

What do youth marketers think about selling to kids?

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This article presents the conclusions of Harris Interactive's landmark poll of youth marketers. John Geraci outlines the advertising industry's own views on such important topics as ethical issues inherent in selling to children and the industry's opinion on its role regarding issues such as nutrition and obesity in children, advertising in schools, and violent content in the media.

THE YOUTH MARKETING industry's practices are coming under increased scrutiny by the media, academics, and government. Issues such as increased commercialism directed towards children, online privacy, marketing in schools, the content of children's media and advertising, and childhood obesity have become part of an international discourse. There has been a lot of information and misinformation in the public debate regarding these issues. One voice that has not been documented is the youth marketing industry itself – a point of view that is critical to understand and fundamental to making positive progress on these important issues.

This poll provides an understanding of issues that relate to moral and ethical standards in youth marketing from the viewpoints of those working in youth fields. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to provide this point of view. The issues this study pursued are as consequential as they are complex, and the youth marketing industry is searching for its role and responsibility.

Method

This poll was undertaken by Harris Interactive in conjunction with the Kid Power Xchange. As two organisations that serve the needs of clients in the youth marketing industry, we were interested in gaining a better understanding as to how the industry views itself. An online method was chosen because of its ability to protect the

anonymity of respondents and to provide an atmosphere where respondents could provide candid answers to questions on potentially sensitive topics. The authors of this poll considered its objectivity to be of paramount importance. Toward that end, it was self-funded, reviewed by individuals not connected with the youth industry for fairness and balance, and undertaken with no strong editorial viewpoint regarding the findings.

This study was completed as an online interview in February 2004. The interview averaged 30 minutes. In total 878 interviews were completed. Some questions are based on sample sizes less than 878 due to skip patterns and suspended interviews. Respondents were recruited for participation from Harris Interactive and Kid Power newsletter distribution lists – lists that contain a broad representation of individuals working in organisations that are concerned with youth. Respondents were classified into the following groups for analysis:

- **Youth marketing (33% of the sample).** Those working in companies that market products or services to young consumers.
- **Advertising/PR (22% of the sample).** Those working in agencies that serve clients who seek to target youth.
- **Media (18% of the sample).** Those working in media organisations that reach young audiences.

- **Non-profit organisations (15% of the sample).** Those working for foundations, associations, or other non-profits whose mission centres on youth.
- **Market research (13% of the sample).** Those who work at market research organisations and who have clients that study youth.
- **Educational institutions (12% of the sample).** Those who work in educational institutions, either K-12 or higher education. These consist primarily of college administrators responsible for marketing their institution to prospective students and academic researchers who study children's issues.

Characteristics of those in youth-oriented careers

Those working in youth fields are highly educated (92% have a four-year degree or more) but few (18%) have specific academic training in working with children. Those working in youth fields are disproportionately female (63%), the average age of respondents was 39, and 57% have children of their own. Most didn't actively choose to work in occupations that relate to youth – two-thirds (66%) tell us they came to work in youth fields purely by chance. Only about a third actively pursued their current field.

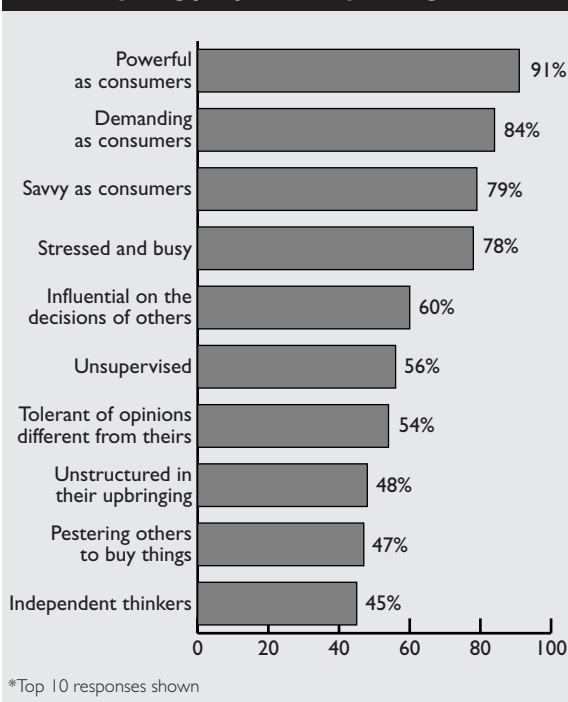
Those working in youth fields can be described as 'moderately' happy with their employment, with those working for academic institutions or non-profit organisations being the most satisfied with their job. All types of employees consider their own job satisfaction to be higher than that of their co-workers. They also report being happier in their jobs than they perceive others working in youth-related fields, and others working in non-youth-related fields to be.

