

On the Market: Thinking Critically About Advertising

By **Annissa Hambouz and Holly Epstein Ojalvo** April 25, 2011 3:34 pm

Overview | How are food and beverage marketers blurring the line between advertising and entertainment to engage young consumers, and why does this concern nutrition experts and children’s advocates? To what extent are product-related games, quizzes and apps making children both recipients and tools of marketing? In this lesson, students consider various forms of advertising, then keep logs of the ads and other branded content they encounter in a specified period, and reflect on their experiences with marketing.

Materials | Computers with Internet access, copies of or links to examples of advertisements and commercials (see below for details)

Warm-Up | Before class, display the following three-question quiz on the board or distribute it in a handout:

1. It is conservatively estimated that children influence more than \$_____ in food and beverage purchases each year in the United States.

- a. 10 million
- b. 50 million
- c. 50 billion
- d. 100 billion

2. In February, the McDonald’s sites HappyMeal.com and McWorld.com received a total of _____ visitors, around half of whom were under 12.

- a. 7,000
- b. 70,000

- c. 700,000
- d. 7 million

3. General Mills's Lucky Charms site, with virtual adventures starring Lucky the Leprechaun, had _____ visitors in February.

- a. 27,000
- b. 57,000
- c. 157, 000
- d. 227,000

Have students answer the questions individually or with a partner. Call on several to volunteer their guesses, and then share the correct responses (1. d; 2. c; 3. d), and then explain that these sentences were all taken from the article they will be reading in class. Ask students if they find any of these numbers surprising.

Next, poll the class. Ask for a show of hands for each of these questions, and tally responses on the board: Have you ever played a game, taken a quiz or used an app related to a food, drink or other product? Have you ever "liked" a product on Facebook? Ask some students to share which products they have engaged with in interactive ways online, and why. List them on the board.

Ask: What do you notice about the list? Have you been more apt to buy, or ask your parents to buy, products associated with these interactive features? Or were you already dedicated consumers of these products?

You might also ask them to speculate on how students their age interacted with products, so to speak, 10 or 20 years ago, and explain that while many companies have had product-related Web sites for the last decade, interactive games, online quizzes and apps geared to children, and product pages on Facebook, are much more recent creations. (Note that Facebook started up in 2004 and the iPhone went on the market in 2007, and that their parents may well have grown up, largely, before the Internet became part of mass culture.)

Ask: How do you think things are different today than they were when ads were limited largely to print, display, radio and television? Tell students to keep this contrast in technology in mind as they read today's article.

Related | In the Business Day article “In Online Games, a Path to Young Consumers,” Matt Richtel reports on the way food and beverage companies are advertising their products using interactive media to build deep ties with young consumers:

Critics say the ads, from major companies like Unilever and Post Foods, let marketers engage children in a way they cannot on television, where rules limit commercial time during children’s programming. With hundreds of thousands of visits monthly to many of these sites, the ads are becoming part of children’s daily digital journeys, often flying under the radar of parents and policy makers, the critics argue.

“Food marketers have tried to reach children since the age of the carnival barker, but they’ve never had so much access to them and never been able to bypass parents so successfully,” said Susan Linn, a psychiatry instructor at Harvard Medical School and director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, an advocacy coalition. Ms. Linn and others point to many studies that show the link between junk-food marketing and poor diets, which are implicated in childhood obesity.

Read the entire article with your class, using the questions below.

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

1. Why are nutrition experts and children’s advocates concerned about the latest developments in food and drink marketing, according to the article?
2. How is television advertising different from online advertising?
3. What does Kelly Brownell mean when he says that children are not only the recipients of marketing, but also the tools of marketing?
4. What does the term “360-degree marketing” mean, and what are some examples?
5. What do you think about the fact that companies are getting smarter about the way they advertise to young consumers (e.g., games, quizzes, apps, social media)? Why?

Activity | Break the class into small groups and give each group one kind of

product advertisement to peruse, with one or two examples. Here are suggestions:

Print ads from magazines and newspapers

Display ads, like billboards and kiosks

Television commercials, like the **2011 Super Bowl** commercials

Product placements in movies and television shows

Radio spots

Internet ads, like clickable ads and splash pages on Web sites

Internet Web sites for products

Online games and quizzes for products

Product apps for cellphones or tablets

Social media campaigns, like product Twitter feeds and Facebook pages

Each group should prepare to introduce the advertising form to the class and provide a brief overview of how the advertiser uses the form to appeal to the audience. How compelling did the class find each ad? Why?

When students are familiar with various types of ads, tell them that they will track, individually, the frequency with which they encounter advertising, by keeping a log of all ads in all forms that they encounter in a specified time period. Suggestions include one afternoon and evening, from when school lets out until they go to bed; a 24-hour period; or over the course of a weekend.

For each one, they should note:

The time of day.

The name of the product or service and the company.

The type of ad or branded content (e.g., billboard, multimedia game, online quiz, TV commercial, product placement in a movie or show, splash ad on a Web site).

Where they saw it (e.g., name of Web site, TV channel, side of a building).

Going Further | When logs are complete, students write reflection papers on the advertising they encountered, noting the patterns they noticed with respect to number, frequency, type of ad and type of product, and their own reactions to the ads of their choice.

Questions for students to consider include these: Did any put them off for any

reason? Did any particularly compel or engage them? Did they find themselves wanting to purchase or experience any of the products or services? If so, can they figure out why? How did the ads “target” them? Which engaged them as “tools”?

They might include a section on food and drink advertising, and the connection they see between the ads they encounter and their personal nutrition habits.

Finally, they might note whether, after this experience, they think they will be more likely, less likely, or just as likely to use product-related games, quizzes or apps or visit product pages at social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, and why.

If desired, students can share their thoughts on our Student Opinion question “How Much Are You Influenced by Advertising?”

To go even further, they might also check out Morgan Spurlock’s documentary “The Greatest Movie Ever Sold,” which looks at the blurred line between advertising and entertainment, or the 2001 PBS report “The Merchants of Cool” to see just how much youth marketing has changed over the last decade, and write a review.

And to go in a slightly different direction, move beyond advertising to personal media habits and have students track their use of digital media. How much of their total personal media consumption consists of engagement with advertising versus interpersonal communication, entertainment, learning and other activities? Can they definitively separate engagements with advertising from other activities? When and where are the lines blurred? Have they considered “unplugging” and going “screen free” for, say, a week?

Standards | This lesson is correlated to McREL’s national standards (it can also be aligned to the new Common Core State Standards):

Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
7. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts

8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Arts and Communication

1. Understands the principles, processes and products associated with arts and communication media
2. Knows and applies appropriate criteria to arts and communication products
3. Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings
4. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication

Behavioral Studies

1. Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior

Business Education

43. Understands the roles of marketing and the impact of marketing on the individual, business and society
44. Understands how external factors and competition influence or dictate marketing decisions
46. Understands characteristics of a market and strategies used to deal with a diversified marketplace

Life Skills: Working With Others

1. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
4. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Technology

6. Understands the nature and uses of different forms of technology

Health

1. Knows the availability and effective use of health services, products and information
2. Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health
6. Understands essential concepts about nutrition and diet
7. Knows how to maintain and promote personal health

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