How Young is Too Young:  
Marketing to the Tween Generation

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.

This scene is from a controversial JCPenney television commercial, which aired in August 2001. In response to parental complaints, the company announced on August 10, 2001 that it would pull the national commercial.

At Wet Seal in Georgetown, Maryland, angry mothers returned more than a dozen pint-size "Playboy" T-shirts, said store manager Victoria Robinson.

Parents and schools around the country have become outspoken about the clothes that are being marketed to children. While the JC Penney commercial concerns a teenager and the Juniors line, fake leather, marabou, sequins and short shorts have penetrated down to the Girls size 7-14 segment. This segment is known as the "Tweens" market and comprises children ages 7 to 11.

"I don't want to use the word sleazy, but it is," said one mother, who shopped at J. C. Penney 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.'"

Diane Baskind, 44, of Framingham, 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, Baskind 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,'" Baskind said. "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 Régional 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 stars 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.
Case was written by an MBA student. Name removed to protect identity.

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."

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. 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 the 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% said they would use the extra time to shop. Playing sports was the only activity category receiving a higher response (23.1%).

"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.'

One of the most successful retailers in this market is Limited Too, with sales of $602.7 million in 2001. Michael Rayden, chairman and CEO of 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 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 web site Mom doesn't have to worry about, 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. For Spring, Pink Panther is focusing on two trends "a revisiting of the homemade look of early punk rock, with raw edges, safety pins and tears - not in a Sex Pistol kind of way but a Britney Spears kind of way; and graffiti."

Robert Reda, creator of the She's Charmed and Dangerous line, says his line is "edgy, funky, has pink, maroon 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. 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 numbers of students who report engaging in oral sex, saying it does not violate "technical virginity."

Experts suggest that such scanty clothing reveals what Deborah Roffman, a sex educator, calls the "de-meaning" 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 bandannas 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 supposed 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, sold at Target and targeted to girls as young as 6, comes with a label that says: "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 during the Vietnam War and the 1960s, are making things difficult for school administrators. Parents also feel that by 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 a Liverton, N.Y. 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."

Thought-provoking Questions

1) The Limited Too has a stated policy that says they are concerned about the development of the girls they target, yet some parents and school administrators are still not happy with the clothing they sell. What more should the company be required to do?

2) Does the nature of Tween market bring more pressure on the retailers to adopt a higher ethical approach?

3) Are the actions of the retailers responsible for creating the desires of the Tween market or are they simply responding to a change in society's values?
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