

Communicating to children: pester power



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Power’: Several studies have suggested that the utilisation of advertising to children is a powerful route to influence adult purchasing through requests and demands for certain products that may not necessarily be good for them, something they need or their parents can afford. Recently, communicating to children has been used positively in attempt to change attitudes and make better purchasing decisions. However, not all evidence is in agreement with each other, some argue that ‘pester power’ is merely an assumption. This paper has utilised discriminate analysis to reveal the notion of pester power and how marketers employ this concept to communicate to children.

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Introduction:

Underpinning the concept of pester power is children's unprecedented power as consumers ('power') and their ability to deploy a variety of tactics to exert influence over purchasing by others ('pester').

Pester power has been defined by the Director General of the Advertising Association as 'a pejorative term for children making requests of their parents'

(Brown 2004). However, some academic researchers have preferred a less severe terminology, such as 'purchase influence attempts' or 'purchase
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request behaviour' (Young et al. 1996, p. 57). For it is pejorative not so much of children and parents but of advertisers and marketers who target children through their promotional strategies, prompting purchase requests that would otherwise go unmade, or would lack the intensity and repetition that pestering entails. Several studies show that consumers perceive pester power as an uncomfortable reality, and that it impacts negatively on their family relationships particularly between child and parent relationships and worse lead to exasperated purchases that the child insists on having. There is substantial evidence from consumer research that parents are uncomfortably aware of it, and children are wise to the tactical framework it offers them to get their own way.

However, in recent times there have been attempts to use this notion of 'pester power' positively, in effort to promote better purchases and ideals.

Contradictory, Procter and Richards (2002) argue that the 'pester power' concept is simply that, a concept. 'What they ask for tends to be the kind of things their friends are buying, so advertising itself is not a particular issue.' This reattribution of influence from advertiser-generated request behaviour to peer-generated 'word of mouth' positions pester power as a cultural given rather than a managed phenomenon resulting from promotional activity.

Part A:

Power of advertising:

Encouraging children to pester their parents has been viewed as harmful by regulators because of the potential for ensuing family conflict which can result in negative effects (Nairn, 2008). Pester power is portrayed as harmful because it was found that advertising exposure led to increased purchase requests which in turn led to an increased level of disappointment if the parent could not fulfil that request and in turn negatively affect children's life satisfaction. Generally the nature of advertisements aligns children and products together in a really, great, fun place, while parents, teachers and other adults inhabit an oppressive, drab and joyless world. Because young children lack the cognitive skills and abilities of older children and adults, they do not comprehend commercial messages in the same way as do more mature audiences; hence children are more susceptible to advertising influence. Jean Piaget (1960) a development psychologist proposed that children's cognitive capacity evolves biologically through a series of pre-determined stages from birth to adulthood, which is critical in understanding how children process advertising.

For instance, Barbie and Diddle are two websites that constantly offer children the opportunity to create wish lists which can be quickly and easily e-mailed to parents and other adults. While the websites do not blatantly say "tell you mum and dad to get it for you" it is the spirit behind the website wish list. According to a seven year old participant in a study conducted by Nairn (2008) "I'd ask my mum and if she said no I'd keep asking and go on

my knees.” Thus, a clear example of some of the tactics used to influence parents to purchase products as well as the power of commercial material.

Food shopping:

Research shows that food shopping usually constitutes the first experience children in the Western world have of consumer activity, often in conjunction with their parents. The participants of a study conducted by Carey (2008), showed clear signs that their children were active participants and influences in the activity, one participant said: “ she does pester me a lot more when we go shopping- she wants lollipops at counters.” McDermott et al. (2006) argues that the alarming increase in obesity among young people in recent years is an example of the excessive consumption of advertised foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. It was found that the more food advertisements children were exposed to the greater the number of attempts to influence parental shopping purchases he or she made at the supermarket (McDermott et al. 2006).

However, as literature suggests, the depth of influence a child has over the familial decision-making process depends on numerous other influences such as parental style, social pressure and the structure of the family unit (L. Carey, 2008). Further, research conducted by Carey (2008) shows that in contrast to previous studies, both mother and fathers were equally affected by pester power of their children and this can often drive a wedge between children and their parents.

Pester power misused?

The Cancer Research UK and British Heart Foundation have developed a series of advertisements, one including an anti-smoking campaign, featuring a young child saying he doesn't want his dad to die. Another show a child playing a video game and the punch line "risk an early death: just do nothing". Russell (2009) argues that the advertising tool of 'pester power' can be misused, that used in such a way may place a burden of responsibility on children and cause them unnecessary concern. Further, if after much pestering the parent doesn't give up smoking or do more exercise, the child may feel that their opinion doesn't matter in the family unit and that they have failed to convince their parents not to do something that will kill them.

