

At Sea in a Marketing-Saturated World: The Eleventh Annual Report on Schoolhouse Commercialism Trends: 2007-2008

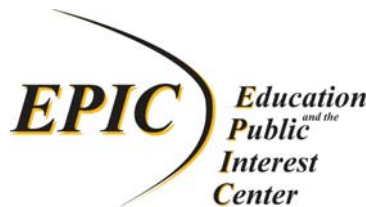
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Executive Summary

Three trends identified in the 2007 Report on Schoolhouse Commercialism continued to develop in 2008. Advertising is becoming ever more pervasive; the boundary between advertising and editorial content is becoming less distinct; and the relationship between marketers and consumers is becoming more interactive. Advertisers and marketers are pursuing divergent strategies, both hiding advertising inside ostensibly neutral editorial matter and directly enlisting consumers as agents and collaborators in the ongoing advertising process.

These practices reach into the lives of children and follow them to school. Today's children live, breathe, and play with brands, and they find advertising integrated into the products they buy or that are bought for them: games, books, movies, the Internet and television. In addition to passively experiencing the advertising saturating their social environments, children actively engage with it by playing branded videogames and passing viral marketing videos among their friends. Advertising's very pervasiveness in the world outside of school helps legitimize and normalize it in school as well. School thus remains a desirable marketing environment because children spend so many of their waking hours there as a captive audience. School-based marketing in the near future is likely to share the dominant characteristics of other marketing efforts directed at children: entwined with content and demanding engagement, winning children over by involving them behaviorally with the brand.

While resistance is growing to advertising that targets children in school, opposition to school commercialism is overshadowed by the highly amplified messaging of businesses that advertise to children in school. Although some of the more egregious examples of commercialism in schools may fade in the coming years, we are likely to see more of the understated variants of school-based commercialism. As schools struggle to make ends meet, we are also likely to see businesses continue to expand the popular approach of "working in partnership" with schools to help with fundraising — building public goodwill and a positive brand image through marketing dressed as "corporate responsibility." In 2008 as well as for the foreseeable future, schools remain a valued marketing venue.

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Introduction

In 2008, children are big business. Not only do they have more spending money at their disposal than ever before, but they also influence their parents' spending as a result of both the "nag factor" and the fact that their parents tend to consult them on purchases.¹ And, with average life expectancy reaching into the 70s, they have years of buying ahead of them. For these reasons, just about anyone who sells anything is eager to reach children. And they do — everywhere and anywhere they can.²

In last year's report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, we noted the development of a "total environment" of advertising, in which marketers who apparently no longer recognize any boundaries strive to engage consumers — even the youngest consumers — at all times.³ In this total environment, advertising is no longer a spread in a magazine or a television commercial that a consumer can choose to pay attention to or not. Instead, more active forms of advertising, such as Internet-based advergames and viral videos, connect to and interact with consumers in as many ways and via as many technologies as possible.

Last year we noted three related trends that now characterize how advertising is changing the social environment of childhood:

1. Advertising is becoming ever more pervasive,
2. The boundary line between advertising and editorial content is becoming less distinct, and
3. The relationship between marketers and consumers is becoming more interactive.

Our review of advertising and marketing publications and the popular press suggests that these three trends continue to develop in 2007-2008, and that they are intertwined in increasingly complex and sophisticated ways.

Definitions and Methodology

The terms *advertising*, *marketing*, and *commercialism* appear repeatedly throughout this report. Although they have overlapping meanings, they are not synonymous. *Advertising* refers to specific

communications practices aimed at persuading audiences to purchase products or to adopt particular points of view or belief systems. *Marketing* encompasses a broader array of activities, all of which make up “the commercial processes involved in promoting and selling and distributing a product or service.”⁴ *Commercialism* refers to an even broader group of activities and the values supporting them. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the principles and practice of commerce; excessive adherence to financial return as a measure of worth.”⁵ Throughout this report we describe a culture of commercialism that fosters marketing and advertising activities and that promotes materialism. We also discuss advertising and the process of marketing as the practical results that potential consumers experience.

This year’s report is based on a review of advertising and marketing publications as well as the popular press. We first review general trends in marketing and advertising, then explore more specifically how these trends are likely to affect children in schools. New this year is a discussion of schoolhouse commercialism trends in England and Ireland. With some of the same large corporations at work in these countries as in the United States, and with English and Irish corporations pursuing profit as energetically as U.S. entities, we find similar school commercialism conditions. Both in the United States and across the Atlantic, corporations strive to make their products as visible to children as they can. More importantly, they strive to generate interaction between children and products as much as possible in games, contests, and other activities both in school and at home.

Major Trends

Underlying Cultural Trends

Several underlying cultural trends interact with and influence developments in marketing and advertising. Most fundamental among them is that the language and values of commerce are slowly becoming accepted as the standard filter through which people, including children, read, interpret, understand and behave in the world.⁶ This goes beyond the argument that “what’s good for business is good for America”: it is, rather, an assumption that what’s good for business is good (or at least “okay”), period.

In a commercial culture, business practices are generally evaluated not in terms of right or wrong, but rather in terms of whether or not they make money. A banal example is the public response to obvious product placements in a TV show like *American Idol*. The host winks at the audience while asking one of the show’s judges what he has in his conspicuous Coca-Cola cup, then innocently chats with a member of the studio audience who happens to be starring in a new show on the same network. Viewers aren’t supposed to be irritated, because everyone is in

on the game, conditioned to think “that’s business,” and so to accept the use of designated content time for advertising. A less banal example is corporate fundraising efforts at schools. Everyone knows that if McDonald’s sponsors a “McTeacher’s Night” and returns some of the evening’s receipts to a local school, McDonald’s is certainly getting something from the deal — probably more than the school is.⁷ But, again, because the public is assumed to be savvy about how business works, most observers don’t think to criticize the McDonald’s; instead, they are likely to endorse “one hand washing the other.”

Materialism and debt are part and parcel of a culture of commercialism. With products to sell — some of them necessities, many surely not — marketers do everything they can to create demand. Psychologist Allen Kanner points out the underlying message that cuts across almost all advertising: the purchase of material goods is the key to happiness. Even ads for “good” products, he notes, contribute to the materialist message.⁸ The impact of materialism is far-reaching, as Kanner indicates, because:

the more that people believe they need an endless array of material goods to be happy...the more time that is devoted to consuming — from making money, to worrying about making money, to shopping, to thinking about consuming, either through exposure to advertising or fantasizing about new purchases — the less time is devoted to activities that satisfy non-material needs — family and friends, creative and artistic endeavors, spiritual practices, etc.⁹

Research has found that higher materialistic values are related to lower self-esteem, chronic physical symptoms, and higher rates of anxiety, depression and psychological distress.¹⁰ In teenage children, higher materialistic values also correlate with increased smoking, drinking, drug use, weapon carrying, vandalism and truancy.¹¹

Another consequence of materialism, operating in combination with heavily marketed and easily available credit and loans, is the “debt culture” — the assumption, prevalent in 2008, that it is normal, acceptable and right to go into debt to finance spending on unnecessary consumer goods.¹² As John Kenneth Galbraith observed in 1958 in *The Affluent Society*,

An increase in consumer debt is all but implicit in the process by which wants are now synthesized. Advertising and emulation, the two independent sources of desire, work across society....With those who lack the current means, it is a brief and obvious step from stimulating their desire by advertising to making it effective in the market with a loan.¹³

So pervasive has this trend become that credit cards are marketed even to carousing students at football games and car loans are marketed to people who have already ruined their credit rating by inability to pay prior debts.

In a 2007 *Advertising Age* article, Rance Crain pondered the implications of the combination of western society's commercial and debt cultures in the context of the recent U.S. housing market crash, even as we try to export those cultures to "opening markets" such as Russia:

Does keeping our "economic locomotive" (as the mayor of Moscow put it) hurtling down the tracks require consumers to acquire stuff — including houses — beyond their means? And shouldn't there be, somewhere in our society, a countervailing voice that preaches caution and even prudence?¹⁴

Regarding caution and prudence, Crain despairs: "These questions don't even get debated anymore."¹⁵ Although there are still some debates in academic and intellectual circles, Crain is right that these discussions don't appear to take place among marketers or in the popular media. The occasional college course, conference presentation, and report, typically not addressed to a mass audience, go unnoticed in the mass of advertising that bombards the average person.¹⁶

Although some analysts suggest that the crash in the housing and lending market may transform the culture of debt that has developed since the 1950s, others believe that Americans will continue to find ways to finance their habitual spending levels.¹⁷ However much money people may be willing to spend, what is sure in 2008 is that the marketing and advertising industries, together with the many corporations they represent, are ever vigilant and creative in their efforts to attract that spending their way.

Trends in Advertising

As advertising becomes more pervasive, consumers' attention is ever more a commodity. Advertisers, struggling to grab their share of a finite resource, try to pull attention to their ads by seemingly contradictory means. On the one hand, "stealth strategies" hide ads in editorial content.¹⁸ Consumers expose themselves to these advertisements by accident, while they believe they are encountering only the content of a television show or article. On the other hand, a second group of strategies actively engages consumers in ads. Such strategies as encouraging consumers to write reviews of products on company websites or to attend a free teleseminar about a product use consumers' interest in the product — or in the advertisement itself — and their subsequent active cognitive and behavioral involvement with it, to build brand loyalty and sales.

Sometimes these types of strategies merge, as potential consumers participate in passing along to their friends advertisements that were designed to “go viral.” Viral advertising is particularly useful in marketing to youth, who tend to actively communicate with friends via Internet and cell-phone.

