

BAABY

BUYBABY

All I'd ever hear from my kids was, 'I want, I want' after they watched morning TV," says 41-year-old Despina Hasapis, a mother of two. "They'd want the latest Barbie or Bratz dolls or Yu-Gi-Oh! cards." Mornings are calmer since TV before school was stopped in the Hasapis household in Ryde, Sydney. In the past year, Domenic, 14, and Cathryn, 8, have not asked for one toy.

As the consumer frenzy builds before Christmas, it's no wonder some parents have had enough. With children watching up to 15 minutes of advertising per hour, the link between TV viewing and kids wanting more stuff becomes startlingly obvious. According to Young Media Australia (YMA), children watch an average of two hours and 30 minutes of television per day and those tuning into commercial TV could be subject to a phenomenal 23,000 adverts per year. By the age of two, an infant can make a connection between television advertising and products in a store, says Patti M. Valkenburg, author of 2001 Dutch study *The Development Of A Child Into A Consumer*.

Welcome to the dizzying world of consumer childhood – junk food, "advertainment" and must-have merchandise. According to studies, a six-month-old baby can form a mental picture of a corporate logo. The more frequently an infant sees an image, the more familiar it becomes, bringing comfort and, eventually, emotional attachment.

Indeed, James U. McNeal, professor of marketing at Texas A&M University, discovered the "drool factor" back in 1993 when he realised that a seated baby will watch, repeatedly, to see where its dribble falls. On that spot, on the nappy or bib, can be found a large brightly coloured media character – Disney on Huggies or *Sesame Street* on Pampers. So, perhaps it's a no-brainer that by "about 24 months, children make their first in-store requests to parents", writes McNeal in his 1999 book, *The Kids Market: Myths And Realities*. "By age four or five, children are →

Just who's talking to our children? As Christmas spending peaks, Claire Scobie looks at the many ways the market seeks to seduce young consumers and their parents.



learning to make their own purchases.”

In America, corporations are estimated to spend about \$US20 billion (\$26 billion) a year marketing to children, the domain of mega-corporations such as Disney, Viacom, Coca-Cola. Annual conferences organised by companies such as Kid Power Xchange in America and BrandChild in Australia offer seminars by marketing directors and research analysts to toy manufacturers, retailers and advertising executives.

Kid Power, held at the Disney Yacht & Beach Club in Florida, aims to make kids “potential long-term customers for the future”. Promoted are techniques such as “surround marketing” – also known as “ad creep” – which bombards children from every angle: television, the internet, at the cinema, in comics and magazines and on food labels. Workshops range from “The impact of reaching kids all day long: strategies that work and are school approved” to how to harness “pester power”. The one-day BrandChild conference is specifically for the tween market. According to the conference’s promotion, “twens, aged seven to 14 are worth \$4 billion to the Australian economy directly and command influence over \$30 billion of spending decisions, from mobile phones to cars to what their parents ‘should’ wear.”

Compared to the US, Australia has strict rules about how children’s products are marketed and classified, laid down by the Advertising Standards Bureau. But, undeniably, America drives mainstream kid culture. As corporations partner together, the advertising web tightens. Movies intended for young audiences, such as Disney’s *The Lion*, *The Witch And The Wardrobe*, are now funded by dozens of sponsors, who are involved in aspects from plot development to toy tie-ins. Characters, from Scooby-Doo to Spider-Man, are licensed to sell biscuits and soft drinks with questionable nutritional value. These products often make more money than the film’s box-office profits.

WHAT KIDS WANT AND WHY: FISHER-PRICE INTERACTV

FOR AGES THREE TO SEVEN



- ★ Children use a touch screen that combines with a video game that plugs into the television. InteracTV uses DVDs and cards inserted into the screen display to ask children up to 100 learning questions.
- ★ The multi-modal system stimulates all the senses, which appeals to preschoolers’ urge to touch and feel.
- ★ Popular characters such as Dora the Explorer and Elmo from *Sesame Street* appeal to a young child’s need for familiarity and attachment to brightly coloured characters and creatures.
- ★ It improves language skills as the games offer lots to do and simple explanations.
- ★ “Kids in this age seem to be attracted to positive expressions such as big smiles and happy eyes,” says branding expert Martin Lindstrom.
- ★ InteracTV is \$110, from www.dstore.com.au.

