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BOYS TOWN[™]
Press

Who's RAISING your child?

**Battling the Marketers for
Your Child's Heart and Soul**

Help Kids Care Less about Things and More about People!

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How Marketers Sell to Kids

Persuaders of all kinds – from prophets to dictators, political candidates to marketers – use basically the same strategy to convince their audience to believe, vote for, or buy what they’re advocating. The *content* of the persuader’s message can be good or bad, but the *strategy* itself is neutral and powerful. Let’s look at how the strategy can be used for a variety of messages. Susan B. Anthony’s campaign for women’s suffrage is an example of positive persuasion; an example of persuasion with evil purpose is Adolf Hitler who persuaded others to join his mission of European domination and annihilation of the Jews.

First, the persuader issues a warning, identifies an enemy, points to a problem, or induces a fear. From

1845 to her death in 1906, Susan B. Anthony ignored opposition and abuse as she campaigned first against slavery and then the denial of educational opportunities, labor protection, and equal pay for equal work for women and ex-slaves. Adolf Hitler and his Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels told the German people they had been sold out and weakened by the Treaty of Versailles at the conclusion of World War I and betrayed by the Jews living among them.

Secondly, the persuader tells people that their circumstances could be much better. Anthony believed that conditions for women would improve when they had the right to vote. The Nazis promised Germans that they could be powerful, superior, and a great nation again.

Finally, persuaders urge their audience, “Follow us, we’ll show you how to get what you want.” In 1862, Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton formed the American Equal Rights Association and promoted women’s suffrage by publishing a newspaper, conducting speaking tours and petition drives, and appearing before every Congress from 1869 to 1906. Hitler convinced many Germans to participate in his attempt to eliminate the Jews and conquer the rest of Europe.

As you can see, the strategy of persuasion can be potent and powerful in many arenas. Marketers use a version of the same strategy when selling to children. Here’s what their messages tell kids:

- “You’re not cool.”
- “You need to be cool.”
- “Follow us, we’ll show you how to be cool.”

‘You’re Not Cool’

The first thing a lot of advertising aimed at teens does is make them feel bad about themselves. How many real teens are as skinny, beautiful, clear skinned, hip, and even sexy looking as the young models who populate the ads in magazines and on television? It can be pretty alluring for teens to believe the suggestion that buying whatever product the gorgeous celebrity or fabulously wealthy athlete is endorsing will give them a bit of that “good life” too. Younger kids see a parade of enticing things – snack foods, soft drinks, toys, computer games – and feel deprived if they don’t have them.

It is the (unspoken) goal of advertising to convince kids to be perpetually unhappy. Marketers show children that there’s something lacking in their lives, in their looks, in their possessions. And, if they’re unhappy, kids will search for a way to become happy.

‘You Need to Be Cool’

There’s tremendous pressure on kids, particularly teens, to conform, fit in, and keep up with their peers. Marketers know this, and use this “fear factor” – the

17% of schoolchildren said their **favorite** word was **“COOL.”** Their next favorite words were **“wicked,”** **“bling-bling”** (flashy jewelry), **“mint”** (having money), **“groovy,”** and **“kerch-ing”** (money).

Source: Survey of 20,000 children by Penguin Books, 2003

fear of being “out of it,” a dork, a geek, a nerd – as the underlying message of much advertising to kids. It’s why even a 4-year-old turns up his nose at a toy because it’s not connected to a “cool” brand. Or why your teen has to have only the most expensive athletic shoes endorsed by the latest NBA superstar and no other.

“Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you’re a loser,” Nancy Shalek, former advertising agency president, told the *Los Angeles Times*. “Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant.

But if you tell them they’ll be a dork if they don’t, you’ve got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it’s very easy to do with kids because they’re emotionally vulnerable.”¹

Creating even more pressure is the increasing speed at which things move from cool to “out of it.” In *USA Today*, Jon Hein, creator of Jumptheshark.com which tracks when hot trends go cold, says, “The way culture is these days, everything is so five minutes ago. There’s a lot more available to us in a much shorter period of time. So these cycles keep churning and churning.”² So kids keep thinking that the next purchase of the latest craze merchandise is just what they need to be cool.

U.S. Advertising Expenditures

1990 \$130 Billion


2001 \$284 Billion

Source: Universal McCann
Insider's Report

‘Follow Us’

Of course, the final step of the strategy is for marketers to promise that they can supply whatever product kids need – what to wear, what to eat or drink, which music to listen to, what to apply to their face – for them to be “cool.” By the time this step is reached, they’ve changed kids’ wants into needs. Clothing is a basic need. A hip-hugging, bell-bottomed pair of jeans is

a want manufactured into a need by designers, retailers, and marketers. Food is a need. Green ketchup and cartoon character cookies are wants that advertising convinces kids are needs. Most parents are familiar with situations like these: a teen who says she’ll just “die” without a pair of those jeans or a child who’s nagging turns trips to the grocery store into torture.



Almost half of all parents admit that their kids would rather go to a shopping mall than go hiking in the woods for a family outing.