Of course, trying to grab consumers’ attention is nothing new — it’s what advertisers have always done. What’s different now is that the grab is more subtle and subversive, so much so that consumers — especially children — do not even realize that their attention has been hijacked. They define their activity as “watching TV,” “downloading a video,” “e-mailing a cool Christmas card” or “playing a video game” without realizing that they are simultaneously exposing themselves to brand marketing. An example is OfficeMax’s holiday campaign, called “Elf Yourself,” in which visitors to the company’s holiday website could paste images of their faces onto dancing elves. Leading up to Christmas 2007, 26.4 million people (nearly one American in 10) checked out the site. One hundred twenty-three million elves were created. More importantly, of the 20 most common search terms in the first four weeks of December 2007, six of them included the words “Office Max.” This suggests that while people were “elfing themselves,” many of them were also becoming more aware of the Office Max brand.¹⁹

The implications of current trends for children are many. With the proliferation of competing brands, the stakes for developing brand loyalty at an early age are getting higher. As a result, even the youngest children are being exposed to even *more* advertising, in every medium and every location. These include all media that children employ: old-fashioned television and radio as well as more sophisticated computers, video games, and cell-phones. Schools, although low-tech, are more valuable to advertisers than ever because of the captive audience they provide. Therefore, we can expect to continue to see more sophisticated and more brazen attempts to reach children at school.

The types of advertisements addressed to children are likely to fall into the two general groupings discussed above:

1. Advertisements intended to develop brand loyalty blended with other content, such as product placements in television shows and video games. In schools, these types of advertisements take the form of corporate-sponsored educational materials such as classroom posters, fundraising efforts such as math-a-thons, and appropriation of space such as scoreboard logos.
2. Advertisements that are designed to interact with the child such that the child actually markets to him- or herself. Some examples are clothing-store websites with avatars that children can dress up and then forward to their parents as purchase instructions; viral marketing; and peer-to-peer marketing on

social networking sites like Bebo, MySpace, and Facebook. In schools, examples include sponsored programs such as art contests, fundraising efforts such as McTeacher nights, and exclusive agreements, such as with soft drink companies, that lead to purchase and consumption of branded drinks.²⁰

At every turn, literally, children experience ads — in their schools, on their computers, frequently even in conversations with friends.

What is the impact of all this advertising on children? Marketers intend it to be brand awareness, which they are in fact cultivating. Children in 2008 know the difference between iPod and Zune (31% of children ages 6 to 10 use digital music players, with iPod the brand of choice for 54% of them²¹), between Wii and Playstation, and between Webkinz and Shining Star stuffed animals. More fundamentally, however, the sophistication and ubiquity of marketing legitimizes and reinforces the underlying ideology of consumption.

Brand Image

Companies seem to be trying hard to develop “good karma.” At any rate, they are trying to convince consumers that they are “good guys” with good intentions — people that consumers should feel comfortable supporting with their purchases.²² Companies nurture this image by associating their brands with pro-social causes; by disassociating with potentially unpopular causes; and when necessary, by visibly self-regulating, or appearing to self-regulate. The guiding notion is that everything a company does affects how consumers view the brand.²³

An example of a brand affiliating with a pro-social cause is the massive advertising campaign launched this year by Unilever’s Dove brand, which focuses on helping girls develop positive body image.²⁴ Other companies, noting the increasing public concern with the environment, try to connect themselves with pro-environment causes. For instance, Wal-Mart, which might not immediately come to mind as a particularly environmentally oriented company, has been taking a vocal stand on the environment by communicating to its customers what would happen if they all bought organic milk or energy-efficient light bulbs. According to its advertising agency, the Martin Agency, Wal-Mart started its campaign as a public relations move, but eventually became converted to its own position.²⁵

Several examples of self-regulation are evident. Many companies shied away from airing TV commercials during episodes of CBS’ controversial show *Kid Nation*. It wasn’t clear in advance whether this reality show about 8- to 15-year-olds forming their own society in a western frontier village would end up warming viewers’ hearts or reminding them of *Lord of the Flies*; as a result, advertisers were cautious.²⁶ Food companies engaged in well-publicized, if not actually

very effective, self-regulation to limit advertising of highly sugared foods to children.²⁷ Child-oriented websites self-regulate by requiring “parental” consent for access, by outlawing foul language and other inappropriate conversation, and by limiting advertising to small children.²⁸ Even Channel One, the advertising-supported, for-profit, in-school current events channel, got on the self-regulation bandwagon and stopped accepting ads for non-nutritional food like candy, soda, and snacks.²⁹

In an interesting twist, Do Something, a nonprofit organization that encourages teen volunteerism, recruits corporations, such as GameStop, Doritos, and DelMonte, to sponsor grants to teens with good volunteer ideas. The organization gives three \$500 “branded” grants per week.³⁰ Doritos maximized the public relations success of its participation by putting photos of its grant winners, with short summaries of their charitable activities, on the backs of bags of chips; some of these stories found their way into local newspapers.

The Responsible Retailing Summit 2008, held in London in January 2008, directly acknowledged the potential financial value of corporations being seen as socially responsible. The conference website informed potential participants that “Consumers are increasingly basing their purchasing decisions on how well third world manufacturers are treated, how organic ingredients are, how small a retailer’s carbon footprint is and how they can contribute to society at large.” Participants in the conference, UK retail executives, learned how to “develop corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies that will **boost profits, reduce costs, increase market share and enhance their retail brands**” (emphasis in original).³¹ Sessions included a case study of “Strengthening Your Corporate Image Through Effective Community and Charitable Activities” and an interactive workshop on “Enhancing Brand, Product and Packaging Through Environmental Design Principles.”³²

Uncertainty in Advertising

These examples may seem to suggest that advertisers and marketers have consumers — especially child consumers — all figured out. That is not necessarily the case.³³ It is true that the development of new technologies and the opening up of previously inaccessible advertising space offer advertisers more opportunities to hawk their wares. It is also true that the increasing sophistication of data collection regarding consumer attention to such strategies as television commercials and advertisements in videogames provides advertisers with more data than ever about the effectiveness of specific efforts. Despite these advances, however, advertisers and marketers are far from omniscient. Their data is more plentiful than it is interpretable, and technology is developing faster than they can figure out how to use it.³⁴ For these reasons, the sheer mass of advertising evident is at least partly a result of advertisers casting a wide net, trying everything and hoping something works.

Consider, for example, the common television commercial, which watchers can easily click away. While there are data on which commercials better avoid being banished, the data are complex and often inconsistent.³⁵ As a result, advertisers are doing everything they can to attract attention to commercials: making them shorter and making them longer; trying to create “buzz” about them to interest potential viewers in advance; stripping them down to bare bones information; adding interactive content; and finally, adding unrelated items that may catch viewers’ interest.³⁶

Advertising Is Ever More Pervasive

Just when it seemed that advertising already *was* everywhere, it’s popping up in even more places — or, perhaps more accurately, it’s popping up differently in some of the same places, as marketers try to expand their outlets and influence consumers more effectively. For example, although there has been advertising at sporting events for as long as anyone can remember, in July 2007, the NFL instituted a requirement that journalists on the sidelines at games wear red security vests featuring logos for Canon and Reebok.³⁷ Security vests for journalists aren’t new either, but security vests sporting sponsors’ logos are, which is why the photographers who were suddenly required to wear them protested. Mickey H. Osterreicher, an attorney who works with the National Press Photographers Association, commented, “We never really had a problem with wearing vests. It’s turning us into walking billboards that we object to. You could end up with lots of little logos and you look like a NASCAR...We’re just afraid that one thing is going to lead to another.”³⁸

Another location where advertising has existed before is in stores themselves: on TV, floor and shelf ads, and on in-store signage and displays. Interestingly, *Advertising Age* reported in September 2007 that the fastest growing advertising medium is this type of “shopper marketing,” designed to engage people, build brand equity and influence purchase behavior while those people are already in “shopper mode.”³⁹ A recent, extreme example of shopper marketing is the translucent advertisements now found on supermarket freezer doors.⁴⁰ Corporate spending on shopper marketing has doubled since 2004, a growth rate greater even than that for spending on Internet advertising.⁴¹

And then there are “screens.” Marketers are fascinated by the amount of time that children spend with their screens, especially by the fact that children can and do often manipulate several screens at a time. The first screen, of course, is television; the second is the computer screen; and the “third screen” is the cell-phone.

Although adults don’t appear to like receiving unsolicited advertisements on their cell-phones, it turns out that teenagers don’t mind, as long as they get something in exchange.⁴² A British company, Blyk, offers its 16- to 24-year-old users 43 minutes of free phone calls and 217

free text messages a month for agreeing to view about six ads on their phones each day. The ads are targeted, based on 60 to 100 data points users provide in a questionnaire when they sign up. Blyk launched in the UK in late 2007, plans to launch in the Netherlands in 2008, in Germany, Spain and Belgium in 2009, and at some undetermined time in Asia and the U.S.⁴³

More discussion of television and the Internet will follow below in the section on the increasingly interactive nature of advertising, but the expansion of product placement and product integration is worth noting in the context of the prevalence of advertising. Product placement “involves the physical appearance of a product in a television show,” whereas product integration “is the embedding of a commercial product or service into the very plot of a show.”⁴⁴

The Nielsen Company reported in March 2008 an overall 13% increase in the number of product placement occurrences in prime-time broadcast network programming for 2007. The Top 10 programs featured 25,950 occurrences in 2007, compared with 22,553 occurrences in 2006.⁴⁵ In the first half of 2007, Coca-Cola alone appeared 3,054 times on broadcast network programs, according to the New York Times.⁴⁶ With 4,379 product placements in 2007, *American Idol* had the greatest number of product placements for the second year in a row. Branded content on that show totaled 545 minutes for the season, or 14 minutes per episode, on average.⁴⁷ Although the number of product placements on cable television decreased 9% from 2006 to 2007, cable TV is even more saturated with placements than the broadcast networks: the Top 10 programs featured 163,737 occurrences for 2007.⁴⁸

Of course, it is unclear how viewers respond to product placement. The big red Coca-Cola cups on the judges’ table during *American Idol* was one of the most recalled product placements in January-February 2008; but if viewers see those cups and think “Oh, there’s Coke up to its old tricks again!” the cups aren’t convincing anyone.⁴⁹ Sometimes viewers do respond critically, especially when the product placement is over-the-top or too frequent, or if the particular viewer is sensitive to the technique. However, marketers count on the fact that often, viewers don’t recognize product placement or apply critical thinking to identify and evaluate advertising while they are involved in a story.⁵⁰

Young children, especially, would not be expected to be aware of product placement, given their lack of cognitive sophistication.⁵¹ Even college-age youth may not be aware of its prevalence. Carol Phillips reported in a November 2007 *Advertising Age* article that her marketing students at the University of Notre Dame were surprised when she informed them that products don’t just appear in movies and TV shows for free.⁵² What’s worse, she noted about her students, is that “they pay attention to who is wearing and using which items. They do not find it at all jarring (as I do) to see product after product in their favorite shows.”

