percent is for fast food restaurants which feature, in addition to hamburgers or fried chicken, sugared products such as soft drinks and assorted desserts. The remaining category is toys, where commercials are concentrated most heavily just before Christmas.

The following table shows the number of commercials for various types of foods (excluding fast food restaurants) on the three major television networks during weekend daytime hours for a recent period of nine months.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commercial Item</th>
<th>Three major networks</th>
<th>commercial totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cereals</td>
<td>3,832</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candy and gum</td>
<td>1,627</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cookies and crackers</td>
<td>841</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit drinks</td>
<td>582</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macaroni and spaghetti</td>
<td>208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desserts</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbonated soft drinks</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soups</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meats and poultry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk, butter, eggs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researchers found that, of the total number of commercials in this sample, roughly 43 percent were not for sugared products. Less than 2 percent of the commercials promoted a well-balanced diet including fruits, vegetables, milk or meat. Consequently, nutritionists, dentists, doctors and many parents believe that television's nutritional message to children encourages poor eating habits and tooth decay. By the age of two, one half of all American children have either gum disease or at least one decayed tooth.

Children were once considered to have little influence on product purchase decisions. Recent research, however, indicates that repeated exposure to ads increases the demands of children for toys and "junk" food while contributing to parent-child conflict.

**Fact or fiction?**

Aside from the damage caused to children's health or nutrition and to family relationships, critics of television advertising directed toward children believe that at least half of the youngsters below eight years old cannot tell the difference between TV commercials and program content. Elements of make-believe are interwoven
into almost all television programming and advertising. Preschoolers and even older children perceive time, space, distance and language differently from adults and may be unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. They are quite likely to believe that most imagery they see on television is true and may not discern the difference between commercials and regular programming. Research also indicates that children accept as fact far more of what is presented on television than most parents realize and that many of their ideas about the world beyond their homes and neighborhoods come from television programs.

Consequently, can children adequately evaluate advertising messages? Adults can normally deal with puffery and other distortions of literal truthfulness in selecting information from television commercials, but children may not be able to do so.

In a recent study, children's attitudes toward commercials were observed. Their attitudes were consistent in that they were disappointed with advertised products, skeptical toward some commercials and generally rejected the idea that commercials indicate product quality. In spite of these attitudes, about half of the children still report wanting much of what they see in commercials.

How about education?

Children frequently need assistance in distinguishing between promotional material for marketing purposes and nutrition education for health purposes. Radio and television have not yet realized their potential for nutrition education and health promotion. Better public service advertisements aired at times likely to appeal to young audiences would help to fulfill the media's responsibility to society. Programming which deals with nutrition-related issues would also be helpful.

During the late 1960s, the media played a major role in redirecting government programs to cope more efficiently with malnutrition related to poverty. Perhaps during the 1980s, this same media should play a large role in motivating and educating its young audience to combat the problems of poor nutrition and obesity which often begin in childhood and adolescence.

Did you know that?

- Ninety-eight percent of U.S. homes have at least one television set, and nearly half of them have two or more.
- Toddlers view more than 30 hours of TV programming a week.
- Children under the age of 12 average 25-28 hours of TV viewing a week.
- Saturday and Sunday morning “kidvid” accounts for only 16 percent of children's television viewing.
- The average high school graduate will have logged up to 20,000 hours of TV viewing, he will have seen 350,000 commercials.

The Teen Scene

A recent survey indicates that American teenagers (13 to 19 years) number approximately 28 million. This adolescent market is of particular importance to marketers because of their numbers, their purchasing power and their influence on family spending patterns. The formation of attitudes and interests during this period also influences the teen's consumption behavior later in life.

Teenage consumers spent approximately $30 billion on a variety of products in 1979; $5.7 billion of this was spent on clothes and $4.7 billion on entertainment. Teenagers also buy a large percentage of personal care products and sports and leisure equipment.

Besides their purchasing power, teenage consumers have great influence on adult and family purchases. Teenage girls alone prepare an average of 13 family meals per week and spend over $13 billion a year on food, more than one out of every three family food dollars.

While teenagers are not considered to be heavy television viewers, they comprised approximately 11 percent of the television audience in 1981. Television commercials of products used by teens emphasize the social significance of the product, group conformity and acceptance. Common themes are humor, fun, excitement, and gatherness.
These types of ads are considered appropriate because teenage peer groups are significant sources of influence. Adolescence is a time of psychological transition for a child from family to peer groups. Dependence on peers is substituted for earlier dependence on parents. In the process, peer values and norms become of primary importance to the teenager.

**Stereotyping and value setting**

Advertising affects all of us throughout our lives, but children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable. They are new and inexperienced consumers and are prime targets for many advertisements. While in the process of learning their values and roles, they are developing self-concepts. Early in life youngsters become sensitive to peer pressure and find it difficult to resist or even to question messages reinforced by the media.

