



Advertising - an overview

What is it

Advertising directed to children includes paid advertisements or commercials that appear in TV programs specifically made for children or in other programs for children and where the product is principally of interest to children under the age of 13 years.

Where does it occur

Free-to-air TV

Advertising directed to children occurs:

- in TV programs that are specifically made for children (such as C programs on commercial TV)
- in other children's programs (such as cartoon programs), and
- in other G programs.

The amount of advertising can be as high as 15 minutes per hour.

Sometimes, the descriptions of prizes for a competition, or the demonstration of a product in a cartoon program can be construed as advertising. Such practices should occur in discrete segments within the program.

Pay TV

Pay TV also carries advertising directed to children, but at a lower level of minutes per hour.

Internet

Advertising directed to children also occurs on the Internet e.g. in banner ads.

Relevant statistics

Australian children on average watch 2 hours and 30 minutes of TV per day. In terms of advertising this means that Australian children watching commercial TV are likely to see:

- 30 commercials per hour
- 75 commercials per day, and
- 23,000 commercials per year.

Most advertisements (out of toy season) will be for confectionery, soft drinks, sugared cereals and fast food chains.

Why advertising to children is a problem

What is advertised

Many of the products advertised are fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods. Nutritionists and other health professionals see

these as promoting poor eating practices in children (see related topic: Food Advertising).

Ability to distinguish advertising from programs

Young children are particularly vulnerable to advertising as they are unable to distinguish advertising from programs. US researchers such as Dale Kunkel (University of California at Santa Barbara) and Don Roberts (Stanford University) say that children under age of 5 or 6 do not distinguish effectively between advertisements and the programs they are watching.

The Australian Psychological Society [<http://www.psychsociety.com.au/member/media.htm>] has expressed concern that children under the age of five are generally unable to differentiate advertisements from programs.

Ability to understand 'selling' intent of advertising

The Australian Psychological Society reports research which indicates that most children six to seven years of age understand the selling function of advertisements, while most eight year olds understand their specifically persuasive intent. They expressed concern that children are less likely to adopt a critical approach to their processing of advertising intent.

Many of the advertisements use techniques that mislead children as to the worth or performance of the product. As Roberts says, to understand selling intent, the child has to be able to take the perspective of another, and to understand that the seller will engage in puffery, trickery, exaggeration in order to sell. (Kunkel, Dale (ref))

Impact on family

Children are effective influencers of family purchasers, pestering their parents to buy products that they neither need nor really understand. A British study reported that 85% of a sample of 4–13 year olds acknowledged that they had asked their parents to buy advertised products and 66% claimed that their parents had met their request.

Advertising pressures can produce significant conflict between parents and children. Many vulnerable families succumb, spending dollars they can least afford. Pester power often works.

An opinion from a reliable source

Steve Biddulph, noted Australian author of books on child raising, says that advertising to children is an unfair practice. He says that advertising works by making you unhappy with their lives, anxious and unsatisfied. It sells to them by



damaging their mental health.

Who is the most vulnerable

Children under the age of 7 or 8. Advertising directed at this age group is inherently unfair.

But even older children do not always know when advertisements are telling the truth, and are vulnerable to the appeals (as even adults are) to the appeals to their self esteem, anxieties, and need to be seen as “cool”.

The advertising industry

Big business now runs annual conferences (with big fees) to share the best techniques to sell their products to children. Children are being actively targeted by the advertising industry for three reasons:

- they have considerable money of their own
- they are powerful influencers of family purchases, from breakfast cereal to the family car
- if captured early, can develop a warm and fuzzy feeling towards a company for life.

Relevant rules and regulations

The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) has a set of legally binding standards for advertising directed to children that occurs within C programs. Commercial [http://www.youngmedia.org.au/codes/complaints_freetoair.htm#commercial] and Pay TV [http://www.youngmedia.org.au/codes/complaints_paytv.htm] have Codes of Practice governing advertising directed to children in other children's programs. There are limits on the amount of time occupied by the advertisements.

Basically they require that no advertisement may mislead or deceive a child, and that the techniques used in ads should fairly represent the product.

There are requirements that apply to the promotion of “premium offers” (the trinket a child gets if they buy some other product such as a fast food meal).

What parents can do

- If you see advertising that you believe is misleading or unfair, complain to the station that screened it. [<http://www.youngmedia.org.au/codes/complaints.htm>]
- Give your children a solid sense of self esteem. (Practise the slogan “I like you as you are, exactly and precisely, I think you turned out nicely”).
- Minimise exposure to commercial TV until children

are over eight. Watch the ABC or Pay TV. Keep a stock of favourite videos (or borrow from the local library) for young children.

- Avoid exposure to cartoon series that are toy linked (see related topics).
- Encourage children to avoid Internet sites that are product linked.
- Use your power as parent to educate your children about advertising. Talk about the techniques, show children the real product in stores and compare it to the way it was advertised. Comment on advertisements that exploit.

What regulators could do

Regulators need to be encouraged to enforce the present set of standards for advertising to children more effectively.

Summary

Advertising and marketing to children is big business. The techniques being used are unfair to young children. Parents need to minimise (where possible) young children's exposure to advertising, and seek less commercial environments. Parents can also be powerful media educators.

Further reading

Young Media Australia *Advertising to children* [link]

Frith, S and Biggins, B (eds.) (1994) (*Children and Advertising: a Fair Game?*) (Papers from a national conference held by Young Media Australia and the New College Institute for Values Research)

Australian Psychological Society (1997) (*Media Representations and Responsibilities: Psychological perspectives*) (Position paper developed by a Working Group of the Directorate of Social Issues.)

Bibliography (for the serious student)

http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/10_03_bib_advertising.htm

Related topics

Toy linked cartoons

Food advertising



For more information about Children and the Media, call the
Young Media Australia Helpline

Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children.

1800 700 357

Freecall anywhere in Australia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
Or go to the Young Media Australia website

www.youngmedia.org.au

Ordering more fact sheets

Young Media Australia has over sixty printed fact sheets about the impact of media on children.

To get a list of available Young Media Australia fact sheets, or to order your copies call the
Young Media Australia Helpline
1800 700 357

You may also download a fact sheet order form from our web site **www.youngmedia.org.au** or browse the fact sheets in topic format online.