In addition to placing branded products visibly on the screen, advertisers, networks, and studios are now creating more elaborate co-marketing arrangements. For example, several mobile-phone companies fought for a product placement deal with the network CW for the show “Gossip Girls,” whose characters each sport a branded phone. Verizon Wireless won the battle because of the extensive co-marketing it could offer the network. Their phones offer exclusive “Gossip Girl” content, and the company sponsors a website where fans can download ringtones of songs featured on the show. The Gossip Girl deal was so sought after by mobile-phone companies because they knew what Carol Phillips learned from her students: the show’s young viewers would look for and care about the characters’ branded paraphernalia.

Product integration, in which commercial products are intertwined in the story lines of television shows, is also common. An interesting example shared in a 2005 “white paper” published by the Writers Guild of America is the integration of perfume into an episode of *All My Children*:

Writers on the ABC soap opera *All My Children* worked for days on an emotional hospital scene only to be told at the last minute that the network had cut a product integration deal with Wal-Mart to plug a new perfume. With production wrapping up, the writers did the best they could by writing a scene where the emotionally distraught wife took a moment to talk about the Wal-Mart scent on the way to the bedside of her comatose husband.⁵³

As this example demonstrates, a product can not only be entwined in the story line but given priority over it.

The rise of reality television in recent years is related to the growth of product integration. According to George Lianne in *Maclean's Magazine*, the show *Survivor* created a new model of TV production in which real people interact with real brands.⁵⁴ He describes the show’s second season’s reward challenge as a “watershed moment” in television. The challenge featured junk food like Doritos and Mountain Dew as the grand prize. When the starving contestants won a plate of Doritos, they went crazy over it, with no acting involved.

This year there are entire shows based on products. Ford, for example, introduced an interactive on-line comedy show, *Where are the Joneses?*, in which a brother and sister drive a purple Ford around Europe to look for their long-lost siblings.⁵⁵ And the Geico cavemen found themselves starring in a television show. That was a little awkward, in that insurance companies other than Geico were hesitant to run commercials during the show, but Geico benefited by engaging viewers in its brand for the full length of the show and by turning its mascots into TV stars.⁵⁶

As product integration becomes more prevalent, it also becomes more sophisticated. For example, *People* magazine, together with

magazine advertisers, struck a multiplatform deal for the 25th anniversary of the show *Wheel of Fortune*. *People* advertised the show for six weeks, and its advertisers (which included brands from Kraft Foods, Sony Corporation, and Procter & Gamble) sponsored prizes on the show as well as branded “wedges” on the game’s centerpiece wheel.⁵⁷ The Telemundo network is a leader in creating shows around products. Its telenovela, *Pecados Ajenos*, features branded jewelry, cars, cell phones, and cleaning supplies provided by marketing partners. Better yet from a marketing perspective, because the story line has one of the characters working at Best Buy, scenes can take place on location at the Best Buy store, with visible signage.⁵⁸

However, the growth of product placement and integration has led to opposition. The 2005 “white paper” published by the Writers Guild of America deplored the practices that force writers to integrate products into storylines.⁵⁹ In September 2007, two members of Congress, Edward J. Markey and Henry A. Waxman, sent a letter to the Chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requesting that the FCC examine the growth of product placement and product integration as well as the Commission’s rules governing sponsorship disclosure. A particular concern was how broadcasters and cable operators distinguish between commercial and creative content. The letter urged the FCC to adjust its rules as needed in order to make sure that, as legally required, viewers are informed about products sponsored in a show and who paid for the sponsorship.⁶⁰ In June 2008, a coalition of 23 advocacy and consumer groups collaborated on their own letter, which urged the FCC to adopt a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) on product placement and product integration that would include cable and satellite television.⁶¹ The advocacy groups call for real-time acknowledgement of any intentional insertion of product into a story.

Advertising industry trade groups opposed to an NPRM have urged the FCC to adopt instead a Notice of Inquiry (NOI), an investigative procedure that documents an existing problem but cannot lead to rulemaking.⁶² A July 2008 article in the *New York Times* quoted Tom Meyer, the president of leading brand management agency Davie Brown, as saying that the type of real-time, pop-up warnings that the FCC is considering would “completely disrupt the entertainment experience.” What’s more, Meyer said, “If their ultimate goal is, can they do something that kills integration, advertisers’ ability to integrate into a show, that would do it.”⁶³

In the UK — much to the consternation of British television companies who would stand to gain from the practice — the Secretary of State at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport announced in June 2008 that the British government would oppose product integration in British television. “British programming has an integrity that is revered around the world,” he said, “and I don’t think we should put that hard-won reputation up for sale.” Product integration has, however, been approved

by the European Union and it is likely that the British government will need to legislate to circumvent the EU directive.⁶⁴

While it is possible that, as advertising keeps increasing its presence, people who live in an advertising-saturated world may learn to ignore the constant bombardment of persuasive messages, that seems unlikely.⁶⁵ Advertisers' fears of such a prospect are not necessarily the reason for the development of the more sophisticated marketing techniques described below; still, strategies to hide advertising in editorial content and to engage consumers in interactive marketing do present possibilities for reaching consumers inured to more direct approaches.

The Blurry Boundary Line Between Advertising and Editorial Content

Entire television shows created from marketing material exemplify a blurring of the line between advertising and editorial content. A potentially more significant venue is the "second screen," the Internet. Consumers don't seem to trust traditional advertising anymore, nor do they trust the companies that pay to advertise their products. More and more, consumers considering a purchase will surf the web for peer reviews of products. Companies are forced to include access to uncensored peer reviews of their products on their own websites, because they look like they're hiding something if they don't.⁶⁶

Creating the impression of honesty is not the only benefit of including reviews on commercial websites. Major search engines look more favorably on "unique content," such as reviews, than on web pages with basic product details; moreover, searches related to product reviews typically get a high volume of queries. So, when Wal-Mart decided to add customer content to its online store, it gained thousands of pages that increased the traffic to and standing of its on-line store. And further, because customers tend to write more positive than negative reviews of products, the reviews serve as honest, credible marketing that then encourages further purchases.⁶⁷

Social Networks

On the flip side, these same companies are trying to manipulate the nature of what consumers find about their products on-line, and how they find it. One tool available to them is social networks. Although there are many, MySpace and Facebook are the most popular social networks, and companies are rushing to have their brands represented in "groups" on these sites.⁶⁸ When a brand is represented in a group, people who like that brand, or who are interested in learning more about it, can join the group and participate in discussion about it. Of course, in addition to whatever content other group members offer about the brand, the company itself will contribute its share of information.⁶⁹

Teens are among the most active users of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.⁷⁰ Preteens are active in social networking as part of their activity in virtual worlds designed for them. Webkinz, Club Penguin, Barbie Girls, Bebo, Habbo Hotel, and others all provide children with social networking opportunities.^{71, 72} Habbo, for instance, reports 9.5 million unique worldwide visitors each month, 2.4 million from the United States.⁷³

In November 2007, Facebook unveiled its concept of “social marketing,” which is its effort to profit from the marketing that happens on its site. The website began including information about members’ on-line purchases in newsfeeds to their friends. Marketers were excited at the prospect, but backlash by users led Facebook to backpedal. Transmission of this information was supposed to be an “opt-out” feature, but members’ ire convinced Facebook to make the transmission opt-in instead.⁷⁴ Even without the newsfeeds revealing off-network purchases, Facebook users upload vast amounts of data about themselves to their profiles. It is not yet clear how Facebook will be able to mine this data to allow for targeted advertising, but the marketing industry is waiting and watching for that to happen.⁷⁵

The Interactive Relationship Between Marketers and Consumers

Viral Marketing

Even aside from the obvious advertising and behavior tracking now happening on social networking sites, these sites are intriguing to marketers because they provide an opportunity for friends to communicate about products and brands and to send marketing materials back and forth. According to Rob Norman, the CEO of Group M Interaction, “The more you enable person-to-person communication, the more opportunities there are for individuals to influence each other.”⁷⁶

The notion of “viral marketing” stems from Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point*, published in 2000.⁷⁷ According to Gladwell, the “tipping point” occurs when an idea or a trend starts small and grows, like a virus, into something much more popular. Although Gladwell examined organic examples of the tipping point phenomenon, marketers are thrilled by the idea that they can manipulate it. The goal of viral marketing is to get consumers to do the marketing work themselves — to actively pass on brand-relevant videos and so forth to their network of friends. According to the theory of viral marketing, consumers will do just that if marketers do two things:

1. Produce content — such as funny videos — that their target market will like enough to want to share with their friends.

