

Marketing ethics

Business



Children are considered by many one of the most vulnerable of all media audiences. After a discussion of the uniqueness of child audiences and commercials' effects on them, this article addresses the values of advertisers who purposely and inadvertently reach children with their messages. Three ethical theories are presented for use in recognizing the special consideration necessary for child audiences. Finally, a model proposed by Robin and Reidenbach (1987) is presented as a means of introducing ethical values and theories into corporate decision-making policies regarding children and advertising. Dorr (1986) suggested that, " Of all the television content children process, interpret, and evaluate, commercial advertising presents the most significant challenges" (p. 51).

Children meet these commercial challenges dozens of times each day. Indeed, as they grow, children are exposed to thousands of television commercials. Since the 1970s, the appropriateness of television advertising to children has been debated among consumer groups such as Action for Children's Television, governmental agencies, the advertising and television industries, and the industries that produce children's products. Almost all these opposing parties recognize that children are substantially more vulnerable than adults in the commercial marketplace. Assumptions about adults' rational abilities and obligations to operate in their own self-interests in the economic marketplace cannot be assumed to be operable for children.

Too frequently, the exchanges among those on the various sides of the issue end in frustration, without much progress in efforts to account for the vulnerabilities of children with respect to television advertising. Because the debate has primarily focused on advertising specifically aimed at children,

one might think that this is the only or, at least, the most essential issue. However, during prime time television hours and other hours of the day, children watch programs intended for other target audiences and thus are exposed to commercials also intended for other target audiences. Current thinking about the longterm socialization and reality-defining effects of media (e. g., cultivation theory) suggests that unintended exposure to these advertisements may have powerful extended effects on child viewers' role expectations, values, and world views.

Despite the findings of a substantial body of research from a cognitive-developmental perspective supporting the notion of a vulnerable child audience, the controversy about appropriate advertising to children goes on. At the heart of this controversy is disagreement about the actual nature and extent of effects on children in real world television viewing contexts. As is typical of the dominant paradigm in the mass media effects literature, a rather limited definition of effects has guided much of the inquiry. Effects have been defined as short-term changes in individuals' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors after exposure to media technology and content (see Rossiter, 1979). For instance, researchers have investigated such things as the effects of host selling, animation, and program separators on children's understanding of selling intent and purchase requests (e. g.

, Hoy, Young, & Mowen, 1986; Kunkel, 1988; Meringoff & Lesser, 1980).

Social learning theory (e. g., Bandura & Walters, 1963; Tan, 1986) and cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) are two theoretical perspectives that bring alternative foci in thinking about the effects television commercials have on children. Both theories suggest that

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individuals' stereotypes, role learning, values, and “ world views” can be influenced by consistently viewing televised portrayals of the world. These kinds of effects accumulate over long time periods and thus are difficult to assess.

Cultivation theory suggests that television is the American culture's “ storyteller,” portraying consistent images of our beliefs, attitudes, and mores, regardless of content type. Commercials provide some of the most compact, consistent packages of value-laden information that is congruent with the values pervading program content. ...