Viewpoints towards the current youth generation

In an open-ended question, respondents told us that the current youth generation is technically advanced, smart and savvy, and very busy and stressed (Figure 1). The youth industry was far more likely to respond with *positive* descriptors of the current youth generation than *negative* descriptors. They were also likely to respond with descriptors that characterise today's youth as *consumers*, more than as children.

It is often said that Generation Y contains the smartest and best-educated group of consumers in history. Respondents agree: they see today's youth as more powerful, demanding, and savvy

Figure 1 Percentage saying word/phrase describes today's youth generation more than young people 10–15 years ago*



consumers than previous generations. At the same time, they characterise young people as disconnected from world events, disrespectful of authority and rules, not nurtured by adults, and as less religious than past generations. The perception is that young people have become powerful and smart, but also that something important has been lost along the way.

In a related Harris Interactive study, teenagers describe themselves as a more disaffected group than the youth industry sees them. Where the industry described the generation in terms of their power as consumers, teenagers themselves provided more emotional descriptors – stressed, busy, unsupervised, depressed, angry, and rebellious. The youth industry paints a more sanguine picture of today's youth than youth themselves construct.

Even though positive towards the current youth generation, members of the industry do, on the whole, feel that it is a 'worse' time to be a kid than it was when they were young. There is a bit of a nostalgic effect in play – the older the respondent, the rosier the childhood they recall. Generations tend to pride themselves on constructing a better world for subsequent generations, and this may be the first time in history where we sense some concern that the world may not be a better place for youth. That said, those working in youth fields display a great deal of confidence that the current youth generation will leave a positive legacy for others – particularly in terms of race relations and the environment.

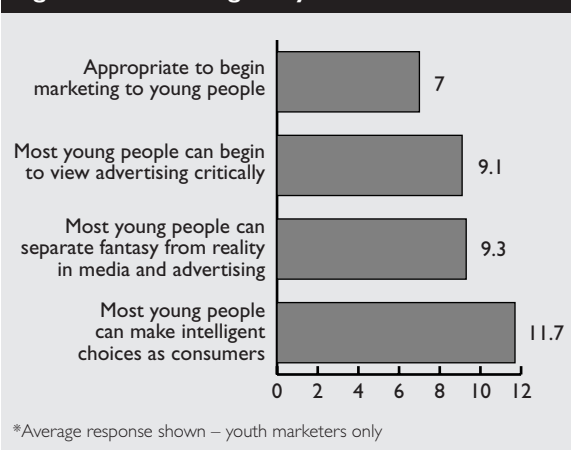
Young people as consumers

Those working in youth fields tend to define the generation as a consumer group. Youth marketers, more so than the other types of respondents, tend to feel that this group comes of age as consumers younger than others.

On average, those working in companies that market products and services to young consumers feel that it is appropriate to begin advertising to children at age 7. This is more than two years before they feel young people can view advertising critically (age 9.1), or when they feel young people can effectively separate fantasy from reality in media and advertising (age 9.3). A stark finding of this project is that those working in youth marketing feel it is appropriate to advertise to children almost five years before they feel that young people can make intelligent choices as consumers (age 11.7). (See Figure 2.) There is a sense of urgency to reach them young, so that they will be familiar with a brand when they do reach an age where they make or influence purchase decisions.

There is a consensus among those working in youth-related fields that young people are marketed to in ways they don't even notice. Most feel that companies put pressure on children to pester their parents to buy things and that companies pressure kids to grow up faster than they should. Most also feel that advertising to children begins at too young an age and that there is

Figure 2 At what age do you feel...?*



too much advertising and marketing directed towards children. The concern towards increased commercialism aimed at the young is there; the restraint to stop contributing to this concern is not.

