

# **Marketing Madness**

*A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society*

**Michael F. Jacobson *and* Laurie Ann Mazur**

with a Foreword by Ralph Nader



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for a Consumer Society*

Michael F. Jacobson

*and*

Laurie Ann Mazur

*Center for the Study of Commercialism*

with a Foreword by Ralph Nader



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*To Sonya Jeanette's happiness in a more  
joyous, less commercialized society*

**Michael F. Jacobson**

*To the memory of my mother,  
Harriet Mazur, with love*

**Laurie Ann Mazur**



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# Contents

FOREWORD <i>by</i> Ralph Nader . . . . .	8
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	11
PROLOGUE . . . . .	12

## Part One

### *The Face of Commercialism*

<b>1</b> TARGETING CHILDREN . . . . .	19
<i>Section 1</i> The Littlest Consumers . . . . .	21
<i>Section 2</i> Schools Go Commercial . . . . .	29
<b>2</b> THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC AIRWAVES . . . . .	39
<i>Section 1</i> The Trojan Horse: Commercial Television . . . . .	41
<i>Section 2</i> The Private Life of Public Broadcasting . . . . .	49
<b>3</b> HIDDEN ADVERTISING . . . . .	55
<i>Section 1</i> Blurring the Distinctions: Infomercials, Advertorials, and More . . . . .	57
<i>Section 2</i> Product Placement . . . . .	67
<b>4</b> SEXISM AND SEXUALITY IN ADVERTISING . . . . .	73
<i>Section 1</i> The Iron Maiden: How Advertising Portrays Women . . . . .	75
<i>Section 2</i> Sex as a Commodity . . . . .	83
<b>5</b> CO-OPTING CIVIC GROUPS, CULTURE, SPORTS. . . . .	89
<i>Section 1</i> Selling with Social Issues . . . . .	91
<i>Section 2</i> Corporate Culture . . . . .	101
<i>Section 3</i> Sports: Marketers Go for the Green . . . . .	111
<b>6</b> INTRUSIVE MARKETING . . . . .	117
<i>Section 1</i> Big Brother and You: The Growth of Direct Marketing.. . . .	119
<i>Section 2</i> Assaulting the Home: Telemarketing . . . . .	127
<i>Section 3</i> Litter on a Stick: Billboards and Outdoor Advertising . . . . .	133
<i>Section 4</i> Ambush Advertising: Video Monitors Everywhere. . . . .	139
<b>7</b> ADVERTISING LIES, ADVERTISING KILLS . . . . .	141
<i>Section 1</i> Ads That Lie . . . . .	143
<i>Section 2</i> Ads That Kill I: Tobacco . . . . .	149
<i>Section 3</i> Ads That Kill II: Alcohol . . . . .	163
<b>8</b> COMMERCIALIZED HOLIDAYS AND RITUALS. . . . .	177
<i>Section 1</i> Dreaming of a Noncommercial Christmas . . . . .	179

## Part Two

### *Facing Commercialism*

<b>9</b> THE IMPACT OF COMMERCIALISM: AFFECTING OUR MINDS, POCKETBOOKS, AND PLANET 187	
•Promoting Materialism . . . . .	188
•Destroying Our Planet. . . . .	191
•Stealing Our Time . . . . .	193
•Taking Our Money . . . . .	194
•Ruining Our Health. . . . .	196
•Twisting Our Minds . . . . .	198
•Sapping the Community's Strength . . . . .	201
•Eroding Religion . . . . .	203
•Undermining Civic Institutions. . . . .	204
•Making Pawns of the Press . . . . .	206
<b>10</b> CALL TO ACTION: TAMING COMMERCIALISM . . . . .	209
•Changing Our Daily Lives . . . . .	209
•Growing Up Smarter in a Consumer Culture. . . . .	214
•Rallying the Religious Community. . . . .	217
•Keeping the "Non" in Nonprofit . . . . .	218
•Businesses Can Do More Than Make Money . . . . .	219
•State or Local Government Can Set the Pace . . . . .	222
•Washington Should Lead the Charge. . . . .	224
•The Final Word. . . . .	231
NOTES . . . . .	232
ABOUT THE BOOK AND AUTHORS. . . . .	249
INDEX . . . . .	250

# Foreword

*by Ralph Nader*

*This book is a detailed report on the commercializing of just about everything. In area after area that was generally off limits to commercialism, the mercantile juggernaut has moved in or swarmed over—into our schools and colleges, our public media, our amateur sports, our holidays and rituals, our arts, our children, our privacy and private sensibilities, our religious institutions, our environment, our language, and our politics. Our historically treasured cultural values are either viewed as marketing impediments—such as democratic tools for civic assertiveness—or are commandeered, coopted, or outright commodified in the service of corporate profits.*

**B**UT DIDN'T PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE say back in the 1920s that "the business of America is business"? Hasn't the command of commerce, the lure of profits, the single-minded focus on markets been around since the days of the thirteen colonies? Nothing past is remotely comparable to the pervasive, time-consuming, and flouting of formerly noncommercial space and institutions in our country as the hyper-intensity and calculation of the megasales pitch that sweeps all prior restraints and functional decorums aside in today's malling of America.

