

How Young Is Too Young: Marketing To The Tween Generation

Stephen B. Castleberry, (Email: scastleb@d.umn.edu), University of Minnesota Duluth

Patricia A. Merrier, (Email: pmerrier@d.umn.edu), University of Minnesota Duluth

ABSTRACT

A girl yanks on a pair of hipster jeans. Her mother is aghast, “You can’t go to school looking like that,” the mother says sternly. The mom then pulls the pants lower, proving she is hip to the current styles.

INTRODUCTION

This scene is from a controversial JCPenney television commercial that aired in August 2001. In response to parental complaints, the company announced on August 10, 2001, that it would pull the national commercial. While the JCPenney commercial concerns a teenager and the Juniors line, fake leather, marabou, sequins, and short shorts have infiltrated the Girls size 7-14 segment. This segment is known as the “tween” market and comprises children ages 7 to 11.

Parents and schools around the country have become outspoken about the clothes that are being marketed to tweens. “I don’t want to use the word sleazy, but it is,” said one mother, who shopped at JCPenney with daughters, ages 13 and 6. “I am looking right at the stuff and I am wondering, ‘What are the buyers thinking?’ I said to my 13 year-old, ‘If you put your arms up and I see your skin, you’re not buying it.’”

A 44-year-old Massachusetts mother of tween daughters said she remembers battling with her own mother over the hip huggers she liked to wear. But “what we thought was tight was nothing,” she said. As the mother of 11- and 14-year-old daughters, she finds herself explaining to her girls why they shouldn’t wear the popular styles being marketed. “They’ll say ‘I don’t understand what your problem is,’” and “I’ll say, ‘Look at what’s showing. Look at what people are staring at. It’s asking for trouble.’ It is a major problem, but they don’t get it.”

“Those folks who make up the styles are making me crazy,” said Paul Berkel, principal at Dover-Sherborn Regional Middle School. “In middle school, sexuality is budding and we need all the help we can get covering up those indicators, rather than promoting them.” Principals are trying to balance the need for personal expression through clothing and maintaining an appropriate school environment for learning.

In Fall 2001, New York State began requiring all public school districts to adopt dress codes as part of a larger code of conduct. In North Carolina, the bill that allowed schools to post the Ten Commandments also required them to institute dress codes.

Parents and schools worry that the line separating normal hormonal-fueled experimentation and lasting damage is increasingly being crossed. Part of it is how young the celebrities are, appealing to an even younger group of girls. Another is that while boundary-pushing stars aren’t new, the overall media saturation of sex is, experts say.

The stars these girls adore have different views of their power. A person at her record label, Jive Records in Los Angeles, said that Britney Spears “. . . is a positive role model for teenagers who promotes the importance of girls believing in themselves through ‘girl power’.” Jennifer Lopez, on the other hand, introduced a clothing collection called J.Lo Girls, targeted specifically at this group. In a statement, she said, “So many of my fans are

young girls, and it is important to me that we target this extremely influential age group.” Actress-singer Hilary Duff has entered the tween market with a line she describes as focusing on clothing that fits younger kids while looking as though it’s for older kids. This product-based competition among celebrities seeking the attention of the young girls who view them as idols has been dubbed “whore wars.”

What makes tweens so important to retailers? First is the size of the segment. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of 8- to 14-year-olds living in the United States totaled approximately 28 million in 2000, and more than half of that population is female. Second, their spending power. Tweens have even more spending power than other members of Generation Y. According to the Wonder Group, today’s tweens spend an average of \$4.72 a week of their own money, typically from an allowance. In addition, tweens get a lot of money through cash gifts. That amounts to \$10 billion a year out-of-pocket with either their own allowances or with money acquired through gifts. In addition to direct spending, there’s the spending they influence, estimated by Wonder Group at \$260 billion annually. And, tweens like to shop. When 7 to 13 year-olds were asked in a survey conducted by Scholastic Inc. what they would do if there were an extra hour in a day, 19.3 percent said they would use the extra time to shop. Playing sports was the only activity category receiving a higher response (23.1 percent).

“This is the most influential youth segment,” says Dave Siegel, president of the Wonder Group. “Unlike teens, they still have to rely on their power to influence their parents in order to get the goods and services they want. And today’s parents are different from yesterday’s; instead of being the gatekeeper that puts off their kids’ nagging, they’ve become cooperative partners in this endeavor. We call them the ‘4 eyed, 4 legged consumer.’ The Tween and mom act as one consumer.”

