Marketing and media are two words that go hand in hand. In today's increasingly commercialized world, it is virtually impossible to escape the marketing that pervades all types of electronic media. Even adults, who are capable of recognizing marketers’ attempts to manipulate them, often have a difficult time resisting the temptations presented so appealingly in advertisements. In the case of children, who often don’t recognize the blatant attempts of marketers to influence their purchasing behavior, there is great cause for concern about the prevalence of the marketing embedded within media content targeted specifically to this young audience.

In *The Future of Children* volume “Children and Electronic Media,” experts highlight important issues related to the prevalence of media in children's lives, including the potential dangers associated with marketing to children. As noted in this issue, the affluence of today's children and adolescents has made them a prime target for marketers. Children have influence over the spending of billions of dollars each year. In 2002, American children ages four to twelve spent $30 billion. In 2003, American twelve-to seventeen-year-olds spent $112.5 billion, with 33 million U.S. teens aged twelve to nineteen each spending about $103 a week. These figures are not lost on marketers. In 2004, total U.S. marketing expenditures were estimated at some $15 billion to target products to children.

Television remains the most prominent platform for advertising to children, with children viewing approximately 40,000 advertisements per year on television. The traditional techniques used on TV include: repetition, branded characters, catchy and interesting production features (action and movement, rapid pacing, sound effects, loud music), celebrity endorsements, and free merchandise to be awarded with the purchase of a product. Not surprisingly, researchers found that the majority of all advertisements on network and cable television were for sugar-coated cereals, sugared drinks, and snacks and fast foods. Although the implementation of the Children’s Television Act (CTA) by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) now limits advertisements on children’s commercial television stations to 10.5 minutes an hour on weekends and 12 minutes an hour on weekdays, these limits are frequently violated. For instance, one in four of the 900 U.S. commercial television stations showed more commercial material than allowed from 1992 through 1994, and in 2004, the SCC levied fines against Viacom and Disney for showing more advertising material than legally allowed.

Traditional television commercials, however, are perhaps not the greatest cause for concern in terms of marketing to children. With the creation of new media platforms has also come the creation of new strategies for marketing to children. One technique, called stealth advertising, is based on the theory that advertising is most effective when consumers don’t recognize it as advertising. Taking advantage of the fact that online marketing to children is far less regulated than television, advertisers use websites and
interactive online games as platforms for marketing products to children. These ads are embedded in the Internet games and programs, thereby exposing unwitting children to a large variety of products. Similarly, marketers have targeted teens by using e-mail and online chat strategies to attract youthful consumers to certain products, often using discounts and freebies as enticements to purchase the products promoted. Finally, marketers have also developed tracking software and spyware in order to create extensive files about children's individual preferences for certain products. A program called RealJukebox, for instance, allowed users to transfer music from the Web and CDs to their PCs and surreptitiously sent information back to RealNetworks about the kind of music the person liked.

How do these marketing attempts affect children’s behavior? Research related to television marketing suggests that marketing is successful in getting kids to want to buy products—not necessarily a beneficial outcome. One study involving three-to eleven-year-old children, found that children who were exposed to more overall advertisements at home and who were most attentive to advertisements in the laboratory setting made the most requests for the advertised products. At the same time, a comprehensive review of the literature on food advertising by a panel charged by Congress to investigate the role of marketing and advertising in childhood obesity concluded that television food advertisements affect children’s food preferences, food requests, and short-term eating patterns.

Less research is available for the newer forms of Internet marketing. Moreover, given the fact that the Internet enjoys more First Amendment protection than broadcast television, less regulation exists to protect children from potential manipulation. Researcher Sandra Calvert recommends the development of regulations for online platforms that are consistent with traditional television and film guidelines, including separation of commercial content from program content. Parents and child advocacy organizations can also fill in the gap by putting pressure on companies to self-regulate. For example, when FaceBook informed users about friends’ recent purchases, an outcry by parents and advocates led the website to stop the practice, at least for the time being. When Webkinz, a popular site geared toward younger elementary school children, started advertising movies and promoting movie tie-in products, similar protests caused the site to remove the advertisements. Likewise, pressure on food companies led eleven major food and drink companies to agree to stop advertising unhealthful products to children under age twelve, and the children’s television network Nickelodeon followed suit and agreed to keep their characters from appearing on most junk food packaging.

As new technologies and marketing strategies continue to emerge, it seems necessary for adults to be aware of marketers wishing to exploit children’s purchasing power and to remain vigilant in protecting children’s best interests.

Specific Chapters Referenced Include:


For more information on this topic, please contact the issue editors of this volume: Jeanne Brooks-Gunn brooks-gunn@columbia.edu or Elisabeth Donahue edonahue@princeton.edu.