Abstract

One of the most important developments in marketing to kids in recent years is the defining of the “tween” market – those aged 8 to 14. Tweens are no longer children, but not yet teenagers. Much has been made of this age group, and this article will examine how to use integrated marketing communications principles to best market to individual segments (and shine the light on hidden opportunities) within the tween age group and increase return-on-investment. We will explore the particular characteristics that will shape tweens as tomorrow’s consumers and look at successful marketing from the entertainment, cosmetics/personal care and electronics industries.

ANFSCD*:

“They are a generation stuck on fast forward, in a fearsome hurry to grow up. Richer than ever, they’re also a retailer’s dream, with a seemingly insatiable desire for the latest in everything.”
– Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1999

So began the first mainstream article on tweens, kids aged 8 to 14 (sometimes classified as ages 6 to 12 - Skey, 2006) (Guthrie, 2005). Many marketers looking to build brand loyalty and expand market share are marketing down to the tween age group and, in particular, tween girls. But marketing to this group presents numerous challenges. Not only are parents still major players in the purchasing decision, but companies have a moral obligation to act within the bounds of age-appropriate targeting. There is an ever-increasing

* And now for something completely different
number of market research and consulting firms focusing on how best to target tweens, but for the purposes of this article we will concentrate on new technology-based trends with tweens and emerging technologies that marketers are using to reach out to tweens and provide them with age-appropriate and relevant products for their age group.

**Tweens: What Do We Know About Them?**

It is difficult to determine whether the media and society have led kids, and particularly girls, to mature more quickly, or whether society has reacted to physiological evolution in our children today. But one thing is certain: the phenomenon of age compression is, bar none, the most significant development affecting youth marketing today. There are two important points to note: First, there is a major difference between boys and girls, with girls maturing more quickly than boys; and secondly, there appears to be an important shift in attitudes and behaviors around age 11 – this is the age at which kids go from primary school to middle school and the peer group takes on new importance, and social skills also develop at this age. These two points have major ramifications for marketers.

Where there used to be one market segment for kids aged 2 to 13, there are now several. Traditional toy age is now peaking at age 8, although boys tend to continue to play with traditional toys well into the tween years, longer than girls do. Tweens, in particular girls, are aspirational, and look to emulate teens – thus spin-off brands such as Limited Too are successful because they build off the association with the teen brand. They do not, however, necessarily seek out adult or teen products per se. For example, in cosmetics, a growth area in terms of tween buyers, tween girls are partial to shimmer and lip gloss, not traditional makeup like lipstick, foundation, and blush. Also, tweens are very brand conscious because they try to emulate teens but typically have not yet developed a personal style. Furthermore, they have been exposed at an early age to marketing messages and thus are very knowledgeable about brands. This means tweens value personalization and situations which allow them to feel they have control (Siegel, 2004).

Tweens are not teens. They still engage in traditional play activities – a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “closet kids”. In fact, one recent study by the KidzEyes division of C&R Research in Chicago found that 84 percent of tween boys and girls play with toys (results based on a sample of 900 tweens) (Kurnit, 2005).

The success of more “wholesome” brands like Beacon Street Girls (B*Tween Productions) or American Girl Dolls demonstrates that tween girls do not always want to relate to older activities. Parental approval of more age-appropriate toys and materials may also play a part in girls’ willingness to latch on to certain toys.

**Micromarketing: Advantages of Understanding – and Catering to – Nuances in the Tween Segment**

Tweens, especially girls, want to look older and to act and behave like teenagers. However, there is some evidence that shows that efforts to treat the teen and tween demographic as one will backfire because it’s very difficult to push one coherent message to kids who can be up to six years apart in age (Meyers, 2005). A year or two in the youth community can make a huge difference, and there is a striking attitudinal distinction between grade schoolers and middle schoolers (Clack, 2004). In middle school, the challenges tweens face change drastically. Friendships are important with tweens, but are mainly a source of fun. Family relationships still dominate, though the peer group will have a growing influence. In the teenage years, friendships become important bonding relationships which can be as significant as family relationships (Siegel, 2004).