Source: Center for a New American Dream Poll, July 1999

These kids (and, unfortunately, many parents) have been convinced by marketers that these products are necessary for their happiness.

This three-step marketing strategy, while very smart and successful, has some unhappy consequences for children. By their very nature, advertising messages encourage kids to be:

- self-centered.

- impatient.
- greedy.

What's in It for Me?

“Obey your thirst.”

“You deserve a break today.”

“Just do it.”

“Have it your way.”

The marketing slogans seem clever and harmless, but the underlying message is not: “What’s important is how this will benefit me.” Kids learn that self-indulgence is a good thing. Material possessions will build their self-

esteem, make them feel good, and get them friends. Their identity and social status are defined by what and how much they own.

Children who use the most media tend to be the least contented, according to a 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation study.

Kids who buy into this message can become selfish and spoiled. On a societal level, it broadens the chasm between kids who can afford (or whose parents can afford) to buy what they want and

the kids who can't. Some kids are so convinced of their “right” to own the things they desire, they see nothing wrong with shoplifting or stealing to get them. On the horrific end of this continuum are a few kids who have actually injured or murdered another child for nothing more than a pair of brand-name shoes.

I Want It Now!

Many kids today are hooked on instant gratification. They want things *now*. Marketers are happy to cultivate that “fast-food” buying impulse. Professional marketers have produced industry articles such as “The Nag Factor” and “The Art of Fine Whining” that instruct advertisers on how to manipulate kids into demanding their products from parents. And parents get suckered into the frenzy. Remember the store stampedes for Cabbage Patch dolls, Tickle-Me Elmo, and Beanie Babies in years past? When parents do take action to limit the “I want it now” behavior of their kids, such as avoiding the cookie and candy aisles in the grocery store, marketers strike back. Paco Underhill, author of *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, writes that to counter that “alarming trend,” one of his clients, a cookie manufacturer, “began securing strategic adjacencies – with appropriate aisle partners (cookies on one side of the aisle and baby food on the other, for example ...).”³

Marketers use clever tactics with teens as well. “Advertisers ... like to play on teen desires to be in the

65% of 200 marketing professionals responding to a survey said marketers do only a “poor” or “fair” job in marketing responsibly to children.

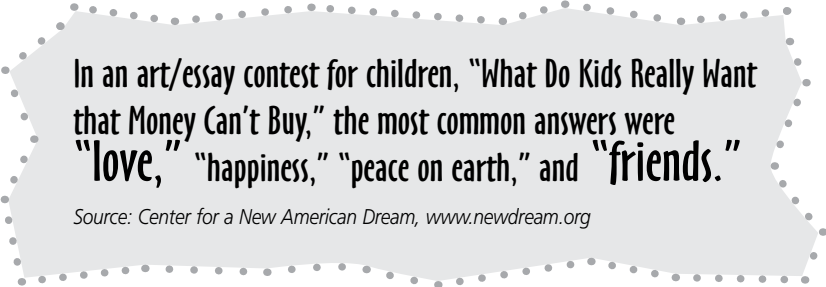
Source: *Reveries Online Magazine*, <http://reveries.com/reverb/research/coolforkids/index.html>

know and have the latest exclusive gear,” according to *The New York Times Upfront* magazine. “When Heelys, the sneakers that can roll like skates, were first introduced, the company made sure they were hard to find by releasing just a few at a time to stores. Only after a teen feeding frenzy began did the company pack the stores with product. Result: big sales.”⁴

I Want More!

From an early age, kids are taught to be consumers. Studies have shown that kids are bombarded with as many as 3,000 advertising messages per day. By age 18, an average teen will have seen or heard, either directly or indirectly, 10 million advertising messages. James McNeal, author of *The Kids Market*, says children ages 5 to 12 make about 15 requests for products during a typical shopping trip with their parents, five requests for products a day at home, and about 10 requests a day while on vacation. This amounts to about 3,000 requests per year.⁵

Kids often tell Mom and Dad what to buy for themselves and the family – what clothes are “in,” what cars are cool, what new electronic device is the best. One par-



In an art/essay contest for children, “What Do Kids Really Want that Money Can’t Buy,” the most common answers were “love,” “happiness,” “peace on earth,” and “friends.”

Source: Center for a New American Dream, www.newdream.org

ent told us that his 3-year-old advised him to buy a Dodge pickup truck. Why? “Cause it’s Ram-tough, Dad.”

In some families, parents spend or hand out “guilt money” in order to make up for the time they aren’t spending with their kids. Other parents want children to have things that they couldn’t afford to have when they were young. When parents do say “no,” it can set up a wearying tug-of-war between parents and kids about money.

Many teens, in a developmental stage where they are insecure and searching for their own identity, turn to *things* to define themselves. What most fail to recognize is that acquiring the latest thing rarely brings a lasting happiness. When they become bored with that particular item, the desired result isn’t achieved, or the trendy move on to some new fad, teens are left wanting still more. Buying becomes an addiction just like smoking or drinking. They need more and more to feel good, to get a “high.”

What Parents Want for Kids

Self-centered.

Impatient.

