



Children and marketing – the commercial pressure is rising

Children are children. They have not acquired the knowledge and experience they need to see through all the commercial messages they encounter on the way to school, in shops and department stores, when they watch television or play video games. This is a generally accepted view in Swedish society, which has led to laws that protect children so that they do not have to be dependent on the good will of advertisers. Those laws and the protection they afford children are under attack. We are seeing certain special interests that want to instil a completely different view of children and marketing.

Children have a right to the protection of the adult world. They need to be protected from the liberalization of opinions concerning what children can be subjected to in advertising contexts. Children are regarded as potential little consumers, as sources of pressure on the family to buy, and as a tool to be used to gain higher profits and market shares.

That children are a group that should be protected in this context is not a new principle. It is also generally accepted in the advertising industry. The special interests that oppose the law against television commercials directed at children often refer to basic ICC advertising regulations and to Great Britain's thoroughly considered regulations aimed at preventing inappropriate advertising to children.

All of these regulations and agreements rest on one fundamental assumption: children are a group worthy of protection who cannot be subjected to advertising and marketing like adults. Nevertheless, advertising aimed at children is more exploitative and manipulative than the advertising encountered by adults. That is one of the reasons that a total ban of tv-commercials directed towards children is the

only reasonable solution. If the rules were followed, the problem would not exist.

Swedish law

Children in the western world are under constant commercial pressure. Even though the marketing methods used most often to reach children are against the law in Sweden, that also applies to us.

It is against the law in Sweden to send direct mail advertising addressed to children under the age of 16 and the law also forbids the broadcasting of television commercials aimed at children under 12. There are also a number of business agreements, including rules concerning toys that inspire thoughts of war and violence.

However, neither Swedish nor European legislation has kept up with the rapid increase and expansion of marketing directed at children. Consequently, we need a survey of the present situation, greater knowledge of new marketing methods, and common regulations for the entire EU that firmly establish principles that shall apply to all forms of marketing directed at children, regardless of the medium employed.

Modern marketing methods

Advertising should exist. It can provide information, as well as pleasurable stimulus. Unfortunately, the lion's share of advertisements are neither informative nor stimulating, but only manipulative and irritating. Advertising directed at children belongs in the junkyard of the advertising world.

Aggressive. Sex stereotypes. Misleading. Those are just a few words that describe modern advertising directed at children. Advertising is becoming increasingly covert, making it difficult to distinguish the sender and

the message urging us to buy. We are also witnessing the expansion of in-tegrated marketing. Television channels, programmes, cinema films, soundtracks, McDonald's characters joining forces around a theme (here, a new Disney film). The total impact is massive and those who want to make alternative choices find it difficult to avoid.

With respect to Internet marketing, we are so far seeing advertisers who follow the rules when they use traditional advertising channels, yet are shamelessly exploiting the new Internet medium. Advertisers are developing new forms of advertising on the net, the chief characteristic of which is that the message to buy is disguised as entertainment. Via chat rooms and clubs where children are encouraged to submit information about themselves and their families, website owners are gathering information that can be used to tailor advertising so that it hits its target with even greater precision.

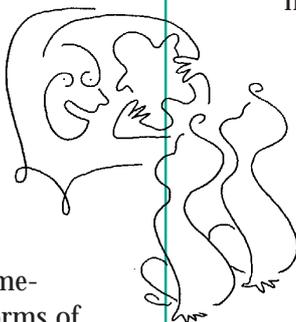
The schools have been an advertising-free zone for a very long time, although corporate sponsorship has existed on a small scale. But the pressure from eager advertisers is rising, and those who enter the schools can raid the cookie jar without being inhibited by rules. When corporate sponsorship of educational materials, classroom equipment, beverages served with school lunches, etc., explodes, schools and legislators will not be prepared to meet the onslaught.

Advertising aimed at children is not solely a matter of Barbie dolls, action figures, or cartoons. Adult advertising is also directed at children. The children have tremendous influence on the family's decisions to buy, with respect to everything from breakfast cereal to clothing and cars.

When you buy a video game, the child may join a club to gain access to help and hints in playing the game – and before long, a member magazine arrives in the mail. Many of those club magazines are actually advertising brochures or product catalogues and are heavily salted with editorial advertising (articles that contain messages to buy) and advertorials (advertisements that look like magazine articles).

Heightened interest in the Swedish model

In 1997 The Swedish Consumers' Association launched a campaign against the commercials directed towards children in the television channels TV3 and Kanal 5. The campaign sparked heated



debate, with hard-hitting attacks from the television companies and advertisers but unexpected support from the advertising industry. The debate is not as vigorous today, but we are pleased to see heightened interest among member states of the EU, with many looking at Sweden and our perspectives on children and advertising. This bodes well in face of the renegotiation of the EU television directive. The media office of the Ministry of Culture sees two ways to prevent television commercials directed at children from coming into Sweden via another country. Either we can pass stricter EU-wide regulations or we can allow the receiving country to apply its regulations to a greater extent. The Swedish Consumers' Association is working towards the introduction of EU regulations that can provide children with strong protection against misleading and exploitative marketing.

The Swedish Consumers' Association demands

- A European ban on television commercials directed towards children.
- A common general law within the EU. Legislation in the area shall be horizontal. That is, the same rules shall apply to marketing to children regardless of the medium employed.
- Greater social resources devoted to increasing awareness and debate about the intense commercial pressure being put on our children today, and its forms and consequences.
- Increased support to public schools so they can equip pupils with sufficient stimulation and knowledge to defend themselves against all the commercial messages forced upon them daily. Active protection for a vulnerable group.

Children and marketing – the commercial pressure is rising is part of a series of fact sheets published by the Swedish Consumers' Association. The fact sheets can be ordered from:

The Swedish Consumers' Association

Barnhusgatan 22, 3 tr Tel +46 8 406 08 60
SE-112 34 STOCKHOLM Fax +46 8 406 02 60
Sweden

Webbsite: www.konsument.a.se
E-mail: info@konsument.a.se