It can pay off to target teens and tweens as two separate groups. In 2003, Reebok introduced a sneaker specifically targeted for the tween girl, a unique product in the sneaker industry at that time, offered exclusively in Lim-

**Tweens are not teens. They still engage in traditional play activities – a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “closet kids”**.
ments to become “lifestyle” brands for tweens, branding everything from room décor to cell phones to video games. This enables manufacturers to be present not only in the toy aisle but in multiple sections of major stores like Target, Kohl’s and Wal-Mart. In their quest to expand beyond the toy aisle, however, companies targeting tweens must be conscious of providing products which are relevant to the targeted segment, rather than simply enticing the tween to consume products. In other words, companies need to recognize their ethical responsibility not to saturate or overwhelm the tween with products that do not have a place in the life of an 8- to 14-year-old, while building a strong brand across product categories. In fact, many major snack food manufacturers are recognizing this fact and have pledged to limit junk food ads to children. Eleven large food manufacturers including McDonald’s, General Mills, Kellogg, Hershey, Kraft Foods, Mars, PepsiCo and Coca-Cola have voluntarily agreed to pull commercials targeted at kids under 12 for foods that do not meet certain nutritional standards. Some critics feel this is only a small step in the right direction and are calling for increased limits. For example, these companies have agreed to limit advertising on shows aimed at kids, but continue to advertise to shows aimed at families. But the companies have also agreed to open their marketing plans to the Council of Better Business Bureaus and its Children’s Advertising Review Unit, and this can be seen as a breakthrough in responsible marketing (Barnes, 2007).

The Truth About Tweens

Tweens are not as financially independent as their teenage counterparts, so parents are still a major factor in purchasing decisions. The involvement of parents is not only financial: tweens cannot drive themselves anywhere yet, so Mom and Dad are often making decisions about where and when to go shopping. In fact, 72 percent of all tween purchase decisions are made jointly by parent and child, and 19 percent are made by the parent on the child’s behalf. Only 8 percent of tween purchase decisions are actually made by children themselves (Clack, 2004). Parental control is stronger in certain product categories, such as cell phones, than others. In fact some companies such as Cingular have catered to parents by providing “starter” phones designed specifically for the tween set or younger, and in 2005 Mattel started MyScene Mobile, featuring MyScene Barbie-branded phone covers and GPS location tracking of the phone (and thus the child).

While the role of parents in tween product selection should not be underestimated, there is a growing trend among tweens to spend their own money. This money is going less toward clothing and more toward entertainment and electronics, such as cell phones and video games (Clack, 2004).

To successfully market to tweens, you must first, as with all marketing efforts, define exactly who you are targeting and why. James McNeal, a marketing professor at Texas A&M University, states, “There are not one, but three different [tween] markets. First, there’s the market created by kids’ direct spending. Second, there’s the market stemming from kids’ influence over their family’s purchases. Finally, there’s the market of the future – that is, courting kids to eventually become loyal adult consumers.” (Phillips, 1999).

We would argue that while these distinctions are noteworthy and useful in developing objectives for a marketing campaign, the first and second markets are essentially the same and worth targeting, and if this is done successfully, the third will follow.

Targeting Tween Direct Spending

In the oft-cited book Brandchild, Martin Lindström defines four groups tweens can generally be grouped into (Lindstrom, 2004):

1. Edges. Viewed as independent trendsetters, they are anti-fashion, supposedly anti-brand, independent rule breakers that do not usually see themselves on the cutting edge. They often identify with brands that reflect their rebellious behavior, and they try things long before everyone else.

2. Persuaders. Much more mainstream than the Edges, persuaders rapidly adopt new trends and are the most popular group; they set trends for Followers and Reflexives.

3. Followers. This is the mainstream group of tweens. They follow and listen to the persuaders but have an ear open to the cutting edge.

