

A REVIEW OF ADVERTISEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES

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Extensive research has investigated children and advertising with the greatest focus on television advertising [9]. The emphasis on television advertising is appropriate since the average child views approximately 30,000 television advertisements per year or about 55 commercials each day [6]. However, this single medium focus has ignored the influence of printed advertisements directed to children. One exception was Lindquist's [4] study which explored children's attitudes toward advertising in comic books, children's magazines, radio, and television. His findings suggested that children's overall favorable attitude toward printed advertising was due to the reputable organizations associated with some of the magazines.

During the last decade, children's magazines have increased in numbers and changed substantially. For children ages 13 and under, an estimated 92 magazines were published. In one year alone, seven new magazines just for preschoolers were initiated [3]. While some children's magazines do not have advertisements, many of the newer, popular magazines feature a considerable number of advertisements.

If earlier research on television advertising has noted problems with deception [1], prize-premium requests [2] and disclaimers [8] in children's advertisements, it is arguable that similar problems exist with printed ads. The purpose of this article is to assess advertisements in children's magazines using the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) guidelines.

Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising

Following its creation in 1974 by the Council of Better Business Bureau's National Advertising Division, the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) published a set of "Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising" [7]. The goal of the CARU is to promote truthful, accurate advertising to children which is sensitive to the

special nature of the child audience. The guidelines used by CARU are applicable to all advertising addressed to children under 12 years of age.

The CARU guidelines are based on five basic principles. The first two principles stipulate that advertisers should consider the level of knowledge, sophistication, and maturity of the child audience and not exploit the imaginative qualities of children nor give unreasonable expectations of product quality or performance. The third requires that product information contained in an advertisement be communicated in a truthful and accurate manner. A fourth principle urges advertisers to use the potential of advertising to influence social behavior, and to develop advertisements that address positive and beneficial social standards. Lastly, advertisements should contribute to the parent-child relationship in a positive manner. CARU used the five principles to develop a set of 31 detailed guidelines organized under the following seven categories: product presentation and claims; sales pressure; disclosures and disclaimers; comparative claims; endorsements and promotions by program or editorial characters; premiums; and safety.

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The authors converted the CARU guidelines into an instrument which was divided into eight categories. The first category included five items, one for each of the general principles. The remainder of the instrument included the 31 guidelines, grouped in seven categories.

Magazines for the study were purchased from local retail outlets in Winter 1990. Publications selected for the study were written for children age 12 or under that contained advertisements. Eleven children's magazines and three comic books met this criteria. All of the ads in these publications were analyzed (n=142) except those ads measuring less than three inches square and placed at the back of the comic books.

The most common types of products advertised were entertainment oriented: books and magazines (20 percent); videos, movies and television shows (16 percent); toys (15 percent); and video games/games (11 percent). Foods/beverages and personal apparel/personal care advertisements comprised about a quarter of the ads. Twenty-one advertisements, including ads for clubs, collectibles and hobbies, were classified as miscellaneous.

Results

General Category. The advertisements examined generally did not conform with the five general principles outlined by the CARU for children's advertising. Only one-third of the advertisements complied

with the guideline requiring consideration of the level of knowledge, sophistication, and maturity of the intended audience. In contrast, six in 10 did not exploit the imaginative quality of the child reader by stimulating unreasonable expectations of product quality. Just under one-half (48 percent) of the advertisements met the guideline requiring truthful communication of product information. Eighty-seven percent of the advertisements failed to realize the potential to influence social behavior through positive and beneficial social standards and 95 percent failed to focus on the parent-child relationship in a positive and constructive manner.

Product Presentation and Claims Category. Many of the advertisements complied with most of the ten guidelines in this category. The visual presentation of the product or performance characteristics was not misleading in over one-half (56 percent) of the advertisements. Statements of perceived benefits from the use of the product were deemed not misleading in almost three-quarters of the ads and nearly two-thirds did not exploit the imagination of children. Most ad presentations (83 percent) were made in a manner which would not frighten children or provoke anxiety. However, objective claims about product or performance characteristics were not well supported by appropriate and adequate substantiation in 71 percent of the ads.

Almost three-quarters of the 19 advertisements for food or beverage products failed to encourage sound use of the product. The CARU guidelines require that representations of food products encourage healthy development of the child and good nutritional practices.