2. Get that content into the hands of opinion leaders, or “influentials,” who will share the material, drive trends, and sell product.⁷⁸

The company Competitrak identified more than 4,000 pieces of viral content in the past four years, with “viral” defined as content that tries to attract or engage an audience and that involves mention of a brand. Viral material may also spoof a brand.⁷⁹

Although not all material meant to “go viral” does, and although there is argument about how, exactly, to encourage dissemination of a “viral video,” marketers mostly agree that at the very least, viral marketing is a necessary accompaniment to traditional advertisements. It’s relatively inexpensive to produce viral content to be shared on YouTube and to be e-mailed within social networks, and when that material does “go viral,” its effectiveness is likely to be higher than the effectiveness of a high-priced commercial.⁸⁰

Examples of viral content vary widely. Cadbury Adams, the makers of Stride Gum, sponsors Matt Harding’s travels as he dances around the world. Matt’s June 20, 2008, video posting logged over 5 million YouTube views in its first month. The commercial aspect of the video is subtle, consisting only of an acknowledgement of the product at the end, but, considering the cost of the plane tickets, this may be the most advertising bang for the buck ever.

In December 2007, Burger King posted an eight-minute, documentary-style video about a day without Whoppers at www.whopperfreakout.com. On January 14, 2008, *Advertising Age* reported that the video had already logged 1.5 million views. ComScore, a company that collects and reports data on Internet use, reported that the video drew 250,000 unique visitors in December; and IAG Research noted that it was the most-recalled advertisement in the first two weeks of 2008.⁸¹ In addition, the video spurred viewers to comment on it on YouTube, to blog about it, and to create and post their own spoofs.⁸²

The “Whopper Freak-out” phenomenon is fascinating for two reasons. First, it exemplifies how modern technology and advertising foster the blending of entertainment, social communication and networking. Second, every consumer interaction with “Whopper Freak-out” is intentional. The phenomenon illustrates that people will at times actively seek out, watch, and interact with advertisements.

We know from psychological research that when people are induced to persuade themselves about something, they are more likely to actually be persuaded — and to be powerfully persuaded over a longer period of time — than when someone else tries to persuade them.⁸³ We also know that successful persuasion is created when people are induced to take some action regarding an issue or product.⁸⁴ This is true for adults and for children. For these reasons, when consumers interact with

marketing materials, they are likely to develop positive attitudes toward, and to buy, the brands promoted.

Virtual Worlds for Children

Kids love games. In 2008, kids could find lots of them. Some games, such as Webkinz, require an initial purchase; others, like those they can find on commercial websites or an entry-level membership to Club Penguin, for example, don't. Webkinz, the most successful of the virtual worlds, is the model for many others. Webkinz started as cuddly, moderately-priced stuffed animals with an innovative twist. Each animal comes with a code that enables its owner — for one year — to enter the Webkinz' virtual world and play with her pet's virtual presence there. After a year, if a child wants to continue to play on-line, she must purchase a new pet.

On-line, kids can create rooms for their pets, chat with their friends, play games, and win virtual "Kinz Cash," with which they can buy virtual products. The virtual pets need to be fed and played with, so kids have to log on often to keep their pets happy. Webkinz' success has led to other products in addition to the dolls themselves. Now, kids can buy Webkinz trading cards and charms, both of which come with codes to unlock additional areas at Webkinz.com. There are clothes for Webkinz, lip glosses, body spritzes, and now a bimonthly Webkinz magazine called *Plushie Pals*.⁸⁵ Marketing these products to little girls (the primary market for Webkinz) is certainly good for business. In addition to selling product, however, it transmits subtle messages to these girls that materialism is desirable and that being a woman includes using such products as lip gloss and body spritz.

Webkinz' success has induced other companies to sell toys that connect users to virtual worlds, and according to *Advertising Age*, millions of children are logging on.⁸⁶ In autumn 2007, advertising for children's movies started to appear in the Webkinz virtual world, stimulating complaints from parents to Ganz, Webkinz' parent company. As of July 2008, Ganz had not ruled out the possibility of future ads, although the company's stated policy is to limit third-party advertising on the site and to dedicate the majority of advertising space "to Webkinz products and features and positive life style messaging."⁸⁷ Ganz Communications Manager Susan McVeigh said advertising "would have to pass our standards for quality, family-friendly products — we would not allow junk food, products that are violent or brands and/or products that are not age appropriate."⁸⁸

Even without third-party advertisements, websites like Webkinz and VMK (Disney's Virtual Magic Kingdom) engage children in advertisements for their primary products for however long children play on the site.⁸⁹ Whereas child viewers may or may not pay attention to a 30- or 60-second TV commercial spot, they can spend hours on Webkinz

World playing games, decorating their pets' rooms, and talking to friends who are doing the same. And especially now that there are "exclusive" areas of the site that can only be opened with codes from additional products, buying the first pet is likely to be only the first of many purchases.

Sites like Webkinz, Webkinz wannabes (such as Shining Stars and My E-Pets), Club Penguin, and VMK all set up virtual economies for their players, so that by playing games or meeting challenges, children win virtual money that they are encouraged to spend to buy virtual rewards. This type of virtual economy has been accused of accustoming children to a consumerist mentality. Doug Thomas, associate professor at USC's Annenberg School of Communication, comments:

If you're a parent, I would be much less concerned about things like online predators or violence, than I would be about the conflation between consumption and consumerism and citizenship (in virtual worlds). Because our kids are being taught that to be a good citizen of this world you got to buy the right stuff.⁹⁰

Even worse, however, are sites like Habbo Hotel, in which children must buy virtual "Habbo coins" with the real McCoy.⁹¹

Unlike Dr. Thomas, parents may approve of virtual games teaching children about the real economic world they live in. Banking on this, finance company Minyanville, family-focused media company Kaboose, and the National Council on Economic Education created a new virtual economy site called "Minyanland."⁹² The express aim of Minyanland.com is to teach children about earning, spending, saving, and donating money. In Minyanland, kids can start a business at a virtual mall, and they get business tips as they play. There is no fee to play at Minyanland, which is advertising-supported. Minyanville president Kevin Wassong explains this in his introductory letter to parents on the site: "By not charging for subscriptions or imposing monthly usage fees, we can reach children and families at all economic levels. In addition, we are teaching children about how our economic system works, and advertising is a part of it."⁹³

Gaming

According to the NPD Group, a provider of consumer and retail information,

The video-gaming lifecycle starts with kid-oriented systems, moves into PCs for gaming, and continues with Plug & Play and the more established gaming systems. At about age 10, cell phone gaming starts, and the gaming lifecycle culminates with Nintendo DS and PlayStation

Portable, and the three next generation console systems (Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Wii).⁹⁴

Boys and older children are likely to spend more time per week on gaming, whereas girls, after starting strong on kid systems, tend to “fall off the gaming wagon” as they get older.⁹⁵ In October 2007, NPD reported that kids become “serious gamers” when they reach the 6-to-8-year-old age range. The company’s survey of 3,376 mothers on their children’s consumption of digital media, released in January 2008, found that for kids ages 2 to 14, gaming is their most prevalent activity on the four key digital devices (computer, video game system, portable digital music player, and cell phone). In the surveyed families, 84% of children played video games.⁹⁶ This prevalence, of course, explains the explosion of “advergaming,” in-game advertisements, and cross-merchandising involving video-game brands.

Advergaming

Perhaps the most obvious commercialization of games is “advergaming.” Front Network, a company that specializes in creating computer games for commercial clients, describes advergaming as “the practice of using games, particularly computer games, to advertise or promote a product, organisation or viewpoint.”⁹⁷ Advergaming typically falls into one of two categories. In the first, a company provides interactive games featuring the company’s products on a website. The idea is that potential customers will be drawn to the game and spend more time on the website, hopefully becoming more product aware as they do. The second category of games are those intended to interest the player in the game’s commercial, political, or educational subject, and spur them to look more into the subject. An example of this type of game is “America’s Army,” which was created as a recruitment tool for the U.S. Army.⁹⁸

Advergaming theoretically promote repeat traffic to websites and reinforce brands. A 2003 study of advergaming targeted to children found that sites tend not to pressure visitors directly to buy their product, but do encourage visitors to register for the site and to invite their friends to participate, thereby promoting the site (and associated brands) virally.⁹⁹ “Candystand,” “Millsberry,” “Postopia,” and “Nabiscoworld” are examples of advergaming websites that have been created to market to children.

A different and relatively new type of advergaming is “episodic games.” These are analogous to television series, and because they are relatively small, they can be created quickly, responsively, and inexpensively, compared to larger console games. Kuma, a company that creates advertising-supported episodic games targeted mostly to 18- to 26-year-old males, integrates products such as Schick razors and Jeep vehicles into the storyline of its DinoHunters game. In August 2007,

Advertising Age reported that the number of unique downloads for Kuma's games nearly doubled in the first half of 2007, and it suggested that the cause of the boom is likely the increasing number of PCs that have enough power to run video games.¹⁰⁰

New in advergaming is "massively multiplayer online" (MMO) computer games. These exploded in popularity with the hit game "World of Warcraft," which in January 2008 had more than 10 million paying subscribers. Pepsi-Cola created an MMO for its Mountain Dew brand, popular with boys, in an effort to bring gaming and Mountain Dew together in a story-based form. Through the game, consumers go through a story, play a game and eventually participate in developing a product, a new flavor of Mountain Dew. In January 2008, Pepsi-Cola reported an average per gaming session of 28 minutes, with 700,000 unique visitors and 200,000 registered players.¹⁰¹

In-Game Advertising

Video games designed for PCs or game consoles such as Playstation or Xbox 360 contain "in-game" ads. Sometimes those ads are placed in order to make the game seem more realistic (How realistic would a baseball stadium look without ads along the homerun fence?), but more often than not, their primary goal is to sell brands. At one time, in-game advertisements were "static," meaning that they were hard-coded into the game and never changed. However, the creation of "dynamic" ad platforms around 2004 began to change the industry; now video game publishers can sell ads much as television networks do.¹⁰² For example, Massive Incorporated, owned by Microsoft, integrates all advertisements for Microsoft's Xbox 360. Massive's "dynamic" ad technology allows game developers to create areas within the game reserved for potential advertisements and to measure how often players view them. The areas can be billboards, character clothing, or even dialogue. When a game with Massive software is played on a connected game console, the game receives advertising from the Massive ad server.¹⁰³ This way, the company can sell a particular area for a given amount of time or number of viewings.