Churches speak more about marketing themselves than about Mammon. Children demand of their parents what children's television programming and advertising, which directly bypasses the parents, seduces the youngsters into wanting. And corporate hucksters have even used former Presidents, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, as commercial pitchmen for car dealers, furniture stores, and banks. There are almost no limits or boundaries to commercialism, except perhaps beer commercials interrupting presidential speeches or billboards by the Grand Canyon or in front of Mount Rushmore.

It is important to read *Marketing Madness* as a critique of commercialism that goes beyond matters of taste. Commercial dictates have much greater power in their economic, political, and media manifestations than other more basic values such as health, safety, justice, civic voice, and, yes, beauty and truth. In its rampage, commercialism has put these values on a collision course with itself. It is not much of a contest. Public schools allow commercial television—replete with product advertising—into the classrooms, arguing that they couldn't otherwise afford the donated television equipment. These are the same schools that have turned their missions into vocational training at the expense of the civic training and critical thinking that our society so strongly needs.

How often have you heard politicians say that companies cannot afford to meet modest health and safety standards—the same companies that are paying their executives enormous salaries and are sitting on bloated corporate bureaucracies. This pattern occurred in the 1970s and 1980s within the auto industry—the same industry that admitted in its downsizing that billions of dollars a year were being wasted on excess layers of management. The triumph of commercialism is seen every day in Washington, D.C., and state capitals. From political action committee payoffs to government's massive disbursement of welfare to corporations, the imperative of commercialism surges through our society. Yet even taken on its own terms—that of fostering greater material comforts for the general population—rampant commercialism

has failed to deliver, as the gap between the rich and other Americans grows wider each year.

It does not take too many years of this obsession to institutionalize commercialism not just in the ways of our society but in the minds of its people, starting at a very young age. Teenagers have told reporters that “you are what you buy.” The sense of the heroic for pre-teens is almost entirely drawn from celluloid celebrities such as the Ninja Turtles or the Power Rangers. Real history does not exist in their frame of reference, their aspirations, or their dialogue. Soon to come in a big, time-absorbing, and violent manner is virtual reality, which induces the children to take a direct part in the virtual mayhem.

In the Biblical literature and in mandarin China, commerce was told to respect boundaries in order not to contaminate or damage noncommercial practices, traditions, and customs. In old China, merchants were near the bottom of the social status ladder. At the time of Ben Franklin’s pronouncements about thrift and moderation, there was concern among the nation’s founders about greed and overreaching. During the Civil War, munitions manufacturers, in their avarice to maximize profits, produced defective equipment that took the lives of soldiers. The populist-progressive movements aimed to decentralize power by reclaiming it from the mighty railroads and banks and distributing it to the common people. Call that reform chapter in our history a drive to build a power base for values beyond commerce—democratic values, way-of-life values, family security values—in addition to demanding the power to make a decent living shielded from corporate predators.

Any culture that surrenders its vision and its self-sustaining human values to the narrow judgment of

commerce will be neither free nor just. Commercialism does serious damage to the *substance* of democracy, if not to its forms. It leads to censorship or self-censorship of the media, to invisible chains that keep people from speaking out, to the indentured status of politicians, and to an overall coarseness that deprecates the humanitarian impulses and the creative drives of a culture in balance, a culture having commerce without commercialism. Also, the commercialistic cocoon enveloping children with the “entertainment” of violence, addiction, and low-grade sensuality reflects the displacement of more nurturing values by a “marketing madness.”

Michael Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur have compiled the details and the insights that expose the pretensions of the apologists for commerce without boundaries. They have recommended modes of personal and family rebellion that improve well-being and have proposed broader strategies by constituencies that are expected to protect and nurture other cultural values. But it is the detailed texture of this volume, which is so full of material for family, neighborhood, and community discussions, that may be its most important contribution. Looking at the world through independent thought processes does more than free young women from harming their health through destructive dieting in order to be as thin as the models in the fashion magazines. It is a form of intellectual liberation from the skillfully applied psychology of commercial persuasions that limit human potential and the cultural advancement that views more grandly the purposes of life and the qualities of economies.

*Washington, D.C.*  
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*Michael F. Jacobson*

*Laurie Ann Mazur*



# Prologue

## *Commercialism: The Word and the Philosophy*

*Commercialism: Ubiquitous product marketing that leads to a preoccupation with individual consumption to the detriment of oneself and society.—Center for the Study of Commercialism*

games, and zapped through phones and fax machines. Even

**A**LMOST FIFTY YEARS AGO, THE BUSINESS MAGAZINE *Fortune* observed, “No place on earth is geographically beyond the reach of the hawkers and hucksters; the only oases of peace—the peace that is free of advertising—are the darkened sickrooms of the dying where the customer is not worth bothering about and a few billboardless roads and the depths of the national parks.”<sup>1</sup> Today, commercialism—particularly in the form of its chief harbinger and handmaiden, advertising—pervades our society to an extent not dreamed possible several decades ago. Consider just a few recent examples:

- *Commercial billboards are proposed for low-earth orbit.*
- *“Virtual billboards” inserted electronically into telecasts of baseball games simulate signs that don’t really exist at the ballparks.*
- *McDonald’s spent \$2.5 million to produce one ad aired during the 1994 Super Bowl.*
- *The sides of school buses in Colorado Springs, Colorado, are covered with advertising.*

Advertising—exalted by businesses, vilified by muckrakers—is here in a big way and here to stay. Product and service messages have been crafted to appeal to our visual, tactile, olfactory, and aural senses. They talk to our conscious, rational mind, as well as to our subconscious desires and vulnerabilities. They have been placed in everything from books to movies to the bottoms of holes on putting greens. They’ve been slapped onto everything from beach volleyball nets to ski lifts to bathroom doors to pro athletes’ wrists and feet. They are pumped into subway stations and grade school classrooms, snuck into computer programs and arcade

our clothing carries commercial logos, making us walking billboards. It seems that marketers won’t be satisfied until every square inch of space, every moment of time, is filled with the message “Buy.”

The bottom line is that in 1994 marketers spent well over \$150 billion to persuade Americans to buy their products and that the average American will devote almost three full years of his or her waking life just to watching TV commercials! Those ads are amusing, annoying, or boring, but they have effects of far greater import than the transient emotions they elicit.

Advertising is just the tip of the commercialism iceberg. Marketers are aggressively commercializing aspects of life that were once noncommercial. Children used to play in the backyard, the local park, or on the school grounds; for many children today, the playground of choice is the one at the local McDonald’s. For outings, many families now go to Disneyland and other commercial theme parks instead of state and national parks. In fact, a large shopping mall, Potomac Mills Mall, is the number-one tourist destination in the state of Virginia. Fifty years ago, Halloween was a time when kids and parents crafted their own hobo, princess, witch, and other costumes; today, trick-or-treaters wear store-bought outfits featuring Aladdin, Batman, or other trademarked commercial characters. Free book readings at the public library are now upstaged by those at major bookstores, where the goal is to sell, not loan. And children’s books, as likely as not, feature cartoon characters that were launched as movies, migrated to television, and then showed up on t-shirts, games, and a thousand other products. Even physiognomies are for sale, one and a half million a year,

courtesy of your local cosmetic surgeon.<sup>2</sup> Commercialism knows no bounds, engulfing everything from schools to professional sports to scientific research.

The signs of commercialism are so numerous that we risk becoming oblivious to the obvious. Still, many Americans have begun to express their frustrations with the commercial way. As *Business Week* has observed, “Consumers [are] fed up with being bombarded by up to 3,000 marketing messages a day...A consumer revolt against advertising seems to be taking shape.”<sup>3</sup>

When confined to appropriate limits, the business side of life can coexist with family, religion, recreation, and other facets. But when unleashed and allowed to grow without restriction, commerce adds an “ism” and becomes a philosophy—“commercialism”—that destroys the previous balance.

Commercialism is founded on an illusion of unlimited resources, an obsession with acquiring ever-more material goods. This *ism* stands in stark contrast to the civic ideal of community, or communitarianism, which was one of the core beliefs of our nation’s founders.

The old-fashioned ideals of simple living and moderation in the marketplace are foreign to the modern idea of commercialism. Frugality was a key word in the founders’ civic vocabulary. “Commerce without commercialism” is how Benjamin Franklin or John Adams might have put it. They recognized that there are values beyond the marketplace, worthy aspirations beyond profit and pleasure, and joys in the simple life of modest consumption and friendship with others.

Commercialism teaches us a lesson that is at war with the teachings of our founders. And that commercial message is this: To be a *citizen* means no more than being a *consumer*—patriotism and commercialism are one and the same thing. Hunter College professor Stuart Ewen says that the captains of commerce are moving us from a citizen democracy to a “consumer democracy.”<sup>4</sup> In such a world, the citizen’s most cherished right, indeed his or her *duty*, is to consume.

Commercialism also preaches a lesson at odds with the teachings of moral leaders. The commercial message holds that being a *person* is synonymous with being a *consumer*. That is, “personhood” is defined by what we buy, never mind such traits as honesty, generosity, and loyalty.

We consumers have learned our new lessons well, even to the extent of liberating ourselves from such obsolete values as self-restraint and frugality. Gross excesses of conspicuous consumption<sup>5</sup>—such as \$7,100 mink-trimmed, cashmere sleeping bags and \$98,000 chinchilla blankets—are offered up in the temples of commerce. Such products are out of reach of most of us, but many of us still buy far more than we need or can afford. And focusing so much of our attention on the marketplace may distract us from the noncommercial aspects of life.

\* \* \*

Today, the very quest for a nation in which the public’s welfare is paramount is threatened by rampant commercialism. In Part One of *Marketing Madness*, we describe how marketers insinuate sales pitches into every facet of our lives and of our culture, turning us into a country of Black Belt shoppers.

