

The Marketer's Dream that Lives Down the Hall: A 13-year-old and her brand consciousness

by Hank Stewart

Hugh Hough refers to his 13-year-old daughter Alice as "a marketer's dream." According to the Green Team President, Alice is brand-conscious to a fault. The irony here is inescapable. As a marketing professional, Hough earns his living trying to increase brand loyalty (among other things) for the brands on his client roster, yet when it's brought into his home, it makes him crazy.

Marketing to tweens (kids between being kids and teenagers; generally ages 8-12) and teenagers is nothing new, but it does seem the stakes have been raised over the years. Today's youth (8-18) have an income of \$233 billion (according to a Harris Interactive poll reported in August, 2006), and are subjected to over 38 hours of marketing messages per year.

It's a trend not lost on Hough. "When we were her age," he says, "we weren't exposed to so much of this crap."

What are Alice's brands of choice? In the ever-important fashion category, the must-haves include Abercrombie and Fitch, Lacoste, Ralph Lauren, Converse, Vans, Sugar and Aldo. A weekend stroll through virtually any suburban mall will confirm that Alice is not alone in her brand preferences.

Peer affirmation is a powerful motivator for youth brand choices. According to the Harris poll, 44% of youths (8-18) ranked "I like to buy things my friends have" as the number one factor in making a purchase. At a paltry 29% was "To make sure I buy the right products, I often pay close attention to advertisements."

If you were an advertiser trying to reach Alice, you would do well to spend your money on Laguna Beach, The OC, and Friends. Alice's favorite magazines are VOGUE, Elle and Cosmopolitan, and online, Alice likes to visit sites Facebook, MySpace, aol and iTunes. Advertisements she recalls seeing

include Verizon (cell phones), Advil, Burger King and Temperpedic Mattresses. Her favorite of the lot is the Burger King "man burger" spot, but the product she most desires is the Temperpedic Mattress.

One of the concerns voiced by children's advocates, politicians and others is the affect alcohol and tobacco advertising is having on people under 18. Only when pressed could Alice think of any advertisements for alcoholic beverages, and then only two: a spot for Heineken that "showed people in a club, acting cool," and for a vodka (Alice couldn't recall the brand name) "that showed icy places." Alice couldn't recall seeing any tobacco advertising. These are relatively low levels of awareness, and should be of comfort to concerned parties, especially her parents.

Alice says she likes it when companies have a celebrity use their products. (The example she cited was Proactiv, which enlists the aid of Lindsay Lohan, Diddy and Jessica Simpson.) Her peers are split on the topic. According to the Harris poll, 21% of teens like the practice, while 22% don't. In terms of message delivery, Alice doesn't like it when companies advertise their products on her cell phone. She finds this "annoying," and her peers agree, with only 4% of teenagers saying they liked the practice.

The big question, does Alice think advertisements tell the truth. "Yes," she says "because if they don't, they'll get sued." Perhaps it's because she has faith in her father, but here Alice differs greatly from her peers, of whom only 4% believe advertisements are truthful.

So while her father may lament that brand consciousness has taken on an undue level of importance in her life, a more objective examination of Alice shows she's pretty much in line with her peers on most measures. How much comfort this will bring her father remains to be seen.