In July 2007, dynamic advertising in videogames increased when the videogame publisher Electronic Arts entered into a deal with Massive to integrate ads into five of its top-selling sports games, including the ever-popular "Madden NFL 08." In February 2008, it increased again when Sony announced that it was opening up Playstation for in-game dynamic advertising. In a July 2008 interview, Massive account executive Sean Katona estimated that 60 percent of X-Box 360 players connect online to download new content — along with dynamic ads — for their games. Personal computer (PC) gamers are more than 95% connected.¹⁰⁴

The entwined developments in technology and advertising suggest that in the next few years, all types of video game advertising will increase

in number and sophistication. According to Mr. Katona, the future will likely see all games downloaded from the Internet, as they already are in Asia (implying a 100% connection rate). It may also bring an integration of static and dynamic advertising: for example, a Burger King branch hard-coded into a game can have dynamically changed special offers.¹⁰⁵

One thing to watch will be advertisements for food in video games. As mentioned earlier, food companies are presenting themselves as voluntarily self-regulating in their television ads directed at children, in addition to subscribing to any actual regulation that exists. Not only is there is no regulation of advertisements in video games, but food companies (e.g., Wrigley's, General Mills, Nabisco) have been especially enthusiastic about adver gaming geared to children.

The World of Disney

As those watching branding have long been aware, Disney isn't just Mickey Mouse anymore. The Disney juggernaut pervades child culture. Its television network provides programming for toddlers through preteens; its websites (those tied to its programming, as well as VMK and Club Penguin) provide games and other activities; its radio station plays kids' music. The company produces movies and records, sells clothing and other paraphernalia, and, of course, provides "the happiest place on earth," the Disney theme parks. None of this is new, but the company's recent efforts to master cross-marketing have been innovative — and their success impressive. This cross-marketing power is what other child-oriented companies, such as Nickelodeon, are striving to copy.¹⁰⁶

The Disney cable network accepts minimal commercial advertising, and so all commercial breaks feature advertisements for Disney products (for example, theme parks, recording artists, TV shows, movies). Within shows, it includes "product placements." And with the surprise runaway success of its made-for-TV movie *High School Musical*, the company learned the importance of music in promoting its brands. According to Adam Bonnett, Senior Vice President, Original Series for the Disney Channel, "Because when music is part of a movie or series, it's a much easier way to create a relationship with an audience. They don't have to just wait for the show; they can listen to the album, or watch their [music] videos anytime."¹⁰⁷

As an example of what Disney can do, consider the Jonas Brothers, a band of three brothers going nowhere until Disney's Hollywood Records took it on. Two weeks after the company released the Jonas Brothers' recording, the Disney Channel included the brothers in the episode of *Hannah Montana* that immediately followed the debut of *High School Musical 2*. More than 10 million people tuned in. Meanwhile, the group's singles were featured on Radio Disney, its music videos played during breaks on the Disney Channel, and they were given the opening slot in Miley Cyrus's concert film, "The Best of Both Worlds." As of March

2008, their recording had sold over one million copies and 2.5 million digital tracks.¹⁰⁸ They starred in an original Disney Channel movie that premiered in June 2008 (*Camp Rock*), released their third album with Hollywood Records in August, and will star in a new Disney Channel series that is scheduled to start shooting in the fall of 2008.

The precursors to the Jonas Brothers are the Disney Channel movie *High School Musical* and the TV series *Hannah Montana*, each of which is a cross-marketing exemplars in its own right. The August 2007 premiere of *High School Musical 2* netted 17.1 million viewers, the largest audience in cable history. Honda, Wal-Mart, and Dannon, official partners of *HSM2*, weren't allowed to appear in the show or in ads around it, but they did everything they could to tie their brands as closely as possible to the film. Honda held a sweepstakes — for parents — for its Odyssey minivan; Dannon created a tie-in game on its yogurt packaging; and Wal-Mart held in-store events tied to the movie in its stores around the country. In addition, the companies made appearances on other Disney properties such as Toon Disney, ABC's Saturday-morning lineup, Radio Disney, and the various Disney websites.¹⁰⁹ In schools, *High School Musical* can be licensed for performance as a school play.

Another, unrelated Disney educational foray is “Youth Education Series” (Y.E.S.) programs for school groups at the Disneyland theme park. The programs, which can be combined with daily or multi-day park passes, use attractions to teach students about such topics as physics, animation, leadership, and California geography and history.¹¹⁰ They include sponsored educational materials to support the park-based lessons.¹¹¹

Commercialism in Schools

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) tracked eight categories of commercialism activity in schools between 1990 and 2006.¹¹² Although we discontinued the quantitative analysis of commercialism activities, we continue to track the presence of commercial activities in schools in eight categories.

Sponsorship of Programs and Activities

Definition:

Corporations paying for or subsidizing school events or one-time activities in return for the right to associate their name with the events and activities.

Developments in 2007-2008:

The general trend toward companies cultivating a socially responsible image makes schools an obvious place for sponsored programs and activities. Rising levels of obesity, in particular, lead companies that sell foods of questionable nutritional value to associate themselves with promoting active lifestyles among children. In the United States, the Institute of Medicine reported in 2004 that over the past three decades the rate of childhood obesity has more than doubled for preschool children ages 2 to 5 years and for adolescents ages 12 to 19 years, and it has more than tripled for children ages 6 to 10 years.¹¹³ In England, the government's 2007 *Health Profile of England 2007*¹¹⁴ showed that obesity levels among children under 11 have risen by 50% over the last decade and now include 900,000 children. In Ireland, the 2005 Report of the National Taskforce on Obesity suggested that more than 300,000 Irish children are overweight or obese and that rates are probably rising at a rate of 10,000 per year.¹¹⁵

Walkers, a British company now a subsidiary of PepsiCo Incorporated, runs a program called *Walkers Football Fund*¹¹⁶ that provides branded soccer kits to schools and clubs to encourage children to play the sport. The American global food giant Kellogg's has established similar programs in the UK. It partially funds the *Breakfast Clubs Plus*¹¹⁷ program in English schools, which encourages children to choose among Rice Krispies, Corn Flakes, Weetabix or Sultana Bran as part of their education in healthy eating. On its *Earn Your Stripes* sports-promoting website, the company advertises its support for girls' soccer and Little League. Children are assured that "Athletes are discovering the power of NEW Frosted Flakes Gold with 10% wholegrain per serving, it gives you energy when you need it most — helping you go for gold!"¹¹⁸ This web-based promotion continues in 2008, even though the British Advertising Standards Authority¹¹⁹ described Kellogg's advertising campaign, which included the slogan "Train hard, eat right and earn your stripes," as "misleading."

In Ireland, Allied Irish Bank (AIB) has created a program that defies categorization, but might best be classified as a type of sponsored program. Its "Build a Bank Challenge" has emerged as one of the biggest sponsored competitions in Ireland at the secondary level. AIB staff visit to open a branch of their bank on the school site, using Transition Year students (16-year-olds) as unpaid workers. They interview and select students for positions as "branch manager" and "sales and marketing executive." To achieve prizes in the "Challenge," students must devise a marketing strategy to promote AIB in their school, win new customers, and promote customer loyalty among their peers.¹²⁰

Exclusive Agreements

Definition:

Agreements between schools and corporations that give corporations the exclusive right to sell and promote their goods or services in the school district — for example, exclusive pouring rights for Pepsi-Cola or Coca-Cola. In return, the district or school receives a percentage of the resulting profits.

Developments in 2007-2008:

In May 2006, the Coca Cola Company, PepsiCo, Inc., and Cadbury Shweppes Americas Beverages, along with the American Beverage Association (ABA), entered into a voluntary agreement to reduce the caloric content of drinks sold in schools.¹²¹ The ABA reports significant progress in implementing the new school beverage guidelines in 75% of schools for the 2008-2009 school year, with shipments of full-calorie carbonated soft drinks to schools 45% lower during the 2006-2007 school year than they were in 2004.¹²²

Although any reduction in sales of sugared soft drinks is commendable, the nature of drinks being sold is the only change in exclusive beverage agreements. Almost 75% of high schools, 65% of middle schools, and 30% of elementary schools have exclusive contracts with soft drink companies.¹²³ These contracts provide for brand promotion through signage, book covers, front and side panels on vending machines, and logos on sports equipment, scoreboards, and cups. In a December 2006 report, the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the Public Health Advocacy Institute found that the penalties schools incur for breaking contract marketing provisions are as severe as those for not meeting anticipated sales quotas. This suggests that the beverage companies value in-school marketing as much as actual sales.¹²⁴

Incentive Programs

Definition:

Corporate programs that provide money, goods, or services to a student, school, or school district when its students, parents, or staff engage in a specified activity. Such programs go back over 30 years, with the founding of Campbell's Labels for Education program, which awards "free" educational equipment to schools in exchange for proofs of purchase from the Campbell family of brands.