4. Reflexives. With few friends, members of this group try to increase their popularity and acceptance among their fellow tweens. Reflexives are also followers and rarely pick up fashion trends.

To successfully market to tweens’ direct spending, companies must market to the persuaders. Persuaders are the trendsetters who read magazines and know what is going on in music and entertainment (Lindstrom, 2003). They are the kids you knew who
always had the newest music. Persuaders learn about trends and then turn the rest of the tween community on to them. By being places Persuaders go, magazine and TV companies can reach the one group that influences the entire tween community.

**Targeting Tween Influence Over Their Family’s Purchases**

A 1998-1999 survey found that between 20 and 40 percent of all toy, fast food and apparel sales were the result of successful pleas to parents (Kidfluence, 2003). This “nag factor,” as Susan Linn called it, can be divided into two categories: (1) persistence and (2) importance. Persistence nagging (a plea repeated over and over again) is not as effective as the more sophisticated importance nagging. Parents want to provide their tweens with the best. Importance nagging plays on the guilt parents may feel about not providing the best and not having enough time for their kids (Linn, 2004).

Simply put, nagging works. A study conducted by the Center for a New American Dream in 2002 found that 55 percent of surveyed kids said they are usually successful in getting their parents to give in. It is critical to market to the child – probably even more effective than only marketing to Mom – and to ensure your product is on the nag list.

In addition to nagging, Reyne Rice of the research firm NPFDUniverse states, “[Tweens] are a very vocal group. They tell you exactly what they do and don’t want. Parents don’t want to buy something their kids don’t want. Families are busy and kids are being involved in things more and more. They influence the family car, what food you are going to buy. Families decide where they want to go on vacation together.” (Paterson, 2003).

In almost one in three households, parents ask for their kids’ advice when buying a new car (Sharper, 2003). Toyota not only used kids in commercials for its Sienna minivan, but their chief engineer traveled cross-country to speak with families about their wants and needs regarding a vehicle (Howard, 2003).

**Targeting the Market of the Future – Turning Tweens into Loyal Adult Consumers**

The ultimate goal of all this marketing is to instill lifetime brand loyalty in children (Bryner, 2001). Author and consultant Anne Sutherland said, “General Motors believes that boys under 10 know what cars they want to drive when they graduate to driving status.” (Paterson, 2003). Clothing companies now create specific lines to cater to kids as young as four, and then adapt the lines to tweens and beyond.

People like brands. People bond with brands and will choose a brand above all others because they feel that brand is distinctly better at delivering key rational and emotional benefits. According to Millward Brown’s BrandZ study, very young children do not really bond with particular brands. Tendency to bond to brands, however, increases rapidly during the tween years and peaks around age 25 (GIBS Review, 2006).

This is one reason why companies are so keen to brand to tweens. Reach them as a tween and keep reaching out to them, and they may potentially be lifelong customers.

**Using Virtual Worlds to Build Brand Loyalty**

In April 2006, Toyota made their Scion available to kids in places like the tween/teen virtual world Whyville.net (Whyville, 2006). Whyville.net is the self-purported “leading educational virtual world for boys and girls, ages 8 to 15” that encourages children to learn while having fun. Marketers use Whyville, along with other methods, to build relationships with tweens who are deeply immersive. Advertising in or “taking part” in virtual worlds such as Whyville is inherently more lucrative than traditional passive advertising. All tween segments have become averse to traditional broadcast, print and internet banner advertising, and they are immune to its influence. Yet people in virtual worlds can select what they want to do, and how often, when, and where they do it; and they determine how deeply they want to get involved. Victoria Pearson, director of marketing for Whyville, explains, “Kids in Whyville have built and test-driven the [virtual] Scion more than 1 million times. This compelling, persistent campaign

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in a virtual world delivers many simultaneous, high-quality primary and secondary impressions on a 24/7/365 basis. Thus unlike the banner ad and other traditional offline media which are disruptive, a well-crafted virtual sponsorship or campaign/event will enhance a user’s experience, motivating users to seek out your brand and interact with it on an ongoing basis, rather than actively avoid it. The new frontier of virtual worlds is a marketer’s ‘Holy Grail’ and provides an opportunity for marketers to teach their brands’ to users over hours, weeks, or months. This is the most efficient advertising dollar a marketer can spend.” (Schen-dowich, 2007).

