Chapter 41
Marketing for Children Using Social Interaction Technologies

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ABSTRACT

Children are spending more time online and, in most cases, this means they are using social interaction technologies. Beyond the concern for safety, another issue is gathering strength: namely, interactive marketing to children. This chapter looks at the immersive nature of interactive marketing, which can be found in blogs, chat rooms, virtual worlds, advergaming, and other forms of advertainment. The chapter also examines: the ages of targetable audiences (some of whom cannot yet read the "advertisement" label), websites for children that use interactive marketing, where and how ads are displayed, the effects of interactive marketing, the potential for data collection through interactive marketing, the lack of regulation in interactive marketing, and the future trends of interactive marketing to children.

INTRODUCTION

Early use of social interaction technologies by young people seemed to elicit one primary concern from adults. That concern was safety, because children and teens often reveal too much private information online in blogs, chat rooms, and such social networking sites as MySpace. However, a related issue is gaining momentum. It is the power of interactive marketing on social networking sites and similarly interactive websites for children. The concerns are that (1) young children are unable to discern marketing messages, and (2) even for older children, much of the advertising on social networking sites is so closely tied to the environment that it may be seen more for its participatory nature rather than for its marketing purpose. This chapter will look briefly at the safety issue and then move to explanation and discussion of the growing concern over marketing branded products to children through immersive interactive environments of the Internet.

BACKGROUND

The proportion of children with access to computers and the Internet at home is steadily increasing. A 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation report stated that 86 percent of eight-year-olds to eighteen-year-olds had computers in their homes compared to 73 percent in 1999, and 74 percent had Internet access compared to 47 percent in 1999. Time spent by eight-year-olds to eighteen-year-olds on the computer for recreational purposes alone averaged a little over an hour each day in 2005. Eight-year-olds to ten-year-olds clocked in at thirty-seven minutes, eleven-year-olds to fourteen-year-olds at an hour and two minutes, and fifteen-year-olds to eighteen-year-olds at one hour and twenty-two minutes (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Those numbers are expected to be higher today with the popularity of social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, plus the many online communities for children.

About 55 percent of American youths ages twelve to seventeen use an online social networking site, according to a national survey of teenagers conducted by Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The number of children and youth who use social networking sites and create online profiles is growing daily. Although some participants choose to make their profiles available only to those in their network, much information is still available to all. A study by Huffaker & Calvert (2005) of teenagers' blogs found that the teens volunteered far too much private information. Two-thirds provided their ages and at least their first names, while 60 percent gave their locations and contact information. One in five told their full names.

MySpace.com has a policy that does not allow children under age sixteen to become members. Spokesman Bennet Ratcliff said the firm immediately removes members' sites that are in violation of the terms of service, including those with too much personal information. However, participants can get around the rule by lying about their age, according to Sullivan (2005), who browsed the site and quickly turned up several pages on which children stated they were sixteen, but in their personal descriptions provided information that they were actually younger.

Parry Aftab, who runs the WiredSafety.org program, stressed that she does not think any blogs or community sites are safe for children. Her organization receives complaints every day: "There are underage kids on every social networking site on the Net. They are engaging in highly provocative conversations and doing things they would never do offline" (cited in Sullivan, 2005, p. 2). Now add to this issue the fact that marketers have found social networking sites and are trying to establish their brands in the minds of youthful consumers.

INTERACTIVE MARKETING TARGETS CHILDREN

Marketers have already created MySpace profile pages for characters from their advertisements and have invited users to add those characters to their list of friends. On Facebook, marketers have created groups around branded products and are trying to use those groups to increase word-of-mouth advertising about their product. Marketer sites often include video clips and quizzes to increase engagement, as well as free downloadable ring tones and other promotions to increase traffic. Some of these promotions utilize viral marketing, offering incentives for users to send information to friends. Chase financial services had a promotion on Facebook that rewarded site visitors for getting friends to sign up for credit cards (Hansell, 2006). Of course marketers' social networking sites all have links to their brands' websites, which have more games and activities for a variety of ages.

Younger children are not left out of the interactive social networking strategy of marketers. Virtual worlds are three-dimensional environ-

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