Views toward ethics in the youth marketing industry

Those working in youth fields, on the whole, feel that the ethical and moral standards of the youth marketing industry is on a par with the standards of other industries. That said, they do feel that ethical standards in youth marketing are not being maintained at as high a level as they have been in the past. Those working in media, advertising, public relations, and in youth marketing are far more comfortable with the industry's ethical standards than those working in non-profits, market research, or for academic institutions.

Role models

In an open-ended question, Nickelodeon, Disney, Nike and MTV were most commonly considered as being role models for youth marketers. An organisation was characterised as a role model because of its standards of ethics, its ability to create a deep connection with youth, and its concern for the well-being of children. The financial success of the business was *not* what defined a role-model firm – a role model was defined mostly by its sense of ethics. Disney in particular was seen as maintaining high ethical and moral standards.

The ethical standards of their own organisation

Although somewhat critical of the youth field as a whole, respondents were positive towards their

own organisation's ethical standards. Two-thirds (67%) feel their organisation has higher moral/ethical standards than other youth-related organisations.

Respondents also felt that their management's sense of ethics is comparable to their own. Most felt that ethical issues inherent in youth marketing can and are discussed openly, were comfortable expressing their views, and report that they are not placed in situations where their personal sense of ethics have been compromised. They tell us that their organisation treats young people and parents with respect, and they are proud of how their employer treats young people. A full 78% feel their organisation plays a positive role in the lives of children and 74% feel the positives their organisation does for children far outweigh any negatives.

Further, few respondents felt that the desire for business or career success gets in the way of acting ethically in their organisation. Study results show that those working in youth fields are comfortable and supportive of their organisation's practices.

Views towards rating systems

Most respondents concurred that there are shows and movies that young people are likely to watch which contain inappropriate violent and sexual content. The youth field is split as to whether violence in media translates into violent behaviour in children.

The youth industry does seem to feel that some sort of protection for content is necessary: just 30% felt that today's children are well-equipped to deal with the current media and advertising environment. Just 28% felt that the current ratings systems in place are effective. Moreover, just 24% felt the industry is policing

itself sufficiently in terms of advertising appropriately to children.

Respondents were critical of all ratings systems, and felt that ratings on video games, TV shows, and music CDs were less effective than ratings on movies or movie rentals.

Those in the youth field also feel that online privacy needs to be protected for children. Four out of five (80%) agree that there should be laws about how companies use information they collect from young people. While 37% were not familiar with the COPPA regulation, those who were aware were apt to say it has been effective in making the cyberworld a better place for children.

Marketing in schools

The subject of marketing in school environments tends to bring forth strong reactions. On the whole, reaching young people during school time was *not* seen as important to those working in youth fields. Even among youth marketers specifically, just 16% felt it was extremely or

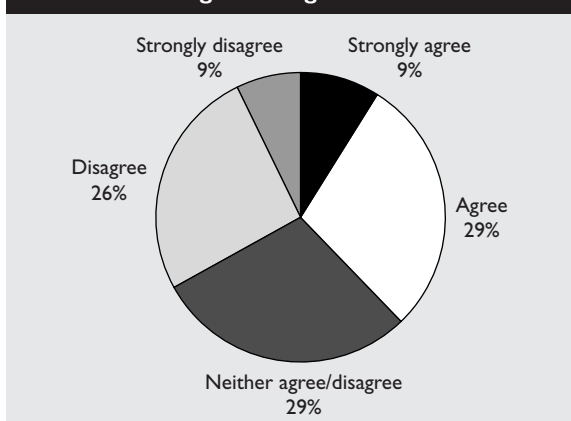
very important to reach young people in school. This respondent base was split as to whether in-school marketing creates more benefits or disbenefits (Figure 3).

That said, some ways of reaching young people in schools are seen as more appropriate than others. Sponsoring school sports competitions, providing loyalty programmes that reward schools for gathering product labels, purchasing sports equipment with brand names on them, and advertising in school newspapers were all seen as highly appropriate tactics to reach children in schools.

Less appropriate tactics included advertising on school buses, advertising on schoolbook covers, and integrating brands into instructional support material and lessons. Respondents were split as to the appropriateness of book fairs and school vending machine contracts.