A report by Market Research found that advertisers have learned that they need to place campaigns in publications and programs that appear to be geared toward older teens but in fact are popular with tweens. This strategy is called “age up.” But marketing to children has its own set of challenges. “The first rule of dealing with children is to recognize that they differ from adult consumers,” says Bart Lazer, a lawyer who, among other things, specializes in advertising matters. “Teens, tweens, and younger children must each be treated separately when crafting marketing materials and programs,” he adds, noting that marketing and advertising rules “will typically be applied and interpreted in a more restrictive fashion when dealing with children, precisely because of who they are.”

One of the most successful retailers in this market is Tween Brands, Inc. (Limited Too and Justice). The company’s revenue was \$757.49 million in 2006, up from \$602.7 million in 2001. Paul Carbone, the company’s Senior VP for Finance, describes the company as being “passionate” about retailing to tweens. He sees the company’s target market as girls between 7 and 14 years of age who are fashion aware and want to dress like the older girls.

Michael Rayden, chairman and CEO of the Limited Too, is confident that the future looks bright for tween-targeting retailers. “There are about 4 million births a year, a figure that’s been very consistent over the past decade. The market size itself is going to stay relatively constant. What’s changing about this girl is that every year she’s getting more and more spending influence: she’s earning more of her own money and she’s getting more power because the adults in her life are spending more on her.”

Rayden is also aware that for every tween customer who walks through the Limited Too doors, there’s an adult protecting her interests. “Moms have three concerns,” he says. “The happiness of her child, the development of her child, and the health and safety of her child. I try to satisfy all concerns simultaneously. We’ve got a chat room-free website, Mom doesn’t have to worry about that, and in terms of fashion, we will always err on the side of being age-appropriate. And I believe our consumer loyalty is so strong because we don’t breach that trust ever.” In reference to the “Lolita” fashion trends, Rayden says “We’re not Abercrombie. We don’t take those risks.”

Nathan Laffin, who created the Pink Panther collection, noted that the tween line was created because a similar Junior line had done so well. Laffin said, “A lot of the motivation for the tween consumer comes from looking at the junior customers, who are in turn looking at celebrities,” adding that Pink Panther scored high marks in tween-oriented focus groups.

Robert Reda, creator of the She's Charmed and Dangerous line, says his line is "edgy, funky, has pink, marabou, and sequins. But it comes from a place of innocence rather than being too sexy or provocative. It's fun, playful, and frisky. Our tops aren't cropped tops and they don't say 'Hot Stuff' or 'Sexy Thing.' Pink and glitter is the deal. We're really targeting the girl that's just past embracing product from Barbie and just before she can dress like Britney."

Several experts disagree with such fine distinctions and take issue with the marketing acronym KAGOY (kids are getting older younger). Instead, they contend that the lines between childhood and adulthood have been blurred unnecessarily. Susan Linn, author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*, notes that marketing to children begins at their birth and that such marketing involves not only products but also values. Kay Hymowitz, author of *Ready or Not: What Happens When We Treat Children as Small Adults*, said "The 15 year-olds don't have that kind of control over their lives yet, they don't understand the power of sex, and we have not had the time to shape their sensibilities about it. We're letting the ads do it. There are other signs such as the increasing number of students who report engaging in oral sex, saying it does not violate 'technical virginity.'"

Experts suggest that scanty clothing reveals what Deborah Roffman, a sex educator, calls the "demeaning" of sex and intimacy among younger and younger children. The new school dress codes reflect this fear. While dress codes in the past have revolved around matters of taste (long hair) or safety (hats or bandanas in gang colors), the latest ones try to rein in what schools feel is the rampant sexualization of teenagers. The way schools and psychologists see it, the continuum begins with skimpy clothes, moves into "freak dancing," in which students grind their pelvises together in simulated sex, and ultimately, incidents like the one at a Maryland High School in which parents went along as high school football players hired a stripper for a party to inaugurate the season.

"Kids are suppose to test the limits, you worry about it if they don't do that," says Roffman. "But the message now is that there are no limits." The Xhilaration line, which is targeted to very young girls, includes this label on the clothing: "There are no rules. Whether you choose to go crazy or dress to thrill. Make a statement. Make a scene. Wear what you want and it won't be wrong."

The matter, school officials say, is complicated by questions of personal taste, First Amendment rights, sensitive issues of female body image, and the tricky reality that the same outfit may look plain on one girl and provocative on another. Today's parents, many who came of age challenging dress codes themselves, are making things difficult for school administrators. Parents also feel that enabling a girl to buy her own clothes increases the chances that she will develop as a more independent person. These parents are often reluctant to challenge their children.

