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# The Diaper Demographic

In a brand-saturated marketplace, how can a company win lifelong loyalty? Snag 'em before they turn two.

by **Evan Ratliff**

images by Atypyk

**A few months ago**, my nephew Hayden, an inquisitive and loquacious two-and-a-half-year-old, was riding in the car with his dad. Like other kids his age, Hayden enjoys pointing out things he recognizes, like rivers, stop signs, and trains. That day, though, he spotted something different. As they drove past those ubiquitous golden arches—one of the most recognized symbols in the world—he pointed and exclaimed, “Daddy, Daddy, I see Old McDonald’s restaurant!”

Not exactly right, but still a shock to Hayden’s father, who had diligently steered him clear of the land of the Happy Meal. My brother’s son can’t yet read, and he has no concept of what an advertisement is. But he is already, somehow, brand aware. Hayden already favors Cheerios over generic knockoffs, recognizes a Home Depot sign at a distance of several hundred yards, and identifies the logo on a can of Coke, despite never having tasted it.

Reams of research conducted over the past decade have tended to support the notion that infants remember much more of what they encounter than previously suspected. The findings have spawned a marketing revolution premised on the idea that kids are a captive audience from day one. Early-age products—from

Fisher-Price toys to shows like *Teletubbies* to Disney-owned Baby Einstein’s educational products—have become a multi-billion-dollar industry.

“Marketers are now finding that babies request brands as soon as they can talk,” says Susan Linn, a psychologist and child advocate at the Harvard-affiliated Judge Baker Children’s Center. That means infants absorb brands from logos, street signs, television, cartoon characters, and more. “They call it the drool factor,” says Linn. “The baby drools, looks down, and sees Disney on his shirt.” It’s a crucial opportunity to capture mindshare. “The marketers talk about cradle-to-grave brand loyalty,” she says. “That’s what they want.”

**Striding confidently** around the front of a ballroom, a microphone clipped to his flower-print Hawaiian shirt, Dan Acuff is debriefing an audience of executives from Johnson & Johnson, Bayer, and Nestlé on the virtues of the Trix Rabbit. Acuff’s presentation is called “Best Packaged Goods Characters of All Time,” and the executives have paid anywhere from \$1,800 to \$3,700 to attend a conference called Kid Power 2003 in Orlando, Florida.

“The Trix Rabbit,” he says, calling up

a slide of the famously silly character on a large screen behind him, “is very iconish.” I’m not sure iconish is a word, but if it’s industry lingo, Acuff would know. He’s the author of *What Kids Buy and Why*, and he makes his living teaching companies how to maximize the appeal of their brands. As the president of Youth Market Systems Consulting—an Encino, California-based firm—he develops and markets products and television programs to kids for clients like Disney, Kraft, Microsoft, Nestlé, and Nike.

The conference program actually focuses on the highly coveted tween demographic—eight-to-twelve-year-olds, who have become a flashpoint for marketers and anticommmercialization activists alike. But, as the economy continues to flail and marketers realize that preteens and their parents have become increasingly savvy about branding, there’s a hint of hard times in the air. With nowhere left to turn, corporations are in hot pursuit of the hundreds of millions to be made in even younger “kid dollars.” Experts like Acuff, whose research plumbs the newborn-to-seven group, are helping companies launch a branding race to the womb—marketing’s final frontier.

Acuff has a relaxed, down-home air,



**“Babies request brands as soon as they can talk,” says Susan Linn, a child advocate.**

but he has clearly mastered the topic of cartoon characters' selling power. He favors the Trix bunny (5th best) over lesser spokescreatures like the Pillsbury Doughboy (10th best) and Tony the Tiger (6th best) because of the rabbit's particular appeal to young children. “There's a concept that applies to children below the age of seven called centration,” he says, pointing out the character's prominent head on the cereal box. “It's a psychological principle. They tend to fixate on the most interesting, largest visual.”

Acuff's book distills child psychology theories like centration into usable marketing advice. Based on such theories, he also advises that TV shows and their character tie-ins be retooled to trigger a response in infants. “Children under three do not respond well to extremely fast-paced programming,” he writes. They need a much slower rhythm “so that they can focus on images and characters.” The book's most significant finding may be that as children “approach the age of three, they begin to influence what their parents buy,” instead of the other way around.

