

Determining the next craze in the kids' market: recognising mindsets

Cristina Afors from Cultural Imprint believes marketers should aim to understand how children think and feel rather than trying to track every new product launched

When looking at the 'next craze' marketers tie themselves in knots trying to investigate every new thing, every new direction in order to capture this elusive holy grail.

There is so much change going on, however, that it is nearly impossible to determine what is going to be the next trendy 'thingy'.

Instead of losing valuable time in following all the new directions presented, marketers should concentrate on revealing the 'emotional hooks' that determine if new products are going to be successful or not. To help develop new products successfully this approach takes a step backwards, deliberately, and investigates the young consumers' mindsets.

However, there is a real problem in identifying the consumers' relevant needs . This is because they usually say one thing in research and do something totally different in real life.

Young consumers and their parents complain about the levels of complexity of computer games and electronic gadgets. They seem to be saying that they actually want to buy products that are simple and easy to use. When examining the results of sales, however, it is the 'complicated' products that sell the most. Young consumers and their parents consistently buy products that are well beyond their ability and their present needs. Paradoxically, consumers want complicated products with added functions that they may never use. Why?

Research conducted by Cultural Imprint reveals that consumers in reality want products that allow them to expand their abilities. To settle for the easy and simple ones is perceived as boring and childish. Young consumers want to be much older than their age. They aspire to be able to develop and expand their abilities without threat to their sense of identity.

Computer and video games address young consumers' needs for 'open-ended' games are constantly challenging youngsters into action.

The games' storyline, nearly always depicting an archetypal fight between 'good and evil' provides an added emotional involvement. The games are in themselves 'never ending'. The moment young consumers master one level they are put automatically into the next one. Even when they lose, the system gives them, through the number of points already scored, concrete proof of their abilities. Furthermore, when young consumers get stuck there are

helplines that can coach and guide them towards the next step.

The system is well balanced. Whilst computer and video games provide young consumers with challenge and excitement, the helplines provide them with the guidance needed for continuous improvement.

In the toy and games arena it is not enough to observe how children play. In order to communicate successfully, toy manufacturers must understand the context in which young consumers play and the cultural mindsets operating in this area.

Children make use of play to explore the world around them and to develop their personality. Ultimately, the aim of play is to prepare the child for things yet to come. It helps them to explore their own individuality and the world of relationships. They learn to establish a degree of personal autonomy, to explore their surroundings and to overcome fear.

It is through play that young consumers satisfy their conflicting needs. These needs are to feel secure and at the same time to be able to expand and to develop themselves (which they do through role-play and games). The development of personality is not linear and, from time to time, children need proof of their achievements in order to gain enough confidence to continue their progress.

When it comes to change and innovation, it is best to explore consumers' experiences of change (what they actually do, not what they say) in order to understand, a priori, the 'triggers' and 'barriers' to the 'next craze'.

In the change and innovation arena this approach has revealed that consumers have a negative model of change. In the young consumers' minds change is usually associated with the 'first day of school', 'moving houses' or 'going into hospital'; all negative experiences that generate a lot of insecurity. When youngsters come across a new product, they seek reassurance and look for something familiar in order to be able to enjoy it. Contradictory, young consumers want to feel both secure and excited by new products.

A number of products highlight these apparently contradictory needs:

- Kellogg's Frosties - the familiarity of cornflakes is retained with the added dimensions of sugar and Tony, the Tiger. Sugar is comforting and pleasurable (like confectionery) but the tiger stands for adventure and play. Kids in British and American cultures are not supposed to play with their food. Tony, the Tiger offers a dimension of 'approved' play that addresses the needs of kids (for play) and their parents (no mess).
- The new Lego with the computer chip. Again we have all the familiarity of the colourful indestructible brick with the added technological dimension of movement.
- The new yo-yo craze is also a good example. They are old fashioned, nostalgic toys with the added possibility of performing complicated tricks that can be enjoyed by kids and their parents.
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Naturally the next craze is not obtained solely by adding sugar or a microchip

to tired products. Hitting upon the 'next craze' is like putting together an abstract puzzle without guidance. By exploring the young consumers' mindsets in the play arena and also their reactions towards change we can however, devise a way to put together some of the vital pieces of this puzzle. And we learn to develop new products that address even the young consumers' unspoken needs.

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