



Advertising under scrutiny as child audience grows



The question of marketing to children has long been vexed and cuts to the heart of what we think about marketing itself.

Most marketers work on the basis that the people they're trying to target know that they're being marketed to and believe that, on some level, they appreciate it. The idea, for example, that brands are useful tools that help people navigate an ever-more complex world is

one that has gained much currency in recent years.

But when marketing to children, those distinctions are much harder to make. My three-year-old is quick to spot "another boring ad", but when we compiled a list of things he wanted for Christmas after seeing them advertised on TV, it filled two sides of A4.

Children aren't the media-savvy audience we fondly believe adults to be, so we have stricter rules about marketing to them.

At least we do in old media. In new media, we have trouble creating any rules at all. And while the 2003 Communications Act passed the responsibility for investigating and ruling on complaints about ads to the Advertising Standards Authority, which is becoming more active in addressing complaints about individual Web ads, it's unclear how far the ASA sees its remit extending.

“CHILDREN ARE BECOMING INSTRUMENTAL IN AIDING PURCHASE DECISIONS IN THE HOME THROUGH THEIR USE OF THE WEB”

And in a world where every child has a mobile phone, what about the emerging forms of mobile advertising that we

discuss in our feature on page 27? As Claire Tavernier, senior VP of interactive at Fremantle points out, advertisers are starting to see mobile as the perfect platforms, "in no small part because it's completely unregulated at the moment".

So in this context it's interesting to read the latest research carried out by agency Panlogic, called 'Families at Home: The Digital Future' (NMA 26.05.05). It points out that children's use of the Internet is increasing, with 88% of primary school children using the Web at home, rising to 95% among 11-18-year-olds.

Talking about the research, Panlogic CEO William Makower told NMA that children are becoming instrumental in aiding purchase decisions in the home through their use of the Web. Certainly no brand aimed at children is going to want to damage its reputation among parents, but at the same time advertisers are continually searching for cut-through, which will inevitably lead in some cases to the edge of what is acceptable.

This in turn raises the spectre of further regulation. Undoubtedly Ofcom and the ASA will be watching to see how online advertising develops, and because of its sensitivity advertising to children will be one of the areas subject to most scrutiny.

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