They also cost parents. A 2005-06 survey by YMA of more than 900 parents of preschoolers revealed that 87.2 per cent said their children had asked to buy food with pictures of TV or movie characters on the packaging. The majority of parents called upon food companies to stop tactics such as movie tie-ins. “Marketing and advertising are bypassing the adult and going straight to the child,” says YMA president Jane Roberts. “As the gatekeepers for a child’s wellbeing, we’re taken out of that loop.”

But Neer Korn, director of research company Heartbeat Trends, says, “Children are becoming more sophisticated consumers. From age eight or nine, they can deconstruct adverts far more than adults can. Smart marketeers have to stay ahead.”

So, how much are children being manipulated? Critics point to the child psychologists employed by toy manufacturers as an example of the insidious commercialisation of childhood. There seem to be no limits on where and how advertisers can reach children, according to accounts in *Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child And The New Consumer Culture* by US sociologist Juliet Schor. “Researchers that I interviewed,” Schor writes, “recounted their [video]taping sessions in kids’ bedrooms, playing with toys or grooming... A ritual as private as bath time has become familiar territory as marketers observe children taking baths and showers to come up with strategies to sell new health and beauty products.”

Some marketing research, however, is clearly put to a good use. American toy company Leapfrog, manufacturer of child laptop LeapPad, employs 300 teachers and child psychologists. Every new toy is assessed to see if it reflects “the skill set and what drives a child at a particular age”, says Belinda Payne, general manager of marketing at Funtastic, a Melbourne-based distributor of children’s products. “So Leapfrog will marry their packaging, functions and colours to the cognitive skills of a preschooler.”

Child psychologists give the toy a reality check, says Payne. “They work out what sounds they would know and how they use a crayon. Are they at the age when they can use a computer? They build all of this subtly into the product to make it educational and fun. Over the past decade, toys have become technologically driven. They need to have a high level of entertainment value as children get bored quickly.”

“What you call ‘surround advertising’ is part of visual culture, the literacy for the kids of today,” says Professor Nicola Yelland, head of school and early childhood education at Melbourne’s RMIT University and editor of the *Changing Images Of Early Childhood* series. “I don’t see tie-ins as a bad thing. From the point of view of learning, it is multi-modal. Take [Sesame Street’s] Elmo toys: you have that on →



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television, in print and electronic books, offering visual, textual, kinesthetic and print literacy. That is positive but you have to be discriminating.”

Children will also “tune out of a product that has a character whose traits don’t gibe with their stage of life”, says Dr Dan Acuff, co-author of *What Kids Buy And Why*. Between ages six and eight, archetypes feature strongly. “Storytelling appeals to kids at this age,” agrees branding guru Martin Lindstrom, whose clients include Disney, Mars, Lego and Kellogg’s. “From the age of eight, kids love to discover. Colours are still important but contrasts don’t have to be as dramatic. The concept of ‘mini’ is now essential: small is cute for girls; big is awesome for boys.”

Lindstrom, whose book *BrandChild* is based on a 2002 global survey of several thousand children from 15 countries (and which prompted the conference of the same name), believes that children from the age of eight “expect to be spoken to as if they were an adult”. Eight- to 10-year-olds no longer role-play; they want to be a character, hence the popularity of celebrities or sporting superheroes. From the age of seven, children want to be cool and until around the age of 12, they’re in the conformity stage when fitting in with their peer group is most important.

As children become more driven to collect related groups of things, trading cards such as Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh! become wildly popular, especially among boys. Marketing professionals encourage this developmental urge with the “free” sets of toys from

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fast-food outlets or in cereal packets, ensuring repeat purchases. “The toy dictates where my kids want to go – McDonald’s, Red Rooster or Hungry Jacks,” says one father, who preferred not to be named. “They’re not interested in the food without the toy. It’s relentless. There’s always the next thing.”