Business executives maintain that commercialism has served the public well, providing unprecedented levels of convenience and material comfort. Marketers maintain that advertising does nothing more than mirror society’s mores and values, alert people to new products and bargains, or motivate people to switch brands; at the very worst, they say, it bores or annoys. With all due respect to those advocates, we contend that commercialism—and the spending of over \$500 annually for every man, woman, and child in the country on highly sophisticated and carefully targeted commercial messages—has far more damaging effects than goading Joe Six-Pack to buy Miller instead of Budweiser. In Part Two, Chapter 9, we explore some of the ways that living in a society dominated by commercial interests affects us as individuals and as a nation.

Social forces are like biological organisms in at least one regard: Once they occupy a niche, they can be almost impossible to dislodge. And, unlike pigeons or dandelions, the champions of commercialism have lawyers, PAC committees, and other hallmarks of contemporary economic and political power. Still, there is time to right the balance in our lives, and perhaps in our society, if only we open our eyes and raise our voices. Thus, in Part Two, Chapter 10, we present an agenda for controlling the marketers whose ultimate effect is to turn citizens into consumers.



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# The Face of Commercialism

*The American citizen lives in a state of siege from dawn till bedtime. Nearly everything he sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells is an attempt to sell him something. Luckily for his sanity he becomes calloused shortly after diaperhood; now, to break through his protective shell the advertisers must continuously shock, tease, tickle, or irritate him, or wear him down by the drip-drip-drip or Chinese water-torture method of endless repetition.* —Fortune magazine (November 1947)<sup>1</sup>

*This is the secret of propaganda: Those who are to be persuaded by it should be completely immersed in the ideas of the propaganda, without ever noticing that they are being immersed in it.* —Joseph Goebbels (March 1933)<sup>2</sup>

**M**ASS COMMERCIALISM'S ASSAULT ON THE public's psyche is spearheaded by incessant thirty-second TV spots, but its scope is far broader. Recent advances in commercialism's all-fronts offensive include:

- Anheuser-Busch's planting a horse-drawn Budweiser-beer wagon in the middle of President Clinton's 1993 inaugural parade.
- Infiltrating schools with daily "Channel One" news shows punctuated by commercials, fast-food outlets in the cafeterias, and curricula produced by major corporations.
- Corporations paying \$30,000 a pop to put their names on children's gameboards.
- Reebok's sponsoring the 1992 U.S. Olympic team—on the condition that medalists wear Reebok outfits on the winner's stand.
- Advertisers inserting their "product placement" ads in movies, making a mockery of artistic integrity.
- "Noncommercial" public radio and television stations accepting increasingly blatant advertising.
- Ink-jet printing with edible inks enabling advertising to be printed on eggs, ice-cream cones, and

other foods currently "advertising deficient."

- The Catholic Church's selling 100-odd items bearing the pope's likeness during His Holiness's 1993 visit to Denver.
- The makers of cigarettes and alcoholic beverages sponsoring African-American, feminist, antipoverty, and environmental organizations, in the process discouraging those groups from criticizing companies whose products are killing their constituencies.
- Corporations producing "video news releases" that are aired by local TV stations as genuine news.
- Orkin Pest Control donating money to renovate the Smithsonian's Insect Zoo—provided that the museum also displayed the company's logo.
- Computer-driven telemarketing that invades the privacy of millions of American homes daily.
- Philip Morris's sponsorship of a national tour of the Bill of Rights as part of its effort to invoke the First Amendment to protect cigarette advertising.
- Companies advertising on the Internet computer network and setting up an electronic shopping mall on CompuServe.

Money is one measure of the magnitude of commercialism. From 1935 to 1994, U.S. expenditures on media advertising (newspapers, magazines, direct mail, billboards, television, radio, etc.) and other promotions soared almost eightfold, from \$19 billion to \$148 billion (adjusted for inflation; 1994 dollars). Those expenditures have doubled since 1971 and risen 50 percent since 1981.<sup>3</sup> On a per

capita basis, expenditures for advertising *quadrupled* between 1935 and 1994.<sup>4</sup> (Businesses spend an *additional* \$115 billion a year on store displays, coupon redemptions, point-of-purchase materials, trade shows, and the like.<sup>5</sup>)

To put that \$148 billion advertising figure in perspective, consider that that's more than 2 percent of our nation's entire gross national product. It is equal to what our nation spent on higher education in 1990.<sup>6</sup> It's more than the federal government spends on Medicare and more than the combined budgets of the Departments of Transportation, Justice, Interior, Housing and Urban Development, and Labor.<sup>7</sup>

Businesses are spending more than \$565 per person, or over \$2,200 per family of four, to encourage us to be consumers. That's almost as much as a family of four spends on medical care and five

