

Now's the time for self-regulation: HDI on the ethics of youth marketing

HDI Youth Marketeers' Managing Director Catherine Bothma, and youth expert, Jason Levin take the time to respond to some of the most frequently asked questions about the ethics of youth marketing.

While the concept of youth marketing may seem like a no-brainer, there's regular debate about the ethics involved in not only marketing to but also communicating with consumers under the age of 18, especially as a brand.

Now, with the ASA facing possible liquidation, who will regulate the space?



ASA in crisis - seeks industry support at AGM next week

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Bothma and Levin hope we will all take up the challenge, and share best practice below...

Impressionable yet analytical children

To the point that children are impressionable by nature and whether marketers should be allowed to try and communicate with them at all, Levin shares, "By the time children are seven, they have basic analytical skills, and the key is to keep that going. It's not necessarily useful or practical to place a gag order on marketers, even if we think we should."



Catherine Bothma, Managing Director at HDI Youth Marketeers.

That's because it doesn't help the endgame, which is to develop critical analysis skills in kids, and Levin cautions that while this practice works to some extent internet-wise in China, it's expensive. Australia also failed on implementing digital age-based censorship 10 years ago.

Bothma adds that she wants to protect her children from harm in the same way as any parent does, but in our world of media and social media, "they are going to find the information that they want to find anyway".

That's why she recommends authenticity, and even more honesty for marketers and brand communicators. And for the industry as a whole to recognise the value and regulate the flow so that we "weed out the bad stuff."

Regulating "bad" content aimed at youth

Bothma and Levin say it's easy for corporates and brands to manage and self-regulate as the provisions of industry self-regulation and even legislation prevail, whatever the media platform. Marketers should know better and as most business now operate in a community, even if it's a national or global one, there is no point harming your consumers, no matter what their age.

While Levin says, "most hard sell is pretty transparent, and teens balk against it," Bothma says it's a more thorny issue when you're dealing with small children. Provided the communication is about a product that's not harmful as a baseline, even better if it adds value to their lives, these are positive interventions that should be encouraged in brands.

This also applies branded content and roadshows in schools. Bothma recommends the lowest possible interference with the process of teaching and learning, and that the content has to have educational value, and preferably be curriculum-aligned. As the ASA Code and the CGCSA Code of Ethics outlaws using animated characters in the promotion of unhealthy products, caution should again be taken to ensure the spokesperson's message is beneficial and in line with a healthy, happy lifestyle.

Levin recommends very clear and well-enforced industry self-regulation, which government could be a participant in the drafting of. "Once there's a mutually agreed, strong, robust self-regulation code, then every marketer should be compelled to be a signatory to it. All must be held accountable for abiding by the code, and if they fall foul of it, there must be zero tolerance. The 10% of marketers that act irresponsibly shouldn't give the other 90% a bad name."

Bothma concludes, "Not all marketing is made to sell expensive plastic toys and junk food."

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