Toyota is counting on Whyville users to do two things: influence their parents’ car purchases and potentially grow up with some Toyota brand loyalty. Toyota is not the first car company to engage video game and online game audiences through product placement. Car companies such as DaimlerChrysler have long pitched teenagers and young adults through product placement in video games, and Cadillac has incorporated its cars in a Microsoft Xbox 360 game (Bosman, 2006).

**IMC and the Tween: A Match Made in Heaven**

Ultimately, however, just targeting the right group will not make tween marketing successful. To successfully communicate with the tween market, “you need to understand technology, be edgy and funny and speak their language.” (Alarcon, 2004).

As Pacific Publications youth titles publisher Nicole Sheffield said, tweens are “a generation of multimedia consumers” and when marketers use technology such as the Internet, “it creates maximum penetration with the tween market” (Alarcon, 2004).

By their multitasking, multimedia nature, tweens are an integrated marketers dream. There is vast potential to market an integrated message over multiple channels when dealing with tweens. A perfect example of this new integrated marketing potential is Bratz dolls. Introduced in 2001 with a tagline of, “The only girls with a passion for fashion,” Bratz dolls reflect the growing maturity of young girls and the dolls’ ultra-hip clothes make them sassier than competitor dolls such as Barbie. The somewhat ambiguous varied ethnicities of Bratz dolls are also thought to contribute to their success with the increasingly multiethnic makeup of today’s American kids.

Today, Bratz dolls are an international phenomenon. Worldwide sales are reported to be more than $2 billion (Cook, 2007), and parent company MGA Entertainment has about 350 licensees (Palmeri, 2005) and has been striving to be much more than just a doll company. MGA Entertainment is working to make Bratz a lifestyle brand for tweens, selling Bratz-branded CD players, text message devices, and even digital cameras and room decorations. The first live action Bratz feature film was even released this summer.

The integrated marketing strategy for Bratz includes an investment in a Saturday morning Bratz cartoon on Fox; teaming with the world’s largest commercial real estate company, Simon Property Group (Simon Property press release, 2006) to “deliver integrated marketing attitude to the mall”; teaming with Universal Music Enterprises to combine “the universal appeal of Bratz and the universal language of music” (UME Press Release, 2004); creating other lines of dolls and products, from Game Boy games to stationary and ancillary Bratz videos and books. But, according to Ian Cocoran, the Web site is the lynchpin of the integrated strategy because it “drives a powerful, identity-based message into the minds of the target audience and, of course, the pockets of unsuspecting parents. In terms of content, Bratz.com has an embarrassment of riches fueled by the exponential growth in popularity of the offline brand. There are games, downloads, movie trailers, magazine and TV previews, CD launches, e-cards, horoscopes and a perpetually proliferating product portfolio that must be the envy of competitors from Taiwan to Timbuktu. The Bratz Fan Club is also billed as something of a prerequisite, and kids are being tempted to sign up by offers such as exclusive downloads, the ability to create a virtual Bratz doll, and the chance to collect ‘Party Points’, which can be exchanged for even more downloads and ‘the hottest fashions’ for their newly created cyber doll.” (Cocoran, 2006).

With strong content, engaging visuals and a dash of charisma to burn, Bratz.com is a dynamic caricature of the brand it represents, which can only be bad news for the competition. Offline, there appears to be no end to the markets that the Bratz brand can penetrate; online, the brand is constantly identified with all things “girl power,” which carries a lot more appeal in the mind of a preteen female than the prospect of tea on the lawn with Ken.
Effective Examples of IMC Campaigns

In their book *The Great Tween Buying Machine*, Timothy Coffey, Gregory Livingston and David Siegel identify five rules for ensuring success of new products targeted to tweens: (1) the product must be fun; (2) tweens must have the impression the product is just for them; (3) it must appease parents; (4) it must engender a feeling of power, achievement or independence; (5) and it must appeal to as many of the senses as possible (Siegel 2004). The following campaigns illustrate these rules in practice.