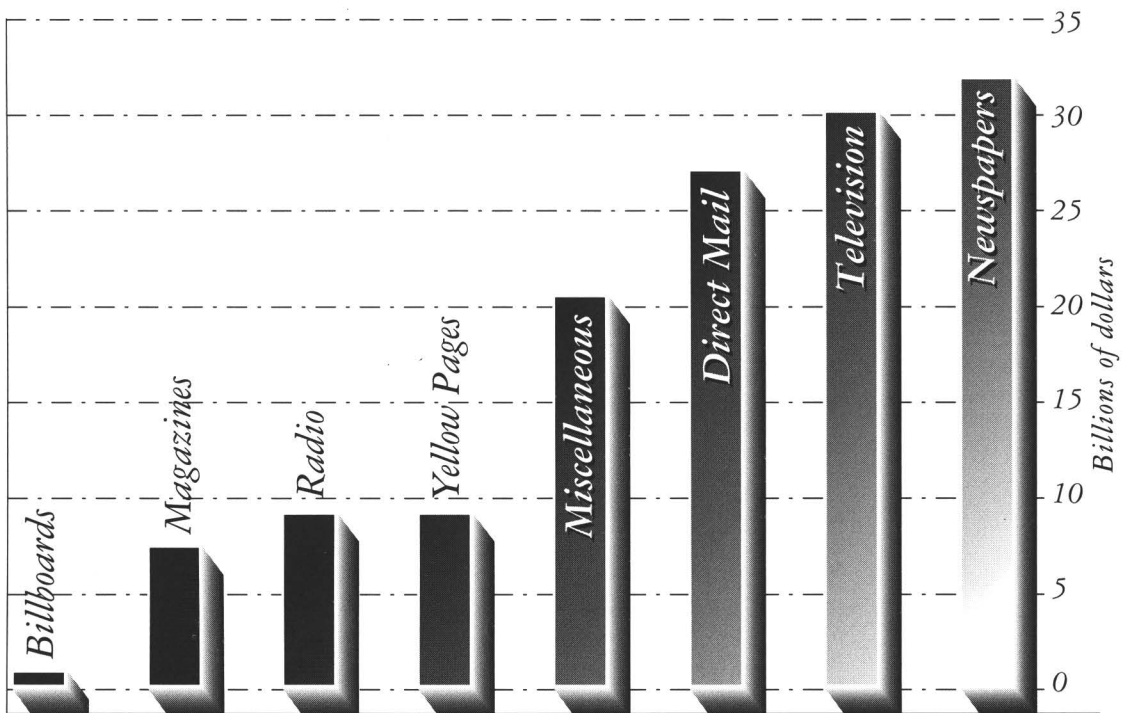
times what it spends on gasoline and oil.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, of course, those advertising expenditures are paid for by consumers themselves.

But those figures still fail to capture marketers' influence on our culture because they do not convey the increased pervasiveness and intrusiveness of modern sales techniques. Nor do they reflect the vastly increased sophistication of marketers and the greater seductiveness of modern advertising. Who in 1935 would have even imagined sneaking cigarette ads into video arcade games or selling ad space on computer networks or having battery-operated sound effects in magazine ads?

At times, marketers must feel like pesticide manufacturers: Both must cope with targets, be they television viewers or insects, that develop a resistance or immunity to previous offenses. Both

