

## **Marketing in Schools – An Introduction**

### **Luke Malone**

During my third year of university, the school I attended suddenly switched to Coke. That is, seemingly overnight, Pepsi products disappeared from the campus, replaced by all things Coca-Cola. At the time, I saw this as merely a minor annoyance. After all, I liked Pepsi, but classes took precedence over soft drinks. What I didn't realize as this was happening was that the university was experiencing something that adolescents are being increasingly exposed to: the branding of schools.

Marketers see adolescents as present and future consumers. As such, they want to develop preferences for their products in any way possible. Though of course they are exposed to many advertisements a day outside of school, teens do have a habit of switching the channel once the commercials come on. Thus, advertisers are finding their way into school systems.

When it comes to corporations invading high schools, a switch to Coke or Pepsi is a relatively minor takeover. Nowadays, companies are finding increasingly clever ways of insinuating themselves into students' lives. In 2000, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified four sectors of commercial activity in schools:

- Product sales. Exclusive sales of one company's soft drink falls into this category
- Direct Advertising. This includes things like posters in hallways. Increasingly, advertisements are placed in washrooms, particularly above urinals (Milner 160)
- Indirect advertising. This includes educational materials provided by corporations
- Market research. Examples of this include taste tests and online profiling of teens

When schools receive revenue, perhaps a

few advertisements in washrooms don't seem like such a bad thing. However, a simple list of the four categories of advertising in schools hardly covers all of the ingenious strategies that marketers have come up with. The next section deals with some of their efforts.

### **Brandstorm**

Sometimes the efforts of marketers also have direct educational value. This is the case of Kellogg's, which supplies nutritional posters to schools. However, adorning the posters are logos for cereals such as Rice Krispies (Milner 160). Indeed, much of branding in schools centres around food. In the United States, both Pizza Hut and Domino's have found ways of grabbing teens' attention. The former, should you read enough books, will reward you with free pizza. Putting a different spin on branding, Domino's rewards schools with free books when those schools sell enough pizza (Stark). Both strategies encourage teens to consume a certain brand of pizza, either by encouraging a school-related activity (reading) or encouraging consumption outright. In other cases,

consumer products are used in Science class experiments (is Prego thicker than Ragu? How do General Mills' Fruit Gushers mimic volcanic eruptions?) (Stark). Sometimes, brands insinuate themselves into the curriculum; McGraw Hill recently published a math textbook with references to Nike and Gatorade (Stark).

The above examples expose students to advertising on a fleeting, irregular basis. Not content with simply exposing teens to advertising once in a while, companies have figured out other ways to get into the classroom.

### **Channel One and YNN**

Channel One, and in Canada the Youth News Network, largely constitute what is known in schools as "electronic marketing." The format of the two is as follows: students watch a ten minute news broadcast, followed by two or two and a half minutes of commercials (Molnar). Aside from having students watch the news, schools ostensibly benefit from these arrangements through the donation of the video equipment necessary for viewing the

broadcasts. In the United States in 2001, Channel One was making its way into 12,000 schools daily (Stark). Opponents of Channel One and YNN cite their unease with teens being turned into a “captive audience” for advertising (Stark). On the other hand, proponents of the broadcasts say that students are “savvy enough to judge the validity of marketing claims” (Kennedy). As Michael Sweeder, a distance-learning coordinator in New Jersey, says of advertising on Channel One, “Kids don’t even pay attention to it” (Kennedy). The obvious question to ask, then, is “Just how much effect does all of this advertising have on target teens?”

### **Being Aware**

Unfortunately, outside the marketing of cigarettes and alcohol (covered elsewhere in this Hotline), little has been done to determine what effect advertising and branding initiatives have on adolescents. In a worldwide study conducted by WPP Group’s Mediaedge, 16-24-year-olds were more likely than other age groups to notice product placement in films (Hall). Additionally, 41% of this demographic

reported being willing to try a product seen in film, compared to 28% for 35-44-year-olds (Hall). Anyone can be a target of advertising, and it appears that youth are more susceptible than adults. It is logical, then, to ensure that teens are aware of marketing and of its intent. Fortunately, media literacy groups have already put together tools to aid teens in thinking critically about marketing. In Canada, for instance, the Media Awareness Network has put together lessons and articles to educate children and teens on different aspects of advertising strategy. Similar resources are available at the Center for Media Literacy. While debate rages about branding in schools, both teachers and libraries can use media literacy resources to educate teens about what they see each day. Savvy or not, the fact remains that teens see advertisements at every turn, even in the halls of their schools.

### **Resources:**

[www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

<http://www.medialit.org/>

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