Maintaining brand relevance with kids

Ted Mininni, Design Force Inc., explains how to make your brand connect with Generation Y

Whether companies are targeting their products or services to various kids’ demographics, this much is certain: there’s a lot more to marketing to kids today than trying to keep brands relevant, ‘hip and cool’. Today’s kids want two things from the corporate brands that are marketed to them: brands that are interactive, and brands that are instant.

Today’s kids were born using technology. Television and the internet have sped the world up, and created substantial challenges for marketers. Kids aren’t talking or writing to their friends any more; they’re instant messaging them on a computer or on a cell phone. Their friends aren’t necessarily the kids next door – they might be anywhere in the world. The Y generation is globally wired and by the time they hit the tween stage, they regularly chat with kids in the neighbourhood as well as from around the world. They play online games, or share music with friends in other countries and on other continents. If marketers thought that the MTV generation wanted things fast, it’s a safe bet that business hasn’t seen anything yet! The iPod generation wants everything right here and right now.

In the United States, kids are brand-conscious at an early age. According to James U. McNeal, author of The Kids Market: Myths and Realities, most children recognise the key attributes of product packaging, such as colour and shape, and at least 200 logos by the time they enter school; 50% of kids aged five are asking for specific brands by name.

Children wield substantial influence over family purchases. It has become more and more clear that marketers must target and engage kids as fully as they target their mums and other ‘gatekeepers’. For young children, obviously brands must be ‘kid accepted and mum approved’. As kids grow older, they generally approve the products and seek mum’s acceptance! Industry statistics indicate that 67% of family car purchases are influenced by children and 65% of ready-to-wear brands are purchased by parents in the same fashion. These statistics do not only apply to kids in the US. Their peers across the globe, from Europe to Asia, are wielding the same level of influence. These revelations make it apparent that brand managers and marketers must balance their initiatives in order to reach both these segments – at the same time – with the proper message.

Marketers take note

As is the case with their parents, today’s kids are too savvy and sophisticated to allow marketers to talk down to them. Successful marketers make the assumption that the kids’ market is sophisticated and precocious. Yet, with all of the tectonic sociological shifts we’ve experienced in recent years, kids have really remained the same in some pretty significant ways. They respond to honesty in marketing. They expect the brand promise to deliver. Kids can detect anything phoney from light years away. In extensive research sponsored
by Millward Brown in 2003, the Brandchild survey was conducted into kids’ insights about brands. It was very revealing: authenticity, points of differentiation, freshness and multi-channel brand messaging illicit a strong and favourable response. Engaging this demographic with fun, fantasy and a bit of humour keep brands fresh and alive – yet the core brand message must be retained. Martin Lindstrom’s book by the same title, Brandchild, details these findings and more, in surveys that encompassed thousands of kids from more than 70 urban centres and 15 countries in North and South America, Europe and Asia.

Kids deserve the highest ethical standards that can be delivered as corporate marketing strategies are formulated. Creating leading brands and brand loyalty for a new generation of consumers depends upon this. In fact, kids who become emotionally involved with brands develop more than brand loyalty; they develop brand passions. By the time kids get to the tween stage, Brandchild’s research shows that they want to interact with, shape and make brands their own. Our own firm’s research bears these findings out. Marketers of children’s products and services have the added responsibility to make certain that their marketing and branding initiatives have a positive impact on kids and their lives.

Uncovering experiential brand drivers

Companies that are targeting kids’ demographics with their products, services or entertainment properties need to come to terms with the fact that marketing to Generation Y is about a whole lot more than trying to keep their brands relevant. In this day and age of high-speed computer access, and interactive cell phones, kids want and expect brands that are also interactive, and brands that deliver instantaneously. While Generation Y kids are sceptical of many brands, the companies that really take the time to focus on this demographic and delve deeply into their unique culture, find that their efforts pay strong dividends. By understanding the factors that motivate brand loyalty and purchases in kids, savvy marketers can begin to create a life-long relationship with the next, viable generation of consumers.

As we all know, strong brands influence consumer purchasing decisions every day. They are rewarded by consumer loyalty and command premium prices. One of the real areas of success for marketers who tap into that hard-to-reach Generation Y segment, is that strong brands create ‘brand endorsement’. When kids take ownership – on an emotional level – of a strong brand, they endorse it to all of their friends. The buzz that this creates drives increased sales and market share.

The youngest segment of the Generation Y demographic – the 77 million Americans born between 1977 and 1997 – connects with brands on a profoundly emotional level. The brands they endorse help ‘support’ how they define themselves and their lifestyles – that perceived, all-important self-expression – and communicate that message to their friends and peers. Research shows that Generation Y kids respond to brands on an emotional level, rather than responding to tangible or functional brand attributes. In fact, from our own design firm’s research, we know that kids and adults will form brand loyalties if they become emotionally connected to brands for kids, this is a most potent motivating factor when it comes to making purchasing decisions. As is
feeling gratified by those purchases. There is a research process that our firm goes through in the pre-design phase, to uncover the brand drivers and unlock what we call the ‘Enjoyment Assets’ of the brand. Communications used in packaging, for example, that extend the Enjoyment Assets of the brand help create positive, memorable experiences for consumers of any age. And when it comes to kids, this can be even more significant than it is for adults.

As the choice is made to brand and market products and services with truthful communications and the highest ethical standards, the proper scenario will be in place to ‘own’ brand categories and to create true brand heritage with this generation of consumers. As I stated earlier in this article: when kids in this demographic group become emotionally involved with brands, they develop brand passions.

**Brand relationships**

Developing meaningful relationships with kids gives brand managers and marketers a tremendous opportunity to build brand loyalty for the long haul. It is crucial that brands position themselves as powerful tools that satisfy core emotional needs for kids – perceived benefits, such as appearing cool and self-determined, exercising personal freedom and control over their own choices score high on kids’ lists. Smart brand managers and marketers identify the specific drivers that build brand loyalty early in kids – remembering that their emotional needs are more important than any other brand attributes.

Kids need to appear cool, in charge of their own destinies, able to have the freedom to express their perceived individuality, and in control of their own choices. Whether kids are in the position to make their own purchases, or influence their parents’ purchase decisions, brands that stand for the specific values that are enumerated here will be much more successful than the ones that deliver the usual benefits and features.

When it comes to kids’ products and services, brand managers also need to take a critical look at the partnerships they form as they seek to co-brand. While this is a hot trend, that shows no signs of abating, some crucial questions must be asked. Some of the most important are: ‘Do the two brands that are seeking this “marriage” complement each other in a distinctive way?’, ‘Are they both strong on their own, and do they provide increased benefits or perceptive value to the consumer?’ If, by merging two brands, management can truly say that consumers will benefit, that the brands will enjoy greater competitive advantage and leadership in their respective categories, then the co-branding venture will be a win-win situation. If the temptation to co-brand comes from a need to refresh a stagnating brand’s image or is seen as a response to increased competition, co-branding may do much more harm than good.

It takes time and hard work to build a successful brand – it’s also easier to stray from the key attributes and image that built that brand, causing confusion among consumers – and to utterly and irrevocably destroy it. And remember this: kids know immediately whether a co-branding alliance is meaningful and ‘true’, or not. They can smell anything that is phoney or contrived for miles! Honesty and integrity are valued by sceptical young people. Kids are the future of brands. As Martin Lindstrom said, ‘A brand is more than a word. It is the beginning of a lifetime dialogue.’

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