

# New techniques for targeting children

**As Ofcom dithers over the control of TV junk food advertising, the advertisers are finding new ways to connect to children. Ian Tokelove reports.**

**J**unk food advertisers are switching to new marketing techniques that are ideal for targeting media-savvy children, the 90's kids who have grown up with the internet, computer gaming and mobile phones.

As we reported last year, websites are a highly effective yet poorly regulated means of advertising to children. It is fairly easy to encourage children to visit a commercial website – you just have to tempt them in with some sweet treats. Free downloads such as screen-savers or ring-tones work well, as do free games and competitions. To keep children revisiting websites, marketers use regularly updated celebrity gossip and news, along with games and prizes.

## Mobile marketing

It is estimated that nine out of ten children under the age of 16 now own a mobile phone. Texting is an enormously popular way for these children to communicate with their friends, with 96% of children with mobile phones sending and receiving text messages. But it's not just friends who want to talk to these children – food and drink firms also want to communicate with them and do so using text marketing (also known as SMS or 'short message service' marketing).

Junk food companies have made particular use of 'text 2 win' competitions – where promotional codes printed on food or drink packaging can be texted to the companies in exchange for prizes. The codes encourage repeat purchases and companies get their hands on a consumer's mobile phone number, allowing them to text back with new offers and inducements to buy more products.

Companies can also use texting to send virtual vouchers which consumers can then



**This 'text 2 win' competition on a bottle of Fanta, aimed at those aged 12 or older, offered a chance to win one the 'latest' picture messaging phones.**

exchange for real products. McDonald's undertook a promotion like this in the US, where participants could sign up to receive a voucher for a free McFlurry ice cream.

## Chat rooms

A chat room is an online forum where people can chat online. Some are simply word-based, whilst others allow the user to appear as a chosen avatar (a graphical image of a user) and explore different virtual rooms and environments, talking and interacting with other users whom they meet. One in five children aged nine to 16 regularly use chatrooms. As the director of one new-media agency pointed out *"With communities, you are hitting opinion-formers. It's classic word-of-mouth"*, he says. *"Kids are less susceptible to traditional marketing activity, but they respect what their peers say a lot more and this is where they get a lot of their advice from."*



Advertisers can communicate with these children by creating a branded presence in the children's online world. For example, Sunny D rebranded part of the Habbo Hotel (an online community for teenagers and children) as

the 'Sunny D lido', where a virtual Sunny D employee served drinks and asked what flavours the users liked. Controversially, advertisers can also use 'infiltration marketing' to access chat rooms in the guise of everyday users, where they will chat about the 'benefits' of whatever product they are promoting.

## Viral marketing

Viral marketing – as its name suggests – seeks to spread commercial messages in the same way that a virus spreads from one individual to another. Viral commercials take the form of funny video clips, interactive games, images or jokes which children will find entertaining enough to pass on to their friends. Famously, when Kellogg's launched Real Fruit Winders in the UK they used viral marketing to reach nearly 60% of UK children, who responded with comments such as *"it's cool!"* and *"It is more secret than text messaging – my mum wouldn't know what was going on."* Indeed, mums were deliberately kept out of the marketing agenda – Kellogg's went straight to the kids with their 'mutant fruit characters'. When mums found out, they reacted badly. Real Fruit Winders later received a Tooth Rot Award from the Food Commission's Parents Jury for being almost half sugar, despite being presented as an apparently healthy fruit snack.

## Advertising within computer games

A recent UK survey found that 82% of nine to 19-year-olds own at least one games console. 70% of these played online games, interacting with other players via the internet. And food and drink brands are increasingly being advertised within such games.

Young people can become highly immersed in virtual gaming environments, where commercial messages are placed as part of the routine visual landscape. Crucially for advertisers, online games (a rapidly expanding sector) allow different products and different advertisements to be targeted at specific audiences, thus a 12-year-old girl may be targeted with very different commercial messages than a 16-year-old boy. For example, a virtual vending machine could be designed to have different 'skins' (themed graphics), one advertising 'low calorie, flavoured drinks' for girls, another advertising 'high energy sports drinks' for boys.



**Massive Inc is a specialist advertising agency, owned by Microsoft, that sells adverts in video games. Companies such as Coca-Cola, Nestlé and Dunkin' Donuts can purchase advertising using a model similar to that used in television advertising. Adverts can be targeted according to the time of day and the consumer's location, and customised to fit the game environment. This image shows a Sprite vending machine inserted into a highly realistic gaming environment.**