Developments in 2007-2008:

Tesco, the largest grocery chain in Britain and Ireland, has expanded into Europe, Asia, and the United States.¹²⁵ Tesco runs the well-known British incentive program Tesco's Computers for Schools, which enables UK schools to redeem vouchers from Tesco purchases for computers and other school equipment.¹²⁶ This is probably the most well-known school-business program in the UK, and according to *Business in the Community*, it is "one of the UK's most well known cause related marketing programmes."¹²⁷ Though it has delivered many millions of pounds worth of equipment into schools, a *Which?* magazine investigation as far back as 2001 calculated that it would require £44,900 worth of parental shopping at Tesco stores to secure a scanner worth £80, and £220,000 to earn a school a computer worth £900.¹²⁸

Tesco runs its voucher programs in Ireland also, as does the supermarket SuperValu. According to the *SuperValu Kids in Action 2008 Catalogue*, a school can receive a "free" trainer soccer ball worth €11.70 for €3,190 worth of supermarket receipts, and a "free" gymnastics springboard worth €250 for €39,920 worth of receipts.¹²⁹ According to the *Tesco Computers for Schools Equipment and Software Catalogue 2008*, a basic laptop PC with a recommended retail price of €525 requires spending of over €230,000 at Tesco within the ten weeks of the promotion.¹³⁰

Tesco may be the most active company in the UK and Ireland in terms of school commercialism, appearing to cover all bases. In addition to its "Computers for Schools" campaign it has yet another voucher program, "Tesco Sports for Schools and Clubs," which provides sports equipment.¹³¹ It organizes the annual "Tesco Great School Run," the "FA Tesco Skills" program for soccer coaching, the "Tesco Go Ride" program to encourage cycling, and the "Tesco Young Chef" competition, wherein all ingredients used must be available from Tesco.¹³² The company's concern for the environment is reflected in its "Carbon Control: Tune in to Change" website, which provides interactive and downloadable teaching resources.¹³³ Naturally, none of these are critical of any of Tesco's activities. As concern for the environment rises, educational resources which indirectly express corporate concern for the environment are becoming commonplace. Nevertheless, Tesco and other British corporations came under attack in October 2007 for not being quite as green as they say they are.¹³⁴

In the United States, the relatively small advertising company Droga5 made big news with its plan to distribute free cell phones to New York City school students.¹³⁵ The idea behind this program, which was piloted in the spring of 2008, is to reward students for their performance in school with what they care about outside of school (recall the earlier discussion about how kids like free phone service). Students get points on their phone for attendance, behavior, and class performance. The points

“pay” for talk time, text messaging, or downloading on their phones. There are plans to expand the reward possibilities. Naturally, the program is associated with brands: Verizon provides the service on Samsung phones, and other brands will be able to provide “responsible sponsorships.”¹³⁶

Appropriation of Space

Definition:

The allocation of school space such as scoreboards, rooftops, bulletin boards, walls, and textbooks on which corporations may place corporate logos or advertising messages for a wide range of products, including soft drinks and snack foods. This category also includes the awarding of “naming rights” to corporate entities in return for their sponsorship of capital projects or other school operations.

Developments 2007-2008:

In July 2007, McDonald’s joined ten other food and beverage industry leaders in a self-regulatory pledge to refrain from advertising in schools and to advertise to children only foods that met certain health standards.¹³⁷ In December, McDonald’s made news again, this time for its advertisements on report-card jackets for schools in Seminole County, Florida.¹³⁸ The advertisements appeared on all students’ report cards, but those students whose performance, citizenship, or attendance were exemplary during the marking period could take their report cards to McDonald’s and receive a free Happy Meal. After much bad publicity, the sponsorship was pulled in January.¹³⁹

If any school document possibly could be held sacred, perhaps report cards would be it; that may explain why Seminole County’s report cards received as much attention as they did. Still, students see their report cards four times a year, at most. In contrast, they ride school buses every day — a fact, along with cash-strapped school-district budgets — that suggests why advertisements on school buses are becoming more popular.¹⁴⁰ School Bus Media, a Florida-based company that matches advertisers with interested school districts, presents its case to districts as follows: “SBM is providing an alternative **revenue stream** in order to supplement the budget short falls of the school districts...” (emphasis in original).¹⁴¹ The firm reassures potentially ambivalent officials by describing its commercial sponsors as “fundamentally sound” and as “providing a positive commercial image to Kindergarten through High School students,” and by promising to supplement commercial advertisements with two “informative & socially conscious public service announcements per bus.” To marketers, the message is “Reaching over

225,000 students a day on 3,500 school buses! Audience is exposed to your message over 1-hour twice a day!”¹⁴²

In addition to being forced to view print advertisements on buses, students may also be forced to listen to advertisements on BusRadio, which installed its first units on school buses in the fall of 2006. According to the company, as of July 2008 BusRadio was reaching more than 1.5 million listeners on 14,000 buses.¹⁴³ The organization Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) lists 132 adopting districts across the United States.¹⁴⁴ Claiming to be “the fastest growing national media network in the youth music space,” the company promises a small percentage to participating school districts in addition to “a better alternative to inappropriate FM radio programming... [and] a safer bus ride for students by providing school districts with valuable safety features that help minimize driver distractions, and keep students seated, well-behaved and occupied in a positive way.”¹⁴⁵ Although the company sets a maximum of eight minutes of commercial advertisements per hour,¹⁴⁶ it claims an average of four minutes per hour.¹⁴⁷ In addition to its obvious appropriation of space, BusRadio requires an exclusive five-year contract with its participant districts.¹⁴⁸

An indication of what is happening within school walls comes from a survey of Montgomery County (MD) schools released by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in January 2008. The survey found the most prevalent forms of in-school marketing to be signs on the exteriors of vending machines, food sales in vending machines, and posters. Eighty-three percent of Montgomery County schools have posters or signs with food or beverage marketing messages (such as posters for Rich’s ice cream or Little Debbie snack cakes). Eighty-two percent of vending machines have some marketing messages on their exteriors; and most commonly, the images are of branded sodas, snacks, juice or water. All high schools and middle schools surveyed in the county have vending machines, with an average of 21 vending machines in each high school.¹⁴⁹ Nationally, the journal *Pediatrics* reported in July 2008 that a survey of 395 U.S. public schools and 129 school districts in 38 states found vending machines in 17% of elementary schools, 82% of middle schools and 97% of high schools.¹⁵⁰

Sponsored Educational Materials

Definition:

Materials supplied by corporations or trade associations that claim to have an instructional content.

Developments in 2007-2008:

Hidden Valley, owned by the Clorox Company and makers of Hidden Valley ranch dressings, announced in July 2007 that in 2008, it would expand its program of grants awarded to elementary schools nationwide to support increased access to and consumption of fresh vegetables during lunch. In 2007, the Love Your Veggies pilot program provided grant money and a salad bar to six elementary schools. According to Janey Thornton, president of the national, non-profit, School Nutrition Association, “Schools nationwide are trying to implement creative ways to get their kids to eat their veggies, yet simply lack the funds to do so...We praise Hidden Valley for their efforts in making an impact on thousands of children.”¹⁵¹

Hidden Valley partnered with Weekly Reader Custom Publishing to distribute classroom kits to 30,000 elementary schools nationwide. Focused on the theme “Vegetables and You,” the kits involve cross-curricular activities for grades 1 through 6 that emphasize the importance of eating vegetables. Activities include math, language arts, and science. The Hidden Valley® Love Your Veggies™ nationwide school lunch campaign was created partially based on findings from a 2006 study that found that children consumed 23 percent more vegetables when paired with a moderate amount of ranch dressing.¹⁵²

As part of its “Real Beauty” campaign, Unilever's Dove brand declared Feb. 29 — the extra day gained by 2008 being a leap year — “Global Workshop Day.”¹⁵³ The brand’s goal was to engage up to 10,000 young people in activities designed to encourage a positive sense of self-esteem and a tempered perspective on the beauty world. In Canada, in the Greater Toronto area, Dove employees from Unilever Canada conducted one-hour self-esteem building workshops at participant schools with students ages 7-14.

Junior Achievement (JA), a non-profit organization dating from the 1940s that is supported by partnerships with businesses, has long sought to educate young people to value free enterprise and to understand business and economics.¹⁵⁴ Its programs for students in kindergarten through 12th grade intend to teach them how capitalism works and how they can succeed in the capitalist system. Some of these are after-school programs, but in 1975, JA began offering in-school programming. In 2007, the organization introduced JA Biztown, a simulated town that school groups can visit for a day and where children can try on adult working roles.¹⁵⁵

In preparation for their visit, classes are provided with materials that teach about the economic system, about jobs that will be available to students, and about how to interview for those jobs. Students might work, for example, as CEO, CFO, news anchor, or camera operator at a Cox cable television station, or as CEO, marketing manager, or flight attendant at US Airways. In addition to featuring their business partners as

employers in the Biztown economy, JA stocks their branded products in the Biztown shop.¹⁵⁶ Children thus learn both about how the larger economy works and about specific partner corporations and their products.

In Ireland, the country's Road Safety Authority has been an enthusiastic supporter of sponsored educational material this year. Its "Seatbelt Sherriff" campaign is sponsored by Renault and carries the Renault name and logo on the posters, certificates and badges given to children in 2nd class (8-year-olds). Indeed, the logo even appears on the cartoon Sherriff's clothing.¹⁵⁷ The Road Safety Authority also endorses safety materials produced by supermarket *MACE* and featuring their cartoon marketing family *The Maceys*.¹⁵⁸

In the United Kingdom, all major energy companies produce sponsored educational materials. British Nuclear Fuels has a website aimed at teachers offering a range of often heavily branded resources, as do British Gas, Shell, and E-on.¹⁵⁹ These materials target school children of all ages and, to tempt teachers to use them, link explicitly to the English National Curriculum.