**Entertainment.** “Does anyone remember Christina Aguilera—she sang the song from ‘Mulan’, ‘Reflection’? I heard she has a new song out called ‘Genie in a Bottle.’”

In 1999, RCA Records used viral marketing to build online word of mouth by passing the message on to other target audience members in conjunction with traditional marketing techniques. By doing so, RCA Records sent the debut album, and the career of Christina Aguilera, to No. 1 on the pop charts (Heckman, 2000).

To launch the Aguilera campaign, marketers first compiled a list of the relevant sites, news groups and e-mail addresses for potential fans. They then used this information to generate online discussion among fans by visiting Web sites such as www.alloy.com and www.bolt.com. Marketers, sometimes “sounding like fans”, sometimes like official spokespeople, posted “insider” information such as concert dates, song lyrics and music clips to chatrooms and bulletin boards frequented by the singer’s likely preteen audience (White, 1999). Just before the release of the album, an electronic postcard filled with song snippets and biographical information was e-mailed to 50,000 prospective buyers, chosen based partially on their previous album purchases.

Finally, the team persuaded the large music retailers to post the album’s cover art on their sites. This allowed kids to see what the album looked like before they went to the store to buy it. When it debuted, the album sold more than 951,000 copies.

**Cosmetics and personal care.** Before the L’Oréal Kids hair care line, tweens could choose from shampoos and conditioners targeted to adults, or Johnson & Johnson baby shampoo and Winnie-the-Pooh bottles. L’Oréal understood that there was a market need to fill, and created a line of shampoos and conditioners using bright colors (though not primary colors because those are clearly kid and toddler products), a funny shape somewhat reminiscent of a fish, and a fragrance that is slightly more sophisticated, fun and different, such as Strawberry Smoothie Shampoo, or Fast Dry Shampoo with a Burst of Cool Melon. While it may seem that the name “Kids” in the brand might make it too young, the colors, shape and fragrance all indicate that this product is for tweens. Making bathtime more appealing and fun is a big win with Moms, as tweens are not as obsessed as teens are with personal hygiene. The L’Oréal Kids line also empowers tweens to take care of their own hair and bath (Siegel, 2004). The L’Oréal Kids Web site uses interactive fish- and ocean-themed games to engage kids, and enables them to download underwater scenes as screensavers and wallpapers, which helps keep the brand relevant and present outside the bathroom.

**Electronics.** Leapfrog says its “FLY Pentop Computer is an optical scanning, audio-enabled digital pen that brings computer interactivity to the pen and paper experience.” When you use “special FLY paper, cards or other materials enabled for the FLY Pentop Computer, users can get homework help in math or spelling, translate words into Spanish or English, play games with interactive collectible playing cards or compose music via real-time audio feedback as they write and draw” (Leapfrog, 2006).

To launch the FLY Pentop Computer, Leapfrog created integrated marketing campaigns that used cross-media advertising methodology, network and national cable television, national print and online advertising, and leading education publications directed to school administrators and teachers.

The product’s Web site reinforces
the need to buy the pen by having features such as the ability to compose music by drawing any desired instrument, clicking on the instrument to initiate sound, and blending various instrument sounds to create personalized songs that can be e-mailed to friends. These features can, of course, only be fully accessed by using the pen.

**Conclusion**
To market to tweens, marketers need to:

1. **Market directly to the tween.**
2. **Reach the Persuaders, who are the tween trend setters.**
3. **Use technology, be edgy and funny and speak the language of tweens.**

Tweens are constantly multi-tasking and this makes them an integrated marketers dream. By using multiple platforms and technologies, tweens can be successfully marketed to and brands can grow successfully both today and well into the future.

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