The collectable toys have cool currency in schools, indicated by the number of clips – each representing a fast-food meal – hanging off a school bag. Research from the University of Manchester in the UK suggests that marketing increases competition between children. Dr Joe Tucci, CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation says parents, “want to give things that make their children happy but the marketing is so intense that they can’t say no.”

Kali Wendorf, 42, editor of *Kindred Magazine*, has strict rules in her home in Mullumbimby, in northern NSW. Her children, Sahaja, 8, and Arun, 11, are allowed only two-and-a-half hours of screen time –

DVDs, cinema and computer – per week and no television because of the advertising. “I’m flexible,” she says. “In Arun’s school culture, there’s pressure to be good at PlayStation so I have to weigh the impact of that media against him being left out by his peers. I let him go over to friends’ houses who have PlayStation.”

In response to skyrocketing childhood obesity rates, the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) announced last month a new code for food and beverages, which, says executive director Collin Segelov, “will spread to other areas in advertising”. This means that traditional and new media are subject to the same stringent standards. But cyberspace is not easily policed. As the internet is interactive, lulling the user into a “flow state”, children are more vulnerable to subliminal messages.

Martin Lindstrom believes the web is fast becoming the primary media, followed by games. “The majority of activities are viral mails – cool, fun and edgy emails

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WHAT KIDS WANT AND WHY: TAMAGOTCHI VERSION 3 VIRTUAL PET

FOR AGES FIVE TO 12



- ★ With a password and the click of a mouse, the child can enter TamaTown, talk to friends and earn Gotchi points to spend in this online “shopping wonderland”.
- ★ This virtual pet taps into a child’s urge to nurture.
- ★ Tamagotchi 3 is interactive, which Belinda Payne, of Melbourne toy distributor Funtastic, says is what children want – “either between the toy and child or child and internet”.
- ★ It appeals to the drive “to be part of a community and instills a sense of belonging,” says RMIT University’s Nicola Yelland.
- ★ It fulfils the child’s need to communicate, socialise and collect things.
- ★ Since February, it has been the best-selling toy in Australia. Generation 4 will be launched next year. Version 3 retails at about \$27.

sent between children. This is combined with mobile phone marketing, or ‘mBranding’, which is appearing fast and crossing several channels. For kids, there’s no difference from being online to offline.”

“Advergaming”, where brands meld into video games, and “edutainment”, which combines product promotion and educational activities, focus less on purchasing and more on building nascent brand

loyalty. Food company websites will often have a children’s play area with quizzes and games that incorporate logos and favourite cartoon characters.

Product placement is emerging in computer games. “It’s very difficult to do on children’s TV,” says Belinda Payne. “You can only do it when it’s a promotion or competition; otherwise it’s seen as deceptive.” Collin Segelov argues that advertisers are unfairly blamed

and “scientifically, advertising is only capable of increasing awareness and trial of a product, not in selling it.” He points to the clause in the latest AANA code that will “banish pester power” as adverts “must not be designed to request parents or guardians to buy specific products for children”.

According to US campaign group Commercial Alert, in 2002, children aged four to 12 influenced some \$US565 billion (\$725 billion) of their parents’ spending each year. So, how effective is such a clause when “children are identified as having a major say in how families spend money – on the car, food, gadgets”? asks the YMA’s Jane Roberts. “I’ve seen a car advert in a boys’ magazine, holiday adverts in a girls’ mag.”

Juliet Schor argues the “junk culture” surrounding children makes them materialistic and sick – with afflictions from type-2 diabetes to unhappiness. While moral crusaders lambaste the death of childhood, advertising agencies have created a special term: KGOY, or “kids getting older younger”.

“Ethics is one of the most essential topics for me when working with companies,” says Lindstrom. “That’s why I involve parents, ethics groups, kids and teachers to evaluate all work we do, ensuring that everyone feels comfortable about it.” He adds, “We cannot and should not explore kids’ naive way of being. As I always say to my clients, ‘If we abuse kids today, your brand won’t be around tomorrow.” ●

For more information about children and advertising, log on to www.youngmedia.org.au or www.MartinLindstrom.com.

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