The UK is also developing an industry specializing in the creation of corporate propaganda. MBA, for example, is a business communications agency based in North Yorkshire, England; its vision is to be "the most effective channel of communication between young people and...corporate clients," who "require solid platforms from which to project their brand and achieve their corporate objectives."¹⁶⁰ MBA has already produced curriculum packs and websites for Nestlé, Procter & Gamble, and steel-manufacturer Corus, whose website offers an array of resources, purportedly supporting the science curriculum and also offering school visits and sponsorship.¹⁶¹

MBA also appears to oversee the Times 100, a print and on-line resource for students taking Business Studies courses.¹⁶² Published annually, "it provides the means for students to examine real business issues from a number of major organisations and allows them to put Business Studies theory into a real life context."¹⁶³ Its Business Studies Resource Centre provides material on well-known businesses including McCain, McDonald's, Tarmac, Portakabin, Siemens and, rather unpredictably, the public service trade union Unison.

Another company, the London-based Rapport Group, claims to offer "a unique fusion of marketing and publishing through and for the education sector" for those interested on "marketing through and to schools."¹⁶⁴ The Rapport Group produces sponsored educational resources; its managing director has been quoted as saying that she believes that teachers are able to act as "gatekeepers" to shield children from inappropriate marketing material.¹⁶⁵

Electronic Marketing

Definition:

The provision of electronic programming, equipment, or both in return for the right to advertise to students, their families and/or community members in the school or during their contacts with the school or district. Electronic Marketing refers to in-school marketing programs using broadcast, Internet, or related media.

Developments in 2007-2008:

For years, Channel One has been the electronic marketing outlet that anti-commercialism-in-schools activists have loved to hate. In 2008, Channel One appears to be on the wane.¹⁶⁶ In spring 2007, Alloy Media purchased the company and in May 2008, it upgraded participant schools to digital technology.¹⁶⁷ Mya Frazier reported in *Advertising Age* in November 2007 that the network's audience had decreased to about 6 million teens and 270,000 classrooms. According to Frazier, because it eliminated advertising for candy, soda, and snacks, the network's pool of potential advertisers has shrunk, leaving it with mostly public service announcements (PSAs) during commercial breaks and some branded news segments, such as the Army's Question of the Week and the Gatorade Player of the Week, during the news component.¹⁶⁸

We sampled middle-school broadcasts for June 3, 2008, and June 5, 2008 and transcripts for September 17, 2007, and June 6, 2008. The transcripts did not detail the contents of commercial breaks, but they did provide word-for-word renderings of the news segments. The videos included commercial breaks as well as the news segments. In the four broadcasts sampled, all commercials were PSAs and none contained any branded segments. However, one news segment reported on a study of first amendment rights to be released by the Knight Foundation, a Channel One sponsor. The anchor recited a short blurb about the Foundation, acknowledging its sponsorship. In another segment, on virtual versus live college tours, the University of New Haven was shown as the anchor went on a mock tour of the school. Whether the university is a sponsor was not indicated. Given the apparent dearth of commercial sponsorship at present, Channel One appears much more innocuous than in earlier years, when it was full of soda and snack-food ads. Without commercial sponsorship, its future seems threatened.

A new web-based service, HotChalk, links students, teachers, and parents by providing a hub for communication among them. Teachers create a class website that serves as a clearinghouse for class information and materials, promoting web-based communication among all the "players." Hotchalk's funding comes from the ads it shows to after-school users over the age of 13.¹⁶⁹

Fundraising

Definition:

Commercial programs marketed to schools to raise funds for school programs and activities, including door-to-door sales, affinity marketing programs, and similar ventures.

Developments in 2007-2008:

The Center for Science in the Public Interest's study of food marketing in Montgomery County (MD) schools found that all the high schools, half the middle schools, and about 30% of the elementary schools conducted fundraisers with sales of candy, baked goods, soda, fast food, or other restaurant food. The most common fundraising activity involving food was school fundraising nights at restaurants, usually at fast-food or chain restaurants.¹⁷⁰

An example of a restaurant-based event is the month-long "McTeacher's Night Challenge" sponsored by McDonald's restaurants in Goodyear and Litchfield Park, Arizona. Each McTeacher's Night featured a different school. From 5:00 to 7:00 pm, the principal and up to ten teachers "worked" at a McDonald's branch, greeting customers and tending the registers. Families of students and local school supporters were encouraged to attend, and a portion of sales was returned to the school.¹⁷¹

The second most popular type of fundraising in Montgomery County was proof-of-purchase (typically General Mills' Box Tops for Education or Campbell's Labels for Education) and receipt-redemption programs (at Target and at Giant and Safeway supermarkets).¹⁷² According to the Box Tops website, by 2006, more than 90,000 schools participated in the program; and by 2007, General Mills' total giving to schools topped \$200,000.¹⁷³ Schools vary in their level of involvement in participation, from simply setting up a collection box to sponsoring activities to encourage student and family participation. Not surprisingly, General Mills encourages involvement of all kinds, providing recipes, product coupons, and project ideas for kids.¹⁷⁴

Such projects include extensive student involvement in school, generally promoted by "Success Stories" of schools the company deems model participants. For example, at Andover Elementary School in Andover, Minnesota, not only do students collect box tops, "but they're also involved in the 'back-end' process—each submission period, the counting and bundling of all collected Box Tops is integrated into 5th grade math classes."¹⁷⁵ At Boston Valley Elementary School, progress of the Box Tops program is tracked on a large chart in the cafeteria and a collection bin is housed in every classroom. Students empty the bins every

Friday, then count and bundle the Box Tops, checking to see how quickly they'll win a popcorn or a sno-cone party (the former a reward for 1,000 box tops, and the latter for 2,000).¹⁷⁶ Their active involvement in the program helps build brand loyalty among the children, because the more the children are involved, the more familiar they are with participating brands. These become more than "what mom always bought"; the children develop a positive attitude toward them because the brands are associated with their school activities, including parties and contests.

The success of the Box Tops program is enticing other companies to work with General Mills in cross-marketing strategies. For example, in preparation for back-to-school 2008, Kimberly Clark created the "Rock Your School" sweepstakes in conjunction with Radio Disney and the Box Tops program. Grand prize winners receive tickets to a concert by a Radio Disney performer and 100,000 "bonus box tops."¹⁷⁷

In England, the Nestlé company runs a program similar to Box Tops for Education. In partnership with book company Dorling Kindersley, Box Tops for Books¹⁷⁸ is an incentive program that provides schools with "free" books in exchange for tokens on Nestlé cereal boxes and cereal bars. Although the reward here is books rather than dollars, making it an incentive program, the program's style is similar to that of Box Tops for Education, including its supporting website offering branded teaching resources and school assembly plans asking teachers to model voucher clipping in front of the entire school.

Privatization

Definition:

Management of schools or school programs by private, for-profit corporations or other non-public entities.

Developments in 2007-2008:

CERU's *Profiles of For-Profit Education Management Organizations 2006-2007* reported that in the United States, the for-profit education management industry seems to have entered a period of relative stability.¹⁷⁹ Education management organizations (EMOs) emerged in the U.S. more than a decade ago in the context of interest in market-based school reform. EMOs are private firms that receive public funds to manage schools, including district public schools and charter schools. In 2007, EMOs operated in 31 states, and large and medium-size EMOs managed a total of 457 schools.¹⁸⁰

A significant development in EMOs is the transformation of large and well-known Edison Schools, which lost four school contracts in 2006-2007, the greatest contract loss among EMOs that year. In July 2008, the company changed its name to Edison Learning and its focus to

“technology and innovation at the service of public school educators.”¹⁸¹ According to CEO Terry Stecz, the company intends now to focus on education software, especially with respect to student tracking systems and other “achievement management solutions.”¹⁸²

In the UK, public debate about school privatization has intensified since the Labour party took power in 1997. The work of so-called “failing” Local Education Authorities has been contracted out to EMOs despite a report from Ofsted, the national inspectorate, that those schools “forced to surrender services to the private sector [had] improved less than those who failed an inspection but [where the local council was] allowed to retain control.”¹⁸³ One EMO, Cambridge Education Associates, failed to meet its targets, while the majority of the other privatized authorities were found to be poor. Southwark council lost £1.5 million in 2003 after its contractor, Atkins Education, withdrew prematurely from its contract, the council leader declaring that the “termination of a contract with Atkins is in the long-term best interests of Southwark schools, parents and pupils.”¹⁸⁴

Interestingly, Edison Schools maintains a presence in the UK. It is currently working with Bradford local authority, and appears to be broadening its portfolio by offering management services to individual schools, taking advantage of opportunities offered by the controversial academies program.¹⁸⁵ An academy is a privately-owned, state school. The academies program allows businesses or charities to take over a school in return for a contribution, originally set at £2 million, toward the cost of building a new school. Businesses generally were not enthusiastic, and as the government has scrambled to prevent its flagship policy from failing, it has freed sponsors from making an initial contribution and instead allows them to promise to pay endowments later. Even though the state pays all operating costs and nearly all start-up costs, the sponsor owns school assets and controls the governing body.

Francis Beckett conducted a detailed analysis of academies’ work and found school improvement difficult to measure.¹⁸⁶ Academies are advantaged in several ways. They can select 10% of pupils by aptitude and they exclude pupils at a rate far above the national average. Moreover, they spend £21,000 per pupil, compared to £14,000 in standard state schools. Comparisons are thus difficult to make, although there is no reason to assume the academies’ advantages are automatically increasing achievement. One Middlesbrough academy expelled 10 times more students than the national average, yet failed to reach the achievement target set by the school that it replaced.