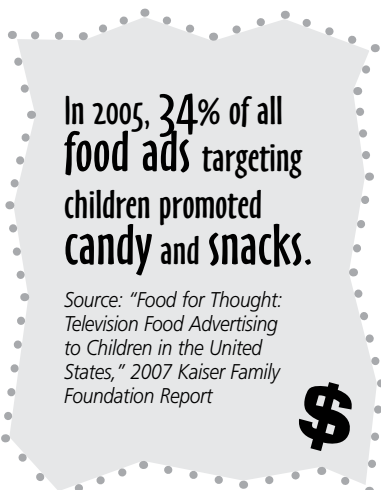
Greedy.

These are what advertising and marketing teach children to be, because they want kids to become good consumers. The evidence suggests that they’ve succeeded all too well. Kids today are more affluent and spend more money on a wider array of merchandise than ever

before. Dr. Allen Kanner, a clinical child psychologist in Berkeley, California, says the children he sees, whether they are from the inner city or wealthy suburbs, share one thing in common: a growing, even insatiable, desire for material goods. "In my practice I see kids becoming incredibly consumerist," said Kanner. "The most stark example is when I ask them what they want to do when they grow up. They all say they want to make money. When they talk about their friends, they talk about the clothes they wear, the designer labels they wear, not the person's human qualities."⁶

Another psychologist, Dr. Tim Kassell of Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, studies materialism. He says that people who are highly focused on materialistic values report they are less satisfied with life, seem less happy, have a higher incidence of unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships, are more prone to drug and alcohol abuse, and contribute less to their community.⁷

What we also see here at Boys Town and among the kids we meet elsewhere is that many children today are lonely. They are surrounded by possessions, but they don't have enough warm, loving, and nurturing relationships with people.



**In 2005, 34% of all
food ads targeting
children promoted
candy and snacks.**

*Source: "Food for Thought:
Television Food Advertising
to Children in the United
States," 2007 Kaiser Family
Foundation Report*



Many kids lack the basic social skills needed to foster healthy friendships because they spend so much time interacting with “things.” Watching television, playing video games, surfing the Net, even participating in online chat rooms – none of it involves face-to-face interaction that requires a whole range of interpersonal skills. A lot of technology, such as portable CD players, headphones, and handheld Gameboys, helps kids block out the social world around them. Some kids are just lost when it comes to holding a conversation with an adult or knowing how to approach a new kid in the neighborhood.

We believe that this is not what most parents want for their children. Think about the kind of person you’d like your child to be or become. We hope you want your child to be:

- Someone who genuinely cares about other people, values others for who they are and not what they look like or own, and shows love for family and friends.
- Someone who demonstrates responsibility and can set and work toward long-term goals.
- Someone who is willing to share with and give to others.

Children don’t just naturally acquire these virtues. They need to be taught, primarily by parents. And with so much of the popular culture working against parents, it can be a tough task. If kids get 3,000 messages per day urging them to buy more things, how do you recapture their attention and teach them to focus on people-oriented goals?

What Parents Can Do

Parents, first of all, can learn from the marketers' success. Kids are great consumers because they've been convinced by advertisers that "stuff" will get kids what they want – popularity, a cool look, a way to feel good. We think parents can use the same three-step sales strategy that marketers use, but with a different message and for a very different purpose.

First, parents should acknowledge that children's needs are important. Kids need to have friends and feel that they fit in. They need to find their own unique identity and gradually accept responsibility and gain independence as they grow. Kids should know that you see those as valid goals for them, too.

Second, parents need to reassure kids that they can be successful at reaching those goals. The route to those goals, however, will not be the one marketers have

Major Sources of Income for Children Ages 4-12

Allowances	45%
Household Work	21%
Gifts from Parents	16%
Work Outside the Home	10%
Gifts from Others	8%

Source: James McNeal, "The Kids Market: Myths and Realities," 1999, Paramount Market Publishing

mapped out for them. Parents can show children that their path to happiness depends on relationships with other people and not with the acquisition of things.

And finally, parents can say, “Follow us, we’ll teach you the skills you need to make friends, earn the respect of others, and be happy in life.” In other words, parents need to sell pro-social behavior as the “product” that will get their kids the same payoffs the marketers promise – friendship, happiness, and success. And, unlike the marketers’ products, what you are “selling” your kids will never be used up, go out of style, or fail to deliver on its promise! You will be teaching them skills that are useful for a lifetime.

We’re not implying this will be easy. Marketing messages are everywhere, and the violent, sexual content of the media that carry the messages can be damaging to kids as well. You will have to make rules, enforce consequences, teach skills, and be a good role model. You will need to set an example, probably by changing at least some of your own media habits and purchasing decisions. It will be hard work, but that’s the definition of parenting, isn’t it?

We urge you to think of the payoff, however, both for your child and you. Kids may grump and groan at rules and restrictions, but ultimately they know that this means you love them and care about what happens to them. Putting relationships first in your family and de-emphasizing the quest for material possessions benefits everyone at home. Your child gets the powerful message

Who's Raising Your Child?

that we're supposed to use things and love people, not love things and use people. That's a message our kids need to understand.