Another problem appeared in an Irvington, New York, middle school when it was forced to retreat on a rule requiring shorts to be five inches in the inseam, after parents complained that they could not find shorts long enough in the stores. "I saw it, shopping myself," said Lauren Allan, the principal. "The truth of the matter is, unless the kids are buying at Talbots, which they're not going to do, it's impossible to find anything."

Of course, tween clothing is not the only product that gets attention and reaction from individuals and special interest groups. The diverse mix of products and services that groups sometimes object to includes casinos, abortion clinics, biotech firms, anti-Semitic newsletters, slaughterhouses, prostitution, televangelists, pornography magazines and adult entertainment, cigarette companies, and education establishments, just to name a few. And these are all legal somewhere in the U.S.

CASE QUESTIONS

1. Is it wrong for a company to target tweens with clothing options that many (e.g., parents, teachers, school principals, etc.) would consider inappropriate for their age?
2. When and how should you let special interest groups, such as those listed in question one, influence your decisions as a business?
3. Does the nature of tween market bring more pressure on the retailers to adopt a higher ethical approach?

4. How would you react to these statements, made by proponents of the type of clothing described in this case:
 - a. “This type of clothing actually is good for girls. It gives girls power. If they look like everyone else, they will be more comfortable with who they are and feel more empowered to take on the world.”
 - b. “If you don’t like it, don’t buy it. But don’t keep those who want to buy it from being able to do so.”
 - c. “If parents or school officials try to stop this type of tween clothing, girls will just want to wear it even more.”
 - d. “There is nothing stopping a parent from keeping his/her child from buying or wearing this type of clothing, even though it might be offered for sale. It’s the parents’ responsibility to raise their children the way they want to. It’s not the responsibility of stores like The Limited Too to be social police.”
 - e. “Where are the statistics that this is actually doing any form of harm?”
 - f. “You can’t legislate morality. It’s a free country and tween fashion designers and retailers are just exploiting a real demand for clothing that already exists.”
 - g. “This type of clothing is actually good for girls. It gives the parents a chance to talk about sex earlier with their young daughters.”
 - h. “Girls are just playing ‘dress up’ when they wear these kinds of clothes. Girls have been playing ‘dress up’ since the beginning of time!”
5. How would you react to these statements, made by opponents of tween clothing described in this case:
 - a. “Retailers and designers are putting vulnerable children at risk. This is a very impressionable group. There should be standards.”
 - b. “If there is even the slightest chance of a risk that this type of clothing might do harm, it is the responsibility of fashion designers and retailers to use caution in terms of the tween clothing designed and marketed.”
 - c. “By offering this type of clothing, you are making our jobs as parents more difficult. We have to defend our principles and beliefs against what the market is telling them is acceptable and cool to wear.”
 - d. “You retailers don’t have to offer something just because it is demanded. You can take the high road instead.”
 - e. “Even if we were to try to convince our young girls that this type of clothing is unacceptable, they can change their clothes as soon as they get to school and wear clothing that we object to. And that is only possible because you tween designers design it and you tween retailers sell it!”
6. This case focuses on clothing for tween girls. Are there products that create similar concerns for parents of tween boys, or is tween marketing a gender-specific issue?
7. Assume you manage a clothing store that sells clothing and related merchandise for tween girls. What would you say to a parent who, in the process of returning items he/she deems inappropriate for a tween, accuses your store of being more interested in profits than in values?

OPTIONAL CASE DEBATE EXERCISE

1. The class will be split into two groups by having each student choose one of the following statements as coming closest to their personal views on the subject:
Group A: It is wrong for a company to target tweens with clothing options that many (e.g., parents, teachers, school principals, etc.) would consider inappropriate for their age.
Group B: It is not wrong for a company to target tweens with clothing options that many (e.g., parents, teachers, school principals, etc.) would consider inappropriate for their age.
2. Teams will meet for 30 minutes, preparing arguments that support their position and also arguments to question the position of the opposing group. The goal of each team is to convince individuals on the opposing team to change their mind.
3. Teams return to the classroom and engage in a group-on-group discussion of the issues for fifteen minutes.
4. Teams meet alone and take five minutes to prepare final arguments that support their position.

5. Teams return to the classroom and engage in a final group-on-group discussion of the issues for five minutes.
6. A confidential vote is taken to see who changed their position and why.
7. Students and faculty debrief and discuss perceived barriers, including communication issues, to achieving their goal.

Note: A powerful follow-up communication activity is available from the authors upon request.

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NOTES