Implications for Commercialism in Schools

In 2008, children live, breathe, and play with brands. Advertising is everywhere, integrated into products, games, books, movies, the Internet and television. In addition to passively experiencing the advertising

saturating their environments, children actively engage with it by playing branded videogames and passing viral marketing videos among their friends. Corporations repeatedly use such outlets as the Disney Channel and BusRadio to encourage children to visit branded websites to play, make requests, and offer opinions about show contents, performers, or anything else that might keep them active on the site—and exposed to marketing messages. While advertising's pervasiveness in the world outside of school seems to make it almost unnecessary in school, that pervasiveness serves instead to legitimize and normalize it in school as well. In the intense competition for young consumers' attention, school remains a desirable marketing environment because children spend so many of their waking hours there as a captive audience.

For these reasons, we can expect current school marketing efforts to continue and new forms to evolve. School-based marketing in the near future is likely to share the dominant characteristics of other marketing efforts directed at children. Specifically, advertising is likely to be entwined with content, and to demand engagement, thereby winning children over by involving them behaviorally with the brand. Of the marketing programs cited above, JA Biztown provides a good example of both these features in the way that students spend the day “working” for a sponsor company. Allied Irish Bank's “Build a Bank Challenge,” addressed to high-schoolers, is an even better example because students' involvement takes place over a longer period of time and involves many different activities.

Opposition to School Commercialism

In the United States, 19 states have now adopted some kind of statute or regulation pertaining to specific school-based commercial activities.¹⁸⁷ In 2008, three states had legislation under consideration.¹⁸⁸ None of these bills passed in the 2008 legislative sessions; they will have to be reintroduced in January 2009. In South Carolina, S. 1071 would prohibit advertising on school buses. In Massachusetts, H.B. 489 would prohibit companies from advertising their products on public school grounds and from providing promotional items or gifts — other than their primary products — that bear the mark or brand name of the manufacturer's products. Vermont's H. 813 proposes similar restrictions. According to the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, the latter two bills, if passed, would be the strongest school commercialism legislation in the country.¹⁸⁹

Legislative and public concern has primarily targeted the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value to children in schools. The National Conference of State Legislatures reported that by the end of 2006, 24 states had enacted some nutrition-related school legislation; 17 mandated school nutrition standards.¹⁹⁰ However, like the soft drink companies' voluntary agreement, the legislation addresses the nutritional content of

what is sold in schools, not what is advertised. In July 2008, the Federal Trade Commission published a review of food industry expenditures, activities, and self-regulation with respect to marketing food to children. The Commission's recommendations focused on food industry self-regulation, specifically, calling for companies to "continue efforts to improve the nutritional profile of foods and beverages sold in schools," and to "cease all in-school promotion of products that do not meet meaningful nutrition-based standards." Likewise, the Commission recommended that schools and districts "adopt and implement meaningful nutrition-based standards for competitive foods sold in schools."¹⁹¹

Advocacy organizations such as Commercial Alert, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, the Center for a New American Dream, and Obligation, Inc., are actively addressing commercialism in general, commercialism with respect to children, or commercialism in schools. For example, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) is currently organizing campaigns to prevent school districts from signing with BusRadio.¹⁹² Another CCFC campaign successfully persuaded Scholastic, Inc. to stop promoting Bratz dolls by selling Bratz books at school book fairs and book clubs.¹⁹³ CCFC also spearheaded the successful campaign in 2008 to get McDonald's to stop advertising on Seminole County report cards.¹⁹⁴ Commercial Alert's Parents Bill of Rights calls for, among other things, federal and state legislation to make schools commercial-free.¹⁹⁵ Together with the Center for a New American Dream and Obligation, Inc, Commercial Alert is organizing a letter-writing campaign to advertisers and ad agencies to persuade them to refrain from advertising on BusRadio and Channel One. This campaign was endorsed by the National PTA, Consumers Union, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Eagle Forum, the American Family Association, and other groups.¹⁹⁶

In England and Ireland, no legislation has been proposed to counter the growth of school commercialism. The British Labour government created a major policy platform for England, *Every Child Matters*, which in some ways mirrors the American *No Child Left Behind*. It also created the post of Children's Commissioner, which is committed to a world "where children and young people are truly at the centre of policy and practice."¹⁹⁷ The position is supposed to serve as a watchdog to ensure government compliance with United Nations and European Union guidance and legislation on children's rights and welfare. It has offered some useful critique of policy but lacks real teeth. Government can easily ignore it and has continued encouraging corporate school marketing as a tool to further other policy objectives. The government's *Education Business Links* website encourages businesses to mine classrooms for corporate advantage, telling them that they "can acquire better market knowledge, tap into local creativity to develop new products, and gain new and more loyal customers." The site promises businesses, in addition,

the “opportunity to influence the curriculum ... [and] ensure that new recruits come through with the right skills and attitudes.”¹⁹⁸

Opposition to commercialism in schools in England is usually issue-specific, isolated and localized, and rarely regarded as newsworthy. The Academies program has generated the most widespread response. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) opposes academies on the grounds that they involve “the transfer of publicly funded assets to the control of an unaccountable sponsoring body.”¹⁹⁹ The largest teachers union, the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers, regards academies as a “threat...to the public service ethos of state education.”²⁰⁰ Even the usually mild-mannered National Governors’ Association opposes academies as being “deficient in accountability and representativeness.”²⁰¹

Despite the general lack of opposition to commercialism in England, there is an increasing web presence of organized groups beginning to ask challenging questions about the commercialization of childhood. Baby Milk Action, Family Focus UK, and Compass: Direction for the Democratic Left are all active in tackling commercialization issues.²⁰² Moreover, the public and media are becoming increasingly receptive to some campaigns.

In Ireland, where several high-profile politicians have previously lent vocal support to commercial programs targeting schools, the Minister for Education, when questioned about marketing in schools, noted that “Private companies are free to promote their business in accordance with accepted marketing practices.”²⁰³ In June 2007 the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), representing teachers at the primary level, published a policy on Commercial Products in Schools stating that schools should be free from commercial presentations aimed at children and their families, from proof-of-purchase incentive programs, and from sponsored material carrying an overt or prominent advertising message.²⁰⁴ In December 2007 the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) criticized programs that encourage schools to redeem vouchers from store purchases for school equipment, recommending that principals and deputy principals no longer participate in such programs.²⁰⁵ Opposition from these groups contributed to the critical coverage awarded the launch of SuperValu’s “Kids in Action” program in the national television news.²⁰⁶

The Irish Heart Foundation has also highlighted the problem of marketing unhealthy foods through schools and “has called for increased funding for sports and PE equipment to help schools be less reliant on commercial funding.”²⁰⁷ A voluntary lobby group, the Campaign for Commercial-Free Education, has been successful in raising critical awareness of commercialism through local and national media.²⁰⁸

Conclusion

Opposition to school commercialism is as yet a soft voice compared to the highly amplified messaging of businesses that advertise to children in school. Worse, marketing activities in school are but one manifestation of the “total environment” of advertising the marketing and advertising industries create. In this environment, advertising has become a dynamic tool for interactively engaging consumers in as many ways, with as many technologies, and for as long a time as feasibly possible. Children, much like adult consumers but more so because of their vulnerability, are so heavily and so shrewdly targeted that they happily seek out and participate in marketing.

Children brought up in a total advertising environment don’t recognize the subtle effect of an ever-more-materialistic culture on their perception of what is right, normal, and true. Children who play popular Internet-based games with virtual economies, such as Webkinz, Millsberry, or Club Penguin, learn to assume a materialistic culture where securing money is a goal because it can be exchanged for goods. Of course, in these virtual economies they exchange virtual money for virtual goods, but this pretend play teaches them a materialist understanding of success. As they practice earning money, they practice buying. By decorating avatars’ or pets’ rooms, for example, they learn that they, too, can and should buy things to decorate their own rooms. As psychologists have indicated, not only are higher materialist values correlated with greater psychological distress and chronic physical symptoms, but the more time that is spent focused on buying, the less time is available for other, non-material pursuits like sports and volunteerism.

That children in 2008 are used to wading in advertising in all areas of their lives, including school, leads some to propose that children are becoming so hardened to advertising that it is less effective — or less threatening, depending on how you think about it. Nevertheless, although children may ignore or dismiss a particular message, in the larger scheme of things, the total advertising environment creates a materialistic atmosphere that encourages more buying, more identification with brands, and more commercialized values.

Some of the more egregious examples of commercialism in schools may fade in the coming years as a result of anti-commercial activism, legislation, and corporate self-regulation. Channel One, for example, is much declawed since its heyday several years ago. BusRadio, targeted by activist groups such as Commercial Alert and Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, may meet a similar fate. The beverage companies are limiting their sales of high-calorie soft drinks in schools. However, we are likely to see more of the understated variants of school-based commercialism: the building of brand awareness through such approaches as sponsored educational materials and advertising panels on vending machines selling mostly branded water. As schools struggle to

make ends meet, we are also likely to see businesses continue to expand the popular approach of “working in partnership” with schools to help with fundraising — building public goodwill and a positive brand image through marketing dressed as “corporate responsibility.”²⁰⁹ These types of activities are especially effective marketing tools because even as corporations can sincerely deny that they constitute “advertising,” they increase the effectiveness of out-of-school, overt, advertising. Children’s actual and potential purchasing power makes them a prized market for anyone with products to sell. For this reason, in 2008 as well as for the foreseeable future, schools remain a valued marketing venue.

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