Three in four respondents (74%) agreed that we will see increased advertising in schools in the future. Although those working in youth fields do say that school marketing has to be done thoughtfully, they also feel that advertising in schools helps provide schools with needed funds and equipment and keeps many important school programmes from being cut.

Figure 3 The benefits that schools receive from in-school marketing programmes far outweigh the negatives

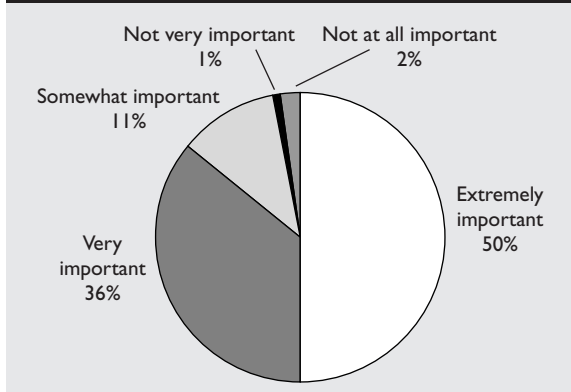


Overweight and obese youth

There is a high level of awareness among those working in youth fields regarding issues of childhood obesity and nutrition. Half (50%) agree that the issue of overweight youth is an extremely important public health concern, and most also feel that the media has *not* blown the issue out of proportion (Figure 4).

Youth marketers and advertisers overstate the issue – they tend to say that more than twice as many young people are overweight than the Centers for Disease Control report. In addition,

Figure 4 How important is the issue of overweight youth as a public health concern?



respondents agree that improved nutrition, as well as physical activity, will be needed to solve this problem.

Further, those working in youth fields do not feel that kids themselves can judge what is healthy and nutritious. While parents must play an important role, our respondents also feel that food and restaurant companies play an important role. In addition, those working in youth fields are not convinced that food companies are being responsible in how they are addressing issues of childhood obesity, or that the food industry is taking positive steps to deal with this issue. Even though respondents seem negative towards the food industry's efforts, they are more likely to place the blame for the obesity issue on parents rather than companies. Although critical of the industry as a whole, our respondents feel that their own organization contributes positively to the issue of overweight children.

What does the future hold? Those working in youth fields foresee an increase in healthy alternatives being offered to parents and children, and that consumers will react positively to these alternatives. About two in three respondents (66%)

agree that there will be increased regulation of the food and beverage industry in the future.

Conclusions

The study presents a number of provocative findings. Study results show that those working in youth fields are comfortable and supportive of their organisation's practices. However, have those working in this field become *too* comfortable? Reviewing the results, it became clear that youth marketers are quick to criticise the industry as a whole, but reticent to question the ethics of their own organisation. This is a natural tendency, but fosters inaction across the industry in general.

Ethics can be a matter of intention and not necessarily results. Those within the industry see ideas discarded because they may not be suitable for young consumers even though these ideas may have great commercial value. They see ad campaigns and products modified at great expense to improve their appropriateness. They spend considerable resources on market research to be sure their products have an educational value for youth and are acceptable to parents. Many of the most ethical practices in the industry take place behind the office walls, and are not seen by the media, the public, or politicians.

Issues that are perceived as resulting from increased commercialism directed towards youth in effect have multiple causes and owners. The childhood obesity issue is a good example. The issue of overweight youth is a serious public health concern, yet has not come about overnight or from one overriding cause. Dozens of contributing changes have happened slowly, over a period of time. These changes have resulted in a crisis that, according to some observers, has created the first generation of

children whose life expectancy may be lower than that of their parents.

Our poll results show that youth marketers feel that marketers have played a role in some of these issues, but that so have many other players. This poll reveals that youth marketers feel that these issues also come down to personal responsibility and parental influences.

This is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless, the industry has to find a winning strategy for

marketing to youth, or it risks vilification. Public policy debates aren't about complexity. Rather, they are about distilling an issue down to simple causes, and advocating simplistic solutions. There is an activist adage that 'if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.' The youth industry will be seen as being a cause of many of these issues if it doesn't start taking more active steps to be part of the solution.

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