Following this logic, superstores—a brand central—are taking pains to ensure that logos are plainly visible to their youngest customers. Visit a discount

retailer like Kmart or Walgreen's and it's hard to find clothing that doesn't have a logo on it.

In marketing parlance, well-intentioned parents who screen their toddler's intake are “gatekeepers.” At Kid Power, sessions like “The Reemergence of the Gatekeeper” and “Hit 'Em Where They Hang: Reaching Kids in Their Natural Habitat” warn that, to a much greater extent than previous generations, Gen X parents tend to be health-conscious and leery of celebrity sponsorship. Getting past them seems to be the greatest challenge marketers face.

The upshot of all this is that Hayden's parents may be making more stops at McDonald's in the future. As it turns out, that moment of recognition probably originated from a single event: when his grandfather stopped there for an ice cream and shared his cone. Hayden wasn't exactly marketed to—he just made the connection between the golden arches and something yummy. Toddlers are in a continual process of discovering the world around them, and when that world is dominated by brands, it's next to impossible to keep them from noticing. While Hayden's parents do their best to safeguard him, completely denying Hayden brand-associated products seems, well, not much fun.

Either way, the explosion in kid marketing has prompted a backlash from child psychologists and anticommmercialization groups. To the extent that cradle-to-grave marketing works, argues Linn, its very pervasiveness makes a parent's job impossible—and gives kids a built-in disadvantage as inexperienced consumers. She points to childhood obesity as a potential consequence, along with studies that warn of the dangers of materialism and a sedentary lifestyle. But the real issue, says Linn, is saturation—the point at which commercial language becomes the child's framework for the world. “If it was one brand or one logo that kids were advertised to or associated with positively, it wouldn't be a problem,” Linn says. “The problem is that it's just everywhere.”

On the legislative front, Linn and others are fighting to contain the more obvious flagrances, like advertising in schools and TV commercials directly targeting kids. Even on those issues, anticommmercialization interests face a staunchly pro-business environment. It's not on anyone's agenda to call for the Trix Rabbit to be removed from its box, McDonald's to fell its arches, or Disney to stop putting the Little Mermaid on lunch boxes. But even if it was, that wouldn't stop Hayden from



**Two-and-a-half-year-old Hayden identifies the logo on a can of Coke, despite never having tasted one.**

pointing at the bright red-and-white delivery van on the highway and exclaiming, “That’s a Coke truck!”

**At the Kid Power 2003 conference,** Acuff holds the 50 or so company reps in his sway with lines like “In a sense, Captain Crunch is a ruler,” and “The Keebler elves, what’s their story?” Dissecting these characters, he says, is part of the science of finding an “evergreen property.” He reminds his audience that despite all the attention on kids, parents can’t be forgotten. “Mom is the gatekeeper through age 7,” he says, “you must make sure those characters work for her as well.”

Indeed, industry types have seized upon the Mom-as-gatekeeper refrain as an abnegation of responsibility. Ultimately, they say, it’s the parents’ job to regulate the child’s tastes. “When you take out your 2-year-old and give him french fries,” Acuff told me, “you are starting him on the road to unhealthy eating habits.” If anticommercialization groups want to help parents and kids, he offers, they should focus on educating them about the consequences of their choices. “You can’t put your head in the sand and say we are not living in a consumer society.”

Even Linn can’t argue with that. Parents have enormous control over

infants under two, she says, but “it gets much harder when kids go to school.” At two-and-a-half, Hayden may already have broken out of his parents’ protective shell.

After Acuff finishes his talk, I wait behind a Chuck-E-Cheese representative to ask a few follow-up questions. I explain that *ReadyMade* is asking contributors to come up with fictional campaigns and products for babies, and ask if he can offer any guidance. “Kids fixate on big faces, like Mom,” he says, and suggests putting to work one of the five key animals—dogs, cats, rabbits, ponies, or bears—to sell our brands. “You might use a bear, it has a big face,” he offers. “Not a grizzly bear, though. That’d be scary.”