## JUST THE FACTS

### Total U.S. Advertising Spending—1993<sup>9</sup>

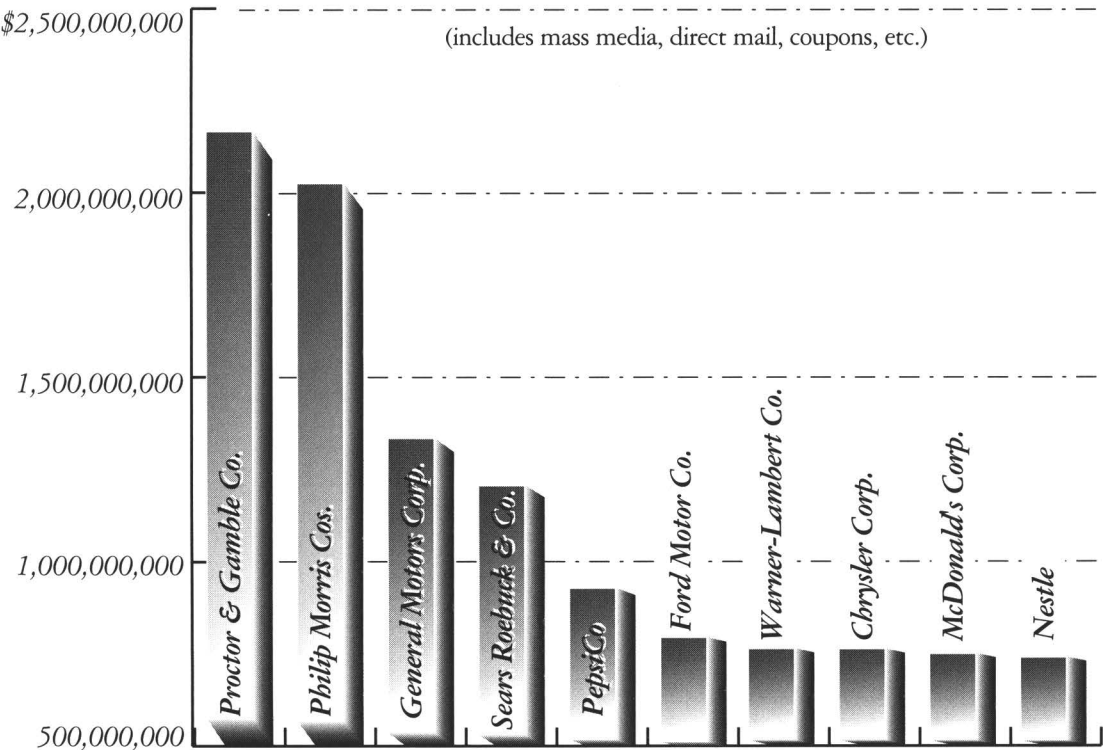


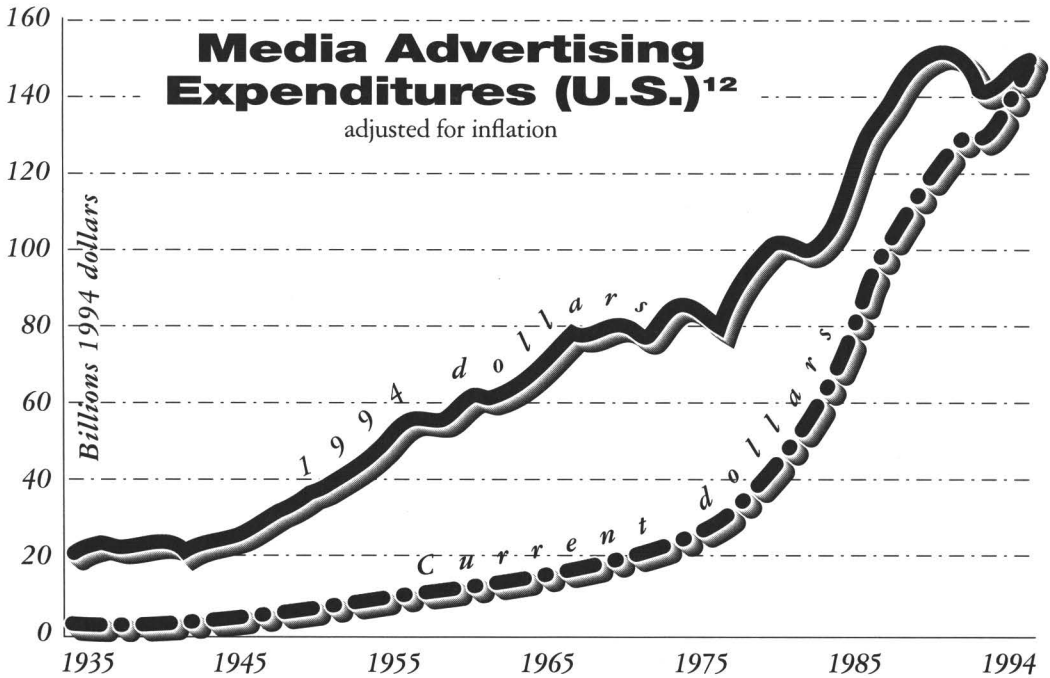
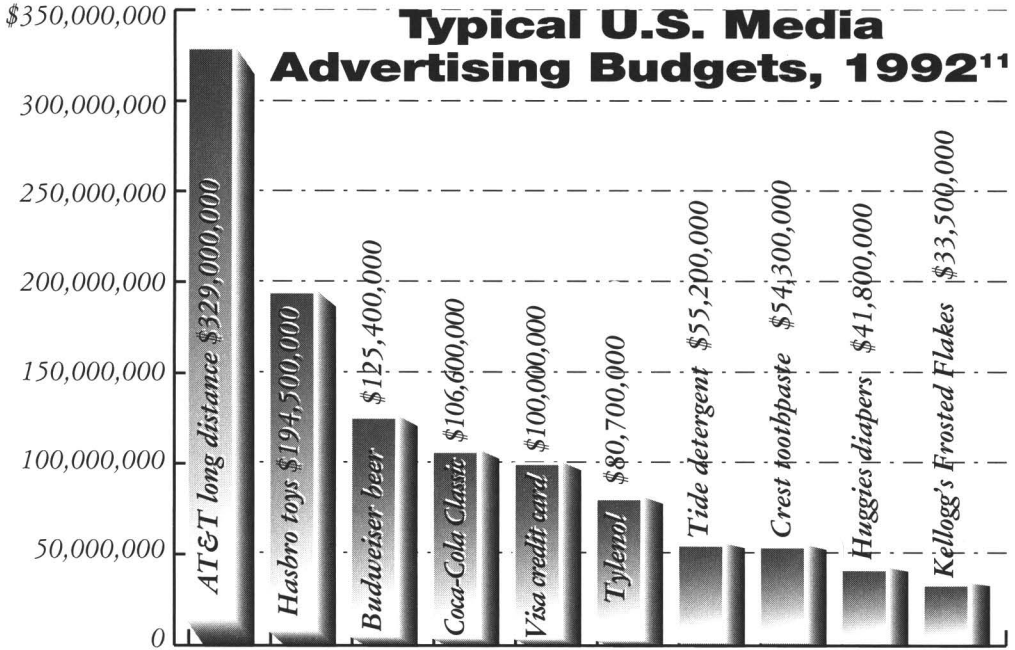
must devise new techniques that can overcome the targets' defenses.

