

Common Sense on Selling to Kids

Seeing through the hype

Commercials are nothing new. We all grew up with them and can probably sing a dozen or more jingles. What is new is how advertisers have adapted to children's media, using sneaky methods that don't look like ads. Product placement, online promotions, viral videos, cell-phone updates — even Twitter and Facebook are all reaching kids directly. And with location-based apps like Foursquare, marketers can determine exactly where your kid hangs out and shops to target ads based on your kid's location.

Some facts

Teens in the United States spend around \$160 billion a year (*CBS News, 2007*).

Children (up to age 11) spend around \$18 billion a year (*CBS News, 2007*).

Preteens (8- to 12-year-olds) "heavily influence" more than \$30 billion in other spending by parents, and "80 percent of all global brands now deploy a 'tween strategy'" (*CBS News, 2007*).

Children (under age 12) and teens influence more than \$130-670 billion of parental purchases a year (*CBS News, 2007*).

Preteens spend 82% of their money on video games, music, movies, books, videos/DVDs, and online worlds (*C&R Research, 2010*).

What is advertising to kids?

Kids are bombarded with advertising messages everywhere they turn. In addition to the traditional TV, print, and radio ads, as well as product placements in TV shows and movies, interactive ads blaze throughout online and gaming worlds. Sponsorships, contests, and product endorsements appear regularly. Ads come to our kids disguised as "free" cell phone ring tones, surveys, and pass-along games and quizzes that capture email addresses when kids respond or forward the pass-alongs to one another. (This is called viral marketing.) And every time a kid puts on a T-shirt or a hoodie with someone's brand on it, he becomes a walking ad for that company.

Why it matters

Advertisers know that the earlier a kid learns about a brand, the more likely she will be to buy it later (or beg her parents to buy it). And kids under 7 can't tell the difference between advertising and entertainment. Many ads are for junk food, and one out of three kids in this country are at risk for obesity. Ads that target appearance can cause feelings of insecurity and body image issues.

Children are so impressionable that a number of organizations, including the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, have called for heavy restrictions on advertising to children.

Wanting more and more material things can cause anxiety, depression, and anger. It can make kids judge their self-worth by what they own. Helping kids understand how advertising works can help protect them from being exploited.

Parent tips for preschool kids

- » **Keep your children away from advertising as much as possible.** Let them watch commercial-free TV or use a DVR to skip through ads. And those sugar cereal Web sites with the free fun games? They are a ploy to get kids to buy more cereal.
- » **Teach kids the difference between a TV program and a commercial.** Point out commercials and use a timer to show your children when a commercial begins and ends. Ask questions to help your kids recognize that the purpose of the commercial is to sell them a product. For example, ask, “What is the commercial selling?”

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Help kids identify other types of advertising messages.** Watch TV or play a video game with your children and find the products and logos used as props or part of the storyline. Have a conversation about how the messages try to get kids to buy products.
- » **Tell your kids never to click on an ad or fill out a form without your permission.** Contests and promotions are often devious ways for companies to get emails and phone numbers.
- » **Start a conversation.** Ask your children if they know who created a particular ad and what words, images, or sounds were used to attract their attention. How did they feel after seeing the ad?
- » **Explain “tricks” that advertisers use in commercials.** For example, advertisers often use Vaseline to make hamburgers look juicy. Talk with your children about the true purpose behind promotions, downloads, and links from games, websites, and cell phones. Kids need to know that no matter how clever the gimmicks or games, they’re all ads.
- » **Teach your children about the popular techniques ad-makers use,** such as testimonials from celebrities — or everyday people. This will help your kids recognize how they’re being influenced.

Parent tips for middle and high school kids

- » **Demystify brands.** Brands sell images to kids as much as they sell products. Companies are smart about making brands seem so cool that every kid will want the products. Help your kids to know that they are much more than what they own.
- » **Talk to kids about alcohol advertising.** Help keep your children away from alcohol-branded merchandise. Studies show that alcohol messages to kids are very effective. In fact, the more kids see ads, the more likely they are to drink.
- » **Mobile phones are for communicating, not for contests.** Some advertisers get kids to trade personal information for freebies — soda, candy, etc. Not a good trade; the drink lasts a moment and the cell number is with advertisers forever.
- » **Resisting peer pressure.** Many ads will count on the fact that kids are especially sensitive to peer pressure. Remind your children that advertisers are counting on this vulnerability to sell things.
- » **What is left out?** Ask your children, “What might the advertiser be leaving out of the commercial and why?” For example, most food ads are not designed to tell us nutritional values. Encourage your kids to look elsewhere for missing information.

Common Sense Media, an independent nonprofit, is dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a world of media and technology.