

Beyond Buyer Beware: A Need for Marketing Literacy

**Nancy E. Furlow
Marymount University**

In the 1970s, a need was identified for critical education to help young adults understand and analyze messages they are exposed to through the media, including advertising. This need has developed into formal media literacy courses taught in American elementary and secondary public schools, focusing on teaching children how to critically analyze the many messages received through the media, and often includes detailed information regarding advertising messages.

Young consumers are vulnerable to conspicuous consumption and in need of marketing education, or “marketing literacy.” As demonstrated by the nation’s negative savings rate, the growing popularity of brands, the increase in young adults carrying credit card debt, and the growing number of personal bankruptcies in this nation, it is apparent that young adults have failed to get the message, or possibly choose to ignore the lessons they were taught during their school years about interpreting advertising messages.

Through a series of focus groups of university students, this project examines what type of education in media or consumer literacy students have received, how confident students are about their own knowledge of marketing techniques, and how concerned they are about their generation, and future generations, when it comes to being educated consumers.

INTRODUCTION

A number of programs have been developed to help educate consumers of all ages. Today programs are being developed in financial literacy to teach consumers how to save money and use credit cards wisely. Information literacy programs have developed to teach the public how to access the many avenues of information and how to critically analyze that information. However, the most widely recognized and formal educational program focuses on media literacy.

Media literacy education can trace its roots back to the 1800s with the introduction of photography; the field did not become popular in the United States until the 1970s when American teachers began to introduce the concept to their students. Although the idea was originally dismissed as being “frivolous”, the field has become accepted and is widely adapted in schools today (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). Recognition of the field has grown through the nonprofit Center for Media Literacy, which provides professional development and support for its members.

Media literacy programs are designed to help school-aged children develop critical thinking skills in analyzing messages they view through advertisements. Media literacy education provides a framework for people living and working in the 21st century (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). The programs have also been used in social marketing campaigns. Austin, et al. (2005) noted positive results by using media literacy curriculum to prevent the use of tobacco among youths.

Previous media literacy education programs have focused on traditional advertising, but not on other techniques used by marketers. Even program content today should be included in the discussion when children are targeted by commercial enterprises. With the convergence of media today, the issue of media literacy has become more convoluted and is expanding to include cultural studies, information and communication technology and new media as part of the curriculum (Kellner & Share, 2005).

While media literacy education is designed to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to analyze advertisements, there is only limited evidence that this knowledge will actually reduce young consumer's vulnerability to marketing communications (Hobbs, 2004). Fox (2005) exposed gaps in media literacy research and obstacles of the discipline including the fact that the content and medium being studied can overshadow the actual elements of media literacy. Again, denying young consumers of the real education needed to make informed decisions.

A NEED FOR MARKETING LITERACY IDENTIFIED

Consumption behavior of “tweens” and teens (Gen Y)

As the term “Millennial” suggests, this generation was born between 1985 through today. They have been influenced by tragedies such as September 11th and the Columbine shootings, yet they are protected and nurtured because of such tragedies. They are tech-savvy and see themselves as cutting-edge. This generation is trustful and optimistic about their future and they are more racial diverse and tolerant than previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Today's teens are very different from previous generations, e.g. they are the world's first computer-literate generation and they are better-traveled than many of their parents. In addition, they are concerned with social issues, particularly environmentalism (Tully & Schonfeld, 1994). The teenage market is growing and becoming more powerful. By the year 2010, the teenage population will reach 31 million. This is the largest teen population at any time since 1975 (Orsini, 1998).

Teen consumers go to a shopping center 54 times a year and spend 90 minutes a visit, compared with all shoppers who go an average of 39 times a year and spend 75 minutes per visit (Voight, 1999). Teens spend at least \$95 billion a year on food, entertainment, clothing and health and beauty items, with female teens accounting for \$48.7 billion of that total (Fox, Krugman, et al, 1998).

With all of that teenage money bound for the marketplace, it is important to recognize who influences teens' purchasing decisions. The top influencing factor of how teens spend their money is friends, followed by parents, advertising and lastly, television (Krol, 1997). In another study, Shim (1996) determined that peers, parents, printed media, TV commercials and consumer education play an important role in influencing adolescent consumer decision making.

While it is evident that ‘tweens and teens are shopping, it remains a concern that these young consumers are not taught to be smart consumers. Risinger (2005) reported that only 21 percent of U.S. students surveyed said they had taken a course in economics or consumer education.

Most of those student responding positively had only taken a one semester economics course their senior your of high school.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, focus group sessions were conducted over the course of a semester in three undergraduate business courses. Most of the students were currently enrolled in a marketing principles class or had previously taken the course and had therefore been exposed to marketing principles and techniques. The groups were large in size, with between 15 and 17 students in each session, which limited to some extent student participation. A total of 47 students participated in the study, 80 percent were upper classmen. The majority of students reported going to public high schools in the Northern Virginia area, but a small number of students were international students.

The sessions focused on three main areas:

- 1) What type of education in media or consumer literacy had students received in high school
- 2) How confident are students about their own knowledge of marketing techniques
- 3) How concerned are students about their generation, and future generations, when it comes to being educated consumers

RESULTS

Findings of the focus groups uncovered that even though they had not received formal education in high school, students who participated in the study consider themselves to be well-educated, perceptive consumers. They expressed a genuine concern about their siblings and a definite need for formal marketing education in high school and possible middle school. They also expressed genuine concern about the impact that credit card debt (their own as well as others) will have on the economy.

When asked about what type of exposure to media or consumer literacy they received in high school, students stated that for the most part they had not received media literacy as a separate class, but talked about it in their government classes. Students would like to see a required course offered in high school that teaches them about personal finances and how to deal with sales people. Students believed that it is important to teach young adults about the tactics used by marketers because younger generations have more spending power, are purchasing things at a younger age, and see things more in terms on needs rather than wants.

The focus group subjects also felt that advertising toward high school aged students is manipulative and are concerned about their younger siblings. However, they agreed that they did receive information about products from their peers more than from ads themselves. About half of the students admitted to paying attention to ads, and a small percent admitted to being swayed by celebrity spokespersons.

The students consider themselves to be smart shoppers and expressed little concern for overall consumer debt at their current age (20-21), but are concerned about their own personal credit card debt and about the amount of consumer debt in our country. A number of students recounted tales of high school friends having their own credit cards and already bad credit ratings.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The focus groups were conducted with business majors or minors. Future research is needed to include the impressions of nonbusiness students. The overriding issue that was identified is primarily concern over irresponsible consumption as a result of not being aware of techniques used by marketers or inexperience in dealing with sales people.

A survey is being developed to explore this issue on a larger level and to determine if there is a genuine need for formal marketing literacy education at the high school or middle school level. If it is determined there is a need, collaborating with existing curriculum development programs in media, financial and consumer literacy training would be ideal.