For example, what do children and adolescents learn about sex roles from television commercials? Simply stated, they learn the stereotypes. These stereotypes have existed for a long time, and we receive these messages constantly from birth. However, no messenger is more pervasive or persuasive than advertising.

In most television commercials, women are shown as either sex objects or as aproned figures obsessed by cleanliness, spraying everything in sight. By contrast, men are generally rugged, authority figures, dominant and invulnerable. Any man found to be engaged in “women’s work” is shown as bumbling and ineffectual. Fortunately, these stereotypes are increasingly being recognized and ridiculed.

Many young people are also being affected by advertising in more subtle ways. Advertising teaches the young to be consumers, to value material things above all and to feel that happiness can be bought. In the imaginary world of TV, there are instant solutions to life’s most complex problems and products that provide fulfillment for our deepest human needs. When women are primarily shown as sex objects and men are depicted as success objects, the individual person becomes a “thing” whose value depends upon the product being consumed.

Advertisers tend to take advantage of the insecurities and anxieties of young people in the guise of offering solutions: a cigarette is shown as a symbol of independence; designer jeans represent status; or the right perfume or beer resolves doubts about femininity or masculinity. Since many anxieties are related to sexuality and intimacy, advertising offers products as the answer where sex is used to sell the product. In this way, sexual connotation and stereotypes represent the most detrimental effect on the young viewer.

**Making dollars and sense**

Commercial television consists of some 726 licensed stations, 600 of them network affiliated, whose programming and operating costs and profits are financed by the sale of broadcast time to advertisers. The three major networks sell commercial time to advertisers at a price determined by the time of day and the projected size of the national audience watching a particular show. Advertisers may pay as much as $300,000 or more for one minute of time if the expected audience size is very large.

The TV program brings together the advertiser and the largest and most saleable audience possible. Children’s TV programming is broadcast only when it provides the greatest commercial advantage over alternative programming at that particular time, (i.e., Saturday morning). Advertising aimed at children has proven extremely lucrative; 25 percent of TV industry profit comes from 7 percent of their programming which is directed toward children.

Since TV advertising pays for children’s programming, the economic structure of commercial television is not likely to change in the near future. However, many public interest groups contend that, if and when voluntary self-regulation is not effective, children should be shielded from possible harmful effects of TV advertising by direct government intervention.

On the other hand, opponents of increased governmental interference with TV advertising claim that bans on children’s advertising are unconstitutional and inhibit the free flow of information in our country. They claim that present rulings,
along with industry self-regulation, ensure truth and accuracy in children's advertising. Advertisers believe that their job is to advertise, entertain and sell, not to educate.

Citizen protest has, to a limited extent, been effective in eliminating or reducing certain practices on commercial children's television, such as eliminating fraudulent or misleading vitamin claims, reducing the number of commercials, and reducing violence levels. But children's interest groups contend that the TV industry too often does not comply with National Advertising Board guidelines on children's advertising and that voluntary self-regulation does not always work.

Setting the course

In an attempt at self-regulation, the Children's Advertising Review Unit of the National Advertising Division of the Council of Better Business Bureaus declared the following guidelines to help ensure that advertising directed to children is truthful, accurate and fair to children's perceptions:

- Advertisers should always take into account the level of knowledge, sophistication and maturity of the audience to which their message is primarily directed.
- Realizing that children are imaginative and that make-believe play constitutes an important part of the growing-up process, advertisers should exercise care not to exploit these qualities.
- Recognizing that advertising plays an important role in educating the child, information should be truthful and accurate with full recognition that the child may learn practices from advertising which can affect his or her health and well-being.
- Advertisers are urged to capitalize on the potential of advertising to influence social behavior generally regarded as positive and beneficial such as friendship, kindness, honesty, justice, generosity and respect for others.
- Although many influences affect a child's personal and social development, it remains the primary responsibility of parents to provide guidance for children. Advertisers should contribute to this parent-child relationship in a constructive manner.

To encourage better use of the Children's Unit Service by the public, the directors meet periodically with citizen's groups, parents, educators, students, and health professionals. Consumers are made aware of the Children's Advertising Guidelines and learn how to file a complaint about a particular advertisement.

You can help

The U.S. is one of only three countries in the world which permits advertising on children's programs. Accordingly, organizations such as the National PTA and ACT (Action for Children's Television) believe it wise to separate children from the marketplace until they are mature enough to deal with it. They urge consumers to take measures against commercials considered to be offensive by: writing letters to networks; joining public interest groups; communicating with the FCC, FTC and elected state and federal representatives; holding open hearings in their communities; contributing to public service counter-advertising; and supporting continued research on the impact of TV on children.

Interested in learning more?

Extension Homemaker Clubs study topics including nutrition, management, housing, textiles and human development at monthly meetings. Local members receive training and present educational programs. Over 600,000 members nationwide benefit from this association with the Land Grant College in their state. For more information, contact your county Extension office.

References


Andrea Jensen, editor; Nancy Meitus and Rod Heckaman, designer and illustrator, Agricultural Communication Service Department, Purdue University.