Word of mouth marketing: beyond pester power

Not all evidence is in agreement with one another; according to Procter and Richards (2002) the notion and driving force of pester power is often thought to be highly influential in the marketing process of selling products to children and assumed to work. It is a popular assumption that the increased influence and exposure of television advertising to children ultimately undermines the authority of parents who eventually succumb to their children's demands. Pilgrim and Lawrence (2001) suggest that pester power is not the main driving influence in purchasing behaviour, rather purchasing is more a process a process of negotiation amongst parent and child. Thus, this purchasing model suggests that advertising needs to be targeted at parents also.

Further, Procter and Richards (2002) affirm that pester power alone does not help the marketer to influence the wide success of a product and does not provide any answers during the new product development to find which are going to be a success. Moreover, there have been many examples of products that have enjoyed incredibly wide appeal with relatively little marketing, like the yo-yo. The yo-yo during the early 1990's boomed without the input of marketers, who only joined the success once interest had grown. Procter and Richards (2002) insist that word of mouth among children and teenagers is the explanation behind such phenomena's.

Part B:

There is considerable evidence to suggest that pester power exists and works. Skilful marketing managers who understand their consumers and the power of 'pester power' are able to utilise these tactics to communicate to children, and in essence to influence their parents.

Applications to pester power:

There are several examples that demonstrate marketing managers utilising techniques to amplify the notion of 'pester power'. The Travel Weekly revealed that 80% of 2,000 children surveyed in a Young-Poll survey commissioned by Teletext Holidays said that their parents sometimes or always let them help choose the family holiday destination. Findings such as this suggest that children are a critical advertising market for family holidays, the Teletext Holidays managing director Victoria Sanders claimed "it is important the industry realises how much influence children have." Further, the editor of PR Week, Danny Rogers said that the travel industry

could learn from other industries by marketing more effectively to children, but should avoid marketing solely to children but to both parents and children. However, First Choice general manager of marketing Stuart Mayo said: “ holidays are high-ticket items. While children might influence decisions, they are not going to generate the demand for the purchase as they would for a toy” (Dennis, 2009).

With that being said, 35% of advertisers on Cartoon Network in India comprise of non-kid marketers, such as LG, Citibank, ING Vyasa (Razdan, 2004). This tactic is cleverly enforced as there is a clear advantage in reaping the duality of viewership’s benefits. Cartoon Network found that it is most often that mothers watch programmes along with their children and this facilitates immediate feedback.

In fact, Corus Entertainment a Canadian media company is urging advertisers to consider ‘ pester power’. Susan Ross, vice-president and general manager of Corus Television says that kids’ “ pester power” can influence parents’ purchase decisions on everything from cleaning products to luxury vehicles, claiming that children influence \$20 billion of household spending each year. The company’s research shows that children have memorised between 300 and 400 brand names by age 10 and 92% of their requests are for a specific brand. Research also shows that 75% of parents respond favourably to these requests.

There are a number of reasons as to why children are becoming a powerful force when it comes to making household purchase decisions. Today’s households are more democratic, with children having more of a voice than

previous generations; parents in today's double-income households are time-pressed and therefore "much more willing to give in to pester power;" kids of the digital generation have both the time and ability to watch commercials and use tools like the Internet to do extensive research on products (Powell, 2003). Information such as this is useful to marketing managers; Corus Entertainment is one example that by thoroughly understanding consumers and social trends it is easy design marketing strategies to influence purchasing decisions.

Even Garden centres have resourced from 'pester power' to increase sales. Through providing events and activities for children at school, garden centres have found that children gain a better knowledge of environmental issues than their parents do and will want to follow up activities that they have done at school.

However, marketing practitioners display what appear to be contradictory views on the pester power phenomenon. One perspective naturalises pester power as 'a characteristic of childhood not a creation of advertising' (Brown 2004). Procter and Richards (2002) concur that pester power is much overrated as a marketing strategy, claiming instead that the crucial success factor is word of mouth. They argue for research into how children interact, socially and psychologically, with each other rather than with their parents, as a way of harnessing the diffusion processes that characterise children's growth markets. For all this, there is evidence that practitioner discourse positions children as a route to adult purchase behaviour.

Conclusion

Whilst some will argue that communicating to children and pester power is a mere assumption, the evidence to suggest that pester power exists and works is endless. Without doubt there are exclusions to every case however, marketers will continue to make use of communicating to children as a route to their parents and will do so in tactful situations. In return children will use tact to influence their parents purchasing decisions, whether this is viewed as harmful or not there is enough evidence to suggest that pester power works and will exist with or without marketers.