It's anybody's guess what the creative geniuses on Madison Avenue will devise for us in the future, but the trends are ominous. Will Domino's Pizza or Disney help fund schools on the condition that school-bus drivers or teachers wear the company's uniform? Will every play, every pitch, every free throw of every sports event be "brought to you" by a sponsor? Will cities allow the "wasted" space on streets to be turned into giant "streetboards" selling goods to office workers looking out of high-rise offices? Will books be peppered with ads? Will phone companies offer free phone calls, provided we listen to a product plug before the connection is made? Will marketers give us discounts if we provide them with personal information that will facilitate their future marketing efforts?

Before you protest that those examples are ludicrous, come with us on a tour of marketing strategies in use *today*. You will discover an America where marketing envelops our lives like smog, where the commercial excesses begin as soon as toddlers learn to turn on a TV set or recognize the Mickey Mouse design on their shirts. The marketing mania continues with pinpoint marketing that focuses on children, women, baby boomers, yuppies, minorities, seniors, factory workers, computer owners, overweight people, dog owners, childless high-income suburban families, and practically every other demographic slice that computers can identify. The individual messages push jeans, soda pop, and mattresses, and a thousand other products. But the common, underlying message is "BUY!" Part One reveals how Americans are trained almost from infancy to be consumers.

10 Leading U.S. National Advertisers—1992<sup>10</sup>





Global Advertising (U.S. \$ billions)<sup>13</sup>

	United States	Overseas	Total
1985	94.8	63.3	158.1
1990	128.6	145.9	274.5
1994	148.0	170.3	318.3

Each day, 260 million Americans are exposed to at least<sup>14</sup>

- 18 billion display ads in magazines and daily newspapers • 2.6 million radio commercials
  - 300,000 television commercials • 500,000 billboards • 40 million direct-mail pieces and leaflets
- Advertising consumes approximately<sup>15</sup>**
- 60 percent of newspaper space • 52 percent of magazine pages • 18 percent of radio time • 17 percent of network television prime time.

# Targeting Children

## **Marketers**

*understand well the value of early brand recognition. Introducing a product to a child might provide a company with a customer today—and for the next seventy years. For that reason cereal, toy, snack food, and other companies target children with their advertising. The sophistication of Madison Avenue is pitted against the innocence of children...and guess who wins. Not only do companies succeed in persuading children to buy particular products, they also imbue children with the values of commercialism. Until recently, businesses recognized certain limits when it came to marketing to kids. But now anything goes, and even public schools are used to exploit captive audiences.*





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# The Littlest Consumers

*It isn't enough to just advertise on television....You've got to reach kids throughout their day—in school, as they're shopping at the mall...or at the movies. You've got to become part of the fabric of their lives.<sup>1</sup>*

—Carol Herman, senior vice president, Grey Advertising

**I**N THE 1990s, MARKETERS ARE weaving their way into children's lives as never before. Ads adorn kids' clothing, lunch boxes, and bed sheets; they beckon from the television screen, lurk in magazines, and masquerade as TV cartoon shows. As we'll see in the next section, they even infiltrate the school curriculum. The bright tapestry of advertising captures kids' imaginations, shapes their dreams, and even influences their values.

In the early days of advertising, marketers rarely targeted their appeals to children. However, in the 1920s a few farsighted advertisers realized that kids could be enlisted to help sell things to their parents. Noting the "difficulty one meets in breaking habits" among adults, advertising psychologist Alfred Poffenberger stressed the "importance of introducing innovations by way of the young."<sup>2</sup> Still, it was not until the 1950s, when the baby boom swelled their numbers, that children became a target market in their own right.

Today, kids are a much-coveted consumer group. They are prized not only for their personal spending power but for their influence on parental purchases as well. In 1992, kids aged four to twelve spent an estimated \$9 billion,<sup>3</sup> and teenagers between the ages of twelve and nineteen



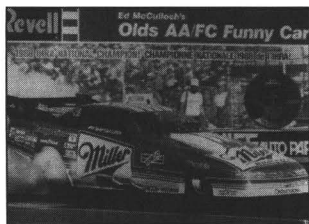
**Designer clothes manufacturers are developing pre-pubescent lines, like Baby Guess and Baby Gap.**

accounted for a whopping \$93 billion.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, kids directly influence another \$130 billion in family spending.<sup>5</sup> Realizing this, some advertisers seek to deploy the ultimate manipulative weapon: the nagging child. Hyatt Hotels Corporation, for example, collects names and addresses of children who stay at its resorts, then mails them promotional brochures. Why target kids who could not reasonably be expected to pay for resort vacations? "There's nothing like a seven-year-old asking nineteen times, 'When are we going back to that hotel?' to get parents to go back," explains Marc Yanofsky, Hyatt's senior vice president for marketing.<sup>6</sup>