Sales Pressure Category. The advertisements complied well with the three guidelines in this category. More than two-thirds of the advertisements did not give the impression that buying the product would increase peer acceptance; only four percent urged children to request products. Almost 60 percent of the ads also clearly represented the price.

Disclosure and Disclaimers Category. Earlier research [5,8] has documented that disclosures and disclaimers represent a problem area in children's television advertising. The CARU includes four guidelines in this category. Only 56 advertisements contained some form of a disclosure or disclaimer. While any disclosures or disclaimers should be expressed in language children can understand, over one-half of the advertisements investigated did not comply. The most frequently omitted disclosures were an item essential to the use of the product, such as batteries, or that the product required assembly. Another

problem area was a failure to state that additional accessories for the product must be purchased separately. As Stern and Harmon [8] noted, the use of disclaimers could benefit advertisers more than they serve the needs of the child audience. They asserted that when disclaimers use adult language and only an audio or visual format, the child could be misled or confused.

Comparative Claims Category. The three guidelines in this category were used to analyze the three advertisements containing comparative claims. None of the ads provided factual information or appropriate and adequate substantiation. Two advertisements did not comply with the guideline requiring that comparative claims be presented in a way that a child can clearly understand.

Endorsement and Promotion Category. Although celebrities have endorsed products for decades, the "status products" being pushed to kids today have never been so costly, and the commercials have never been so slick [6]. The 15 advertisements containing endorsements or promotions of a product by program or editorial characters were assessed by the four guidelines in this category. In the majority of these advertisements (87 percent), the endorsement was by a fantasy/cartoon character such as Snoopy or Mickey Mouse. Since the guideline states that all personal endorsements should reflect the actual experiences and beliefs of the endorser, this guideline is inappropriate for fantasy/cartoon characters.

Another guideline states that a character or personality associated with the editorial content of the publication must not be used to promote products, premiums, or services in the same publication; for example, Barbie should not promote a product in the Barbie magazine. Since 80 percent of the advertisements did not comply with the guideline, it appears that host-selling is prevalent as a means to promote products in children's magazines.

Premiums Category. In an earlier study, Burr and Burr [2] noted that parents had more negative comments about prize/premium appeals than about any other appeal studied. The parents reported that the prizes/premiums were overemphasized to the point that children requested the product just to get the prize. The two guidelines included in this category were used to assess the 17 advertisements containing premium offers. Although the guideline states the child's attention is to be focused on the product, in seven of the ads (41 percent) the focus was on the premium. Only 12 percent of the advertisements complied with the guideline requiring that conditions of a premium offer be stated simply and clearly.

Safety Category. The highest compliance among the eight categories was in the five safety guidelines. Better than two-thirds of the advertisements met the guideline that products should be appropriate to advertise directly to children. The children shown using the product were in the appropriate age range in more than three-quarters of the advertisements. In better than four-fifths of the ads, product use could be duplicated by the child and products were shown with adults and children in safe environments.

Conclusions

This study used the CARU guidelines to analyze advertisements placed in popular children's magazines and noted the following problem areas: 1) a lack of emphasis on positive social standards or a constructive focus on the parent-child relationship; 2) a failure to adequately substantiate objective claims about product characteristics; 3) food advertisements which did not encourage sound use of the product or the development of good nutritional practices; and 4) disclosures and disclaimers which were not expressed in language which children understand.

Endorsements were another problem area. New guidelines might be necessary in this area because the existing ones are not appropriate for fantasy or cartoon editorial characters. Another major concern is use of characters related to the editorial content of the publications in the advertisements. This problem parallels one found with characters on children's television programs appearing in commercials. One must question whether the publication or program is simply a cleverly disguised advertisement for the product.

Although premium offers in advertisements were limited, advertisements which included prizes/premiums focused on the prize/premium rather than the products. The premium conditions were also not expressed in language easily understood by children.

Children's magazines appear to be growing in popularity and serve as a well-established advertising medium. Efforts need to be made to sensitize both children and adults to printed advertisements in these publications. The Children's Advertising Review Unit Guidelines can be used for that purpose.

Teachers could replicate this study in child development and consumer education classes and ask the class or small groups of students to analyze ads directed to children. In addition, each student could analyze an ad and support his/her assessment based on child development and consumer education principles. In a follow-up activity, students could write letters to both the manufacturer and the advertiser stating their conclusions and requesting responses.

References

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Note

The "Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising" are available by writing to the Children's Advertising Unit, National Advertising Division, Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc., 845 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022.