

# The media AND THE MESSAGE

How the industry is answering to calls for tighter regulations on advertising to children

**F**rom the age of four, Nancy Vonk's daughter was unhappy with her hair. "She wanted long, straight blond hair, and she had curly brown hair," says the Toronto mother. As the girl grew older, she started worrying about her appearance. One day, Vonk asked, "Lily, why do you let yourself be sucked into this? You know this isn't realistic." Her tween daughter replied, "It doesn't matter what I know. It's what the world is holding up."

Seeing her daughter struggle with unrealistic beauty expectations gave Vonk, co-chief creative officer at the ad agency Ogilvy & Mather Canada, even greater pride in a now well-known ad campaign her agency helped develop for Dove. Titled "Campaign for Real Beauty," it includes a Self-Esteem Fund that lets girls learn and talk about beauty imagery. Vonk has since seen other advertisers adopt a similar message. "There's some effort to show a consciousness of the issue," she says, "but whether there's really a meaningful shift underway, I don't know."

Parents' and health professionals' growing alarm about how advertising affects children is causing some companies to review their ad practices. This is especially true among food and beverage manufacturers,

which are facing growing calls for bans on advertising to children as child obesity rates soar. More than a third of respondents to our survey want to see ads aimed at kids banned outright, and 40% of the rest would like restrictions placed on the products promoted and the age of kids targeted. Yet it's far from certain that banning ads would have much effect. Technology changes rapidly, there are loopholes in every rule and many of today's most effective ways of getting kids hooked on brands fly under the radar of parents and regulators.

Television, which 96% of our survey respondents let their kids watch, is the most ubiquitous advertising source — but also the most strictly regulated. In Canada, commercials aimed at kids under 12 can't use words like "new" or "introducing" for products that have been on the market more than a year; they can't urge kids to buy (or ask their parents to buy) products; and they can't suggest that using the product will make the child better than other kids. Companies also can't use well-known kids' enter-

## WHAT PARENTS BELIEVE IS ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH ADVERTISING



### PARENTS SOUND OFF ABOUT ADVERTISING

"In a commercial for Bratz, the little girls in the ad were dressed like the dolls, which I thought was inappropriate; the dolls' clothing is too revealing. Little girls don't need to dress like that!"



tainers or cartoon characters in their promotions, nor can their mascots appear in kids' shows, to avoid blurring the line between ads and the programming. And advertisers are prevented from showing more than one commercial for the same product within a half-hour period.

But more and more people fear that isn't enough. A year ago, MP Peter Julian introduced a bill seeking to extend a ban on children's advertising — which has been in place in Quebec since 1980 — across the country. And this past February, Toronto's medical officer of health cited obesity concerns in recommending a ban on food advertising to kids under 13. Most recently, the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada brought together key players, including health experts and advertisers, to examine the relationship between obesity and marketing to children. That conference resulted in a call to end "all marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children within two years."

Even before that call was issued in March, food and beverage companies were worried enough about regulations — and the prospect of lawsuits related to obesity — to have recently announced a voluntary commitment to less advertising of nutritionally questionable food to kids. The 16 companies, ranging from Weston Bakeries to McDonald's Restaurants of Canada, promise to direct their budgets for kids' marketing to more nutritious choices. Diana Carradine of Concerned Children's Advertisers, an advocacy group comprising many of Canada's biggest brands, points out the marketers behind this initiative represent 90% of ad spending in Canada, and eight of the 16 will stop advertising to preteens altogether. The foods they continue to promote "will reflect the principal advice of the Canada Food Guide," she says, though (loophole alert!) the companies have

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**"Leading up to her birthday, my now five-year-old wanted a Backyardigans circus play toy she saw in a commercial. I thought, 'How convenient!' It actually helped me get an idea for her gift."**

leeway to interpret those guidelines and define which products comply.

Banning commercials, of course, leaves many other advertising forms out there. Studies have shown that kids nag as often for products, and parents give in as often, whether they see TV advertising or not. While some studies indicate the Quebec ban has trimmed families' fast-food spending in that province, there are conflicting claims on whether the rates of obesity have budged. And, of course, advancing technology makes any bans difficult to enforce. "I frankly wasn't aware of the ban until you brought it up," says Lyle Stewart, a Montreal father of four ranging from a baby to a 13-year-old. He subscribes to satellite television, so his family has a choice of many national and US channels. "Therein lies the limitation of such a ban," he says. "With satellite and Internet TV, your options are far wider and cannot be limited by government intervention."

Somehow, ads always manage to sneak through cracks in regulations. Kids often watch so-called family shows with their parents, where many advertising restrictions don't apply. In Quebec, companies can get around the ban by saying that their target market is kids over 13.

While parental concern still looms large, some say the influence of advertising may be less of a cause for worry than we think. Mike Farrell, partner and chief strategic officer at Youthography, a youth-focused marketing and research firm in Toronto, says that kids today are more media-savvy than adults give them credit for.

His company's research suggests that even preteens are demanding accountability from brands that cater to them, and companies are responding. After all, he points out, the focus on environmentally friendly products has been driven in large part by youth. While traditional kid-centred ads featuring mascots and catchy jingles still work with grade-schoolers, older kids want a voice, and they know when efforts to reach them aren't sincere. This is media literacy education at work, something CCA's Carradine heartily encourages. "If media and marketing are part of our societal life, we have to teach children how to consume media and how to discriminate between the messages."

Vonk, for one, is encouraged by the shifting tone in some advertising to kids, both as a mother and as an ad executive. While some of the efforts promoting nutrition, self-esteem and environmental protection strike her as blatantly insincere, she's glad to see the ad community weighing its messages more closely. "We get caught up in what we can do, without thinking enough, 'Is this the right thing to do?' It'd be great if it was a fundamental shift. But I think we'd be naive to think that, OK, job done." ♥

#### Who answered our survey

No. of respondents: 2,974  
 Age of their children:  
 10 to 14 – 9%  
 5 to 9 – 28%  
 Under 5 – 58%  
 Expecting a baby – 5%