

Target market: Your children Under the influence: Parents feel pressure exerted by boys and girls influenced by advertisements.

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Abstract:

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Commercials, of course, are designed to make kids want a particular toy. Kids often see commercials before their parents and tend to be extremely brand conscious. And toys are designed to make a fashion or lifestyle statement. In other words, kids want what's trendy, (Selina S.) Guber added.

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Figures do not include

The hustle and bustle --- and sheer crush --- of Christmas advertising envelops kids in a cloud of want. The message is clear: Consumerism is good.

That puts a lot of heat on parents.

Not that Sheryl Rowier, a Fayette County wife and mother of three, doesn't like to get in the holiday spirit. But around this time of year, Rowier starts to dread turning on the television and opening the mail for fear of being bombarded by ads touting this toy or that toy.

"We (parents) feel a lot of pressure. At least I do," said Rowier, a vice president of human resources at Atlanta Life Insurance Co. "By the time I get home, they've picked things out. 'This is what I want. This is what I want.' "

It works.

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And it's not just parents who feel the heat. Any adult who has money to spend and comes within range of a child during the holidays can fall victim to the hype.

"I definitely get pressure from my niece and nephew for things. They watch a lot of TV and whatever they see, they want, without realizing how much things cost," said Tangia Walker, an administrative assistant at Georgia State University.

"Because of the ads on TV, even before the Rugrats movie came out, my niece was already asking for an Angelica doll," added Walker.

Guilt is major motivator

A hot toy is a combination of advertising and a great toy, said toy industry expert Christopher Byrne, contributing editor of Playthings Marketwatch.

"You can spend \$10 million to market a toy, but if the kids don't like it the advertising won't matter," said Byrne.

That makes marketing to children a complex and sophisticated communication process. The goal is to target children in such a way they pressure their parents or other adults into spending. Adults buy into it for a number of reasons, but a major one is guilt.

"Seventy percent of mothers work full- or part-time outside the home. As a result, moms have more guilt," said Selina S. Guber, a psychologist and president of Children's Market Research Inc., a market research firm based in New York. Surveys by Nielsen indicate children between the ages of 2 and 11 spend up to 28 hours per week, on average, watching television --- putting them in contact with quite a bit of market-savvy advertisers.

Commercials, of course, are designed to make kids want a particular toy. Kids often see commercials before their parents and tend to be extremely brand conscious. And toys are designed to make a fashion or lifestyle statement. In other words, kids want what's trendy, Guber added.

The pressure is on all year but intensifies during the holiday season, said Stephen Kline, a communications professor and director of the media analysis laboratory at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"I get angry," said Kline, a communications professor and director of the media analysis laboratory at Simon Fraser. "Here I am trying to get my kids educational toys and all they want are toys that they're going to lose interest in in a week. Toys are designed to be out of fashion in a year."

The toy industry learned it was really in the fashion business with Barbie. "Mattel's Barbie became a concept, a lifestyle, a fashion symbol," added Kline.

Although not the first, Mattel was one of the early toy companies to use TV marketing. "Largely, however, it was Disney who with the Mickey Mouse Club created the first real opportunity for advertisers targeting children," said Kline.

Until the 1950s, marketing to kids was regarded as sacrosanct. There was the notion children should not be subjected to the same kind of advertising pressures as adults, but that is no longer the case.

Susan Sabsowitz, an Atlanta mother of two, worries that because of Barbie's marketing, her 6-year-old already is far too concerned about image.

"My daughter totally buys into all the ads targeting girls. If she sees two identical things and one has the Barbie logo on it, then that's the one she wants," said Sabsowitz.

And, she added, her 11-year-old son isn't immune to the "look" portrayed in advertising, either. "He started at age 9 wanting to dress a certain way ... to look cool."

How do marketers pull it off?

In Kline's book, "Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing," the communications professor blames the deregulation of television for an increase in advertising in children's programming. In 1983, the Federal Communications Commission reversed what had been a long-standing position by the agency on children's commercials.

The FCC lifted guidelines that limited the amount of commercial time that could be shown on children's TV shows to 16 minutes per hour. That decision, Kline said, gave rise to children's shows based on toys, games, candy and breakfast foods, in some cases produced by the product manufacturers themselves.

In 1990 the rules were changed to limit advertising to 10 1/2 minutes per hour on weekends, and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays. Still, critics say, the commingling of the toy industry with mass media makes it hard for kids to distinguish between programming and advertising.

"Younger children have less ability to differentiate real from unreal. It's an aspect of cognitive development," said Tom Cummins, assistant professor of child and adolescent psychology at Emory University. "Younger kids have no ability to reason in the abstract."

Plus, today's kids are being brought up by baby boomers for whom consumerism is a big part of life. Sometimes it's the parents who put pressure on themselves.

"I think working parents feel a twinge of competitiveness and even guilt," said Art Roche, father of two and an art director with Turner Broadcasting. "They want their kids to have the newest and coolest stuff."

So here we are in 1998 with a programming climate full of tie-in advertising and character-based marketing. Marketers lean heavily on character-based marketing in which personality becomes the product. Characters come with built-in roles and personalities, affecting the way kids play.

In terms of this type of marketing, Nickelodeon is sitting on a gold mine. The kids' network has a number of hot properties, including "Rugrats" and "Blue's Clues." Toys and games associated with the shows are wildly popular. And in the case of Rugrats, there's also a hit holiday movie.

Ann Sarnoff, executive vice president of consumer products and business development for Nickelodeon, knows kids feel an "emotional connection" to the show, which translates to dollars at the cash register. Holiday offerings include a line of products that play off of the movie such as a talking alarm clock, dolls, stickers, games and puzzles.

Rugrats products were first introduced in 1996 in "a very, very strategic and staged way," Sarnoff said. It started with the successful launch of an exclusive line of apparel and accessories at Kids "R" Us.

"The important thing is that kids really love the Rugrats characters and really empathize with them," Sarnoff said. "We're a very research-focused company. We talk to kids all of the time. We understand what is going on in their lives and choose which properties to take into the consumer products world."

According to Guber, the president of Children's Market Research, some of the most successful marketing campaigns are the ones that cross gender, race and age barriers --- the pairing of Bart Simpson and Butterfinger, for example.

But certain toys, marketed correctly --- even without the TV or movie tie-ins --- also can cross those barriers.

Furby, one of this season's hottest toys, may be just such an item. The fur is really flying over the interactive, gremlinlike critter that "speaks" a new language "Furbish," catches colds and snores.

Tiger Electronics, which makes Furby, unveiled the toy during Toy Fair in New York. Although buyers only got to see a prototype, they were "blown away," said Tiger spokeswoman Lana Simon. By the end of the toy fair, the company had orders for a million units.

Still, the real crux of the issue for critics such as Kline is that kids are vulnerable, and many parents don't have the money to buy all these products.

He believes there are two bottom lines.

"One is that parents come to realize that the marketplace is an important agent for socialization of children's culture as much as schools and parents are," said Kline.

Secondly, he said, play and the spiritual value of toys are being defined by marketers, not parents.

"We've given all this power to marketers and maybe we've given them too much power ... in giving up control and limits."

But many parents, such as Fayette County's Rowier, are trying to ease some of the pressure of the season. Rowier now gives money to her kids to buy their own gifts. Still, she said: "I feel guilty. I think the real meaning of Christmas should be stressed."

--- Staff writer Shelia Poole contributed to this article.

Graphic TOY sales 1206.eps: ANNUAL TOY SALES The toy industry is highly competitive as companies fight for consumer dollars. Additional pressure may be on toy makers this year. NPD Group, a research firm, reports that overall toy and game sales are down about 0.6 percent from the same period a year ago. Here's a look at annual sales figures through 1997: Bar graph shows manufacturers' shipments and retail sales. Consult microfilm for details. Source: Toy Manufacturers of America video games; Caption: Photo NFKtoybug_280117: This talking action ant is from the hit movie "A Bug's Life." / DWIGHT ROSS JR. / Staff Photo : Super Singing Tommy Pickles is getting a big push from a television series and a movie. / DWIGHT ROSS JR., Charlotte B. Teagle / Staff Photo : Furby: A few days after a prototype was released, more than a million orders had been placed for it. How hot is it? There have been fistfights over the toys --- and the fights didn't involve kids. / DWIGHT ROSS JR., Charlotte B. Teagle / Staff Photo : Sing Along Blue, which barks and plays music, is from the popular "Blue's Clues" show on Nickelodeon. / DWIGHT ROSS JR., Charlotte B. Teagle / Staff Photo : This talking action ant is from the hit movie "A Bug's Life." / DWIGHT ROSS JR. / Staff

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