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Media Planner
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Handling Kids Media While It's in Flux

As Parents and Watchdogs Raise Issues With Hard-Sell Ads, Smart Campaigns Honor the Consumer

By Mark Dominiak

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It's been an odd year thus far in kids media.

In the advertising area, first came Kraft Foods' announcement of plans to phase out advertising for many of its high-profile kids brands. Then came the news that Kraft, General Mills, Kellogg's, the American Association of Advertising Agencies and others have founded the Alliance for American Advertising to defend their right to advertise to kids.

In the area of content, SpongeBob SquarePants took it on the chin for bringing up the subject of tolerance, and a controversial episode of PBS's "Postcards From Buster" featuring lesbian mothers created a flap.

On one hand, it seems like there's real effort being made to self-regulate and do what's right by kids. On the other, it looks like

lines are being drawn in the sand by outside forces. How does a media planner react to an escalating situation full of mixed signals?

One sure way to appropriately address the situation is to honor the consumer. In this case, the consumer is plural: children and gatekeepers.

When it comes to kids-and, by default, gatekeepers-marketers by and large don't do a very good job of honoring the consumer. You don't have to go much further than cereal, snack or toy advertising to get a sense of the problem.

Those who've planned on these types of kids brands know the basic strategy: Make a competitive assessment of major brands, get an idea of how many rating points leaders are running weekly, then plan commensurate amounts of gross ratings points to match share of voice, hopefully breaking through the clutter. That's lots of rating points screaming "tastes great" or "really cool" or "buy me."

The problem in a politically correct world is that all of those hard-sell brand impressions don't go over very well with kids gatekeepers.

There are two simple reasons why. First, hard-sell messages reflect the brand's perspective—"Hi, let me tell you about me"—as opposed to explaining what the brand can do to enrich a child's life. Second, messages geared toward "magically delicious" or some other product attribute directly address physical sustenance, the most basic among Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Brands feel they need to do this because messages of this sort push buttons that generate quick sales: "Hey kid, when you're hungry, eat this. It tastes good." Or "Hey, Mom, buy this when you're pressed for time. Your kids will like it."

When it comes to honoring kids as consumers, pushing these buttons is a bad approach, because kids gatekeepers-parents and watchdog groups—are rightfully concerned for kids on a much deeper emotional level, namely the nurturing of other levels in Maslow's Hierarchy involving physical health, safety, well-being, esteem and respect. In other words, gatekeepers don't like marketers exploiting the most basic needs to make a quick sale. They want marketers to take a more active role in what's important to them as stakeholders: nurturing children at a deeper level.

This situation is an opportunity for media planners to innovate in planning and help brands better honor children. Instead of simply relying on traditional GRP-level-based strategies, a planner could try a messaging approach on a higher emotional platform. Those platforms are more engaging to kids, more comforting to parents, leverage deeper emotional connections and actually give creatives a bigger playground.

Here are three suggestions.

- Convert :30s into engaging vignettes. Anybody remember "Schoolhouse Rock"? ABC did a great job converting dry school subjects like conjunctions and congressional bills into informational vignettes many of us remember to this day. There are many hot social areas brands could better equip kids to understand with vignettes versus a bunch of sugary :30s. Communicating a higher-order brand benefit via the vignette's educational message enables a win-win-win for kids, gatekeepers and the brand.

Vignettes strike a deeper chord, enabling consumers to spend more time with brands, resulting in more attention paid. When they're as good as "Schoolhouse Rock," they provide remarketing benefits

as well.

Kraft has been positively dabbling down these lines by sponsoring vignettes on Nickelodeon, telling kids about the benefits of healthy diet and participating in activities such as volleyball. Lunchables Fun Pack Chicken Dunks, a Kraft Sensible Solution, is featured, sometimes without an adjacent ad.

- Think about supporting PBS. PBS understands the power of higher-order needs. What PBS asks of underwriters is support for the deeper benefits they provide children, knowing that association with their programming can prompt kids and moms to form stronger, lasting bonds with brands.

PBS messaging may not generate quick, quantifiable sales, but it will increase caregiver comfort in purchasing underwriting

brands over time. Given the presence of so few brands in the PBS environment, clutter isn't an issue. Clever crafting of underwriting copy can link brand benefits to higher-order need states in a substantive way and provide powerful brand presence in the PBS space.

- Move funding into print programs. If you have kids, you know that doing homework and reading stories with them are important activities. Those activities are certainly tied to higher-order need states.

Scholastic is one media company that understands this. In its mission statement, Scholastic describes its desire to "instill the love of reading and learning for lifelong pleasure in all children" and it offers a wide array of products, from books for children of all ages to teaching aids to educational homework pieces that deliver on the mission.

Scholastic also develops multifaceted programs for marketers that are designed to connect brands to children and parents using a strong platform of reading and education. Scholastic's ability to tailor programs has generated great results for many noteworthy marketers, awareness and response results that flow from connecting brands with consumers in a deeper way.

Current headlines suggest changes are brewing in the world of kids media. It seems the opportunity is ripe for progressive media planners to give their brands a new platform for messaging. Those platforms will be strong indeed if they leverage higher-order need states and ideas that can connect consumers to brands at a deeper level.

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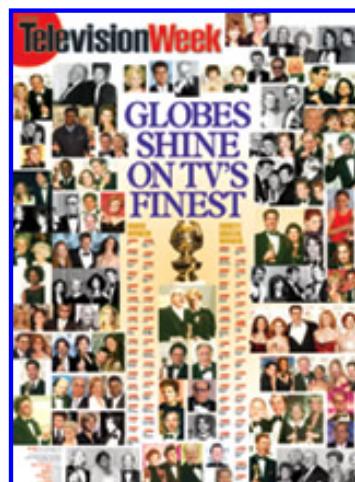
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