Young people are also attractive to advertisers because they have a lifetime of spending ahead of them, and their brand loyalties are still open to influence. As *Seventeen* magazine promises prospective advertisers, "Reach a girl in her *Seventeen* years and she may be yours for life."<sup>7</sup> Mike Searles, president of Kids 'R'

Us, doesn't believe in waiting that long. "If you own this child at an early age," he says, "you can own this child for years to come. Companies are saying, 'Hey, I want to own the kid younger and younger.'"<sup>8</sup>

It may seem odd to aim ads at toddlers, but from a marketing perspective it makes perfect sense. Research indicates that six-month-old babies are already forming mental images of corporate logos and mascots. By the time they are three years old, most children are making specific requests for brand-name products.<sup>9</sup>



**Model cars are plastered with corporate logos—in some cases advertising products kids are too young to buy legally.**

## Batteries Not Included

Once kids are old enough to sit up in front of the television, advertisers begin targeting them in earnest. TV is, by far,

the favored medium for advertising to children, accounting for over \$350 million worth of advertising dollars.<sup>10</sup> Between the ages of two and five, the average American kid watches nearly four hours of TV each day; six- to eleven-year-olds log three and a half hours a day in front of the tube.<sup>11</sup> By the time they are eighteen, most children will have spent more time watching TV than in school. Accordingly, the average child sees about 40,000 TV

commercials every year.

Commercials are especially appealing to young children, who are drawn to their bright colors, fast pace, strange sound effects, and animated characters. However,



young kids are often unable to separate fact from advertising fiction, or even to understand that a commercial's purpose is to sell a product. In one study, a group of four- to seven-year-olds were shown a commercial for Cocoa Pebbles cereal.

Afterward, the kids told interviewers that they wanted the cereal because it had a chocolaty taste, it would make them smile, and Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble had recommended it. One-third of

the kids thought Fred and Barney were experts on nutrition.<sup>12</sup>

Older children also fall for advertising hype, often disregarding disclaimers such as "batteries not included," "some assembly required," or "each sold separately." In one study, 61 percent of parents surveyed bought a toy because their child

saw it advertised on TV and later had to cope with the child's disappointment when it differed from the commercial.<sup>13</sup> Children simply do not have the cognitive sophistication and breadth of experience with which to evaluate advertising claims.

Some activists have taken advertisers to task for making misleading, and potentially harmful, claims. In the 1970s, Action for Children's Television (ACT), a consumer-advocacy organization that disbanded in 1992, persuaded the FTC to strictly regulate the way companies advertise vitamins to children. Although vitamins can be poisonous to kids when taken in quantity, ACT founder Peggy Charren said that "drug companies were pushing them like candy."<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing children's vulnerability to advertising appeals, in 1974 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) set limits on the number of ads allowed during shows aimed at kids. But these regulations were withdrawn in 1984 by Reagan-appointed FCC chairman Mark Fowler. Throughout the 1980s, advocates led by ACT protested the increasing commercialization of kids' TV and succeeded in winning passage of the Children's Television Act in 1990. That legislation limits commercials during kids' shows to ten and a half minutes per hour on weekends and twelve minutes on weekdays and requires stations to broadcast educational programs.

The law's effectiveness remains to be seen. Vague wording gave broadcasters license to sidestep some of its requirements. Charged with providing "educational and informational" programming, broadcasters claimed that cartoons like *The Jetsons* and *G.I. Joe* fulfilled that obligation, according to a study by the Center for Media Education.<sup>15</sup> In 1993 the FCC levied fines against four television stations for exceeding the law's commercial time limits. "I think the stations are still testing. They don't take anything seriously until they see someone is watching," said ACT's Charren.<sup>16</sup>

**Marketers know that kids emulate stars from popular TV shows like *Beverly Hills 90210*.**



## Program-Length Commercials

Even more insidious than thirty-second pitches are shows that blur the distinction between advertising and programming. Toy-inspired shows like *G.I. Joe*, *My Little Pony*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, and *The Care Bears* actually function as program-length commercials. In his book *Children's Television*, ad executive Cy Schneider describes how advertisers joyfully discovered that they could "first design the character as a product, then write a television show starring this character, thereby reversing the traditional process." Kids' shows, he explains, "now contain numerous characters for the obvious reason that this creates multiple purchases by the consumer, rather than a single purchase of a single popular character."<sup>17</sup> (During the first *Care Bears* special, one bear spoke for toy retailers everywhere when he remarked that "ten bears are better than one.") Schneider says kids' shows also deliberately feature lots of "gadgets, gimmicks, hardware, and vehicles—the stuff of which kids' products are made."<sup>18</sup>

The 1980s were the heyday of the "program-length commercial"—by 1986, seventy toys had mutated into TV shows. This strategy was a great boon for toy manufacturers. *He Man and the Masters of the Universe*, for example, enabled Mattel to sell more than 70 million plastic models in three years. And with the help of *The Transformers*, Milton Bradley's Transformer toys raked in \$100 million in their first year, making it the most successful toy introduction ever.<sup>19</sup> As advertising critic Eric Clark has pointed out, "At a commercial level it made great sense to both the toymen and the television companies. The toy firms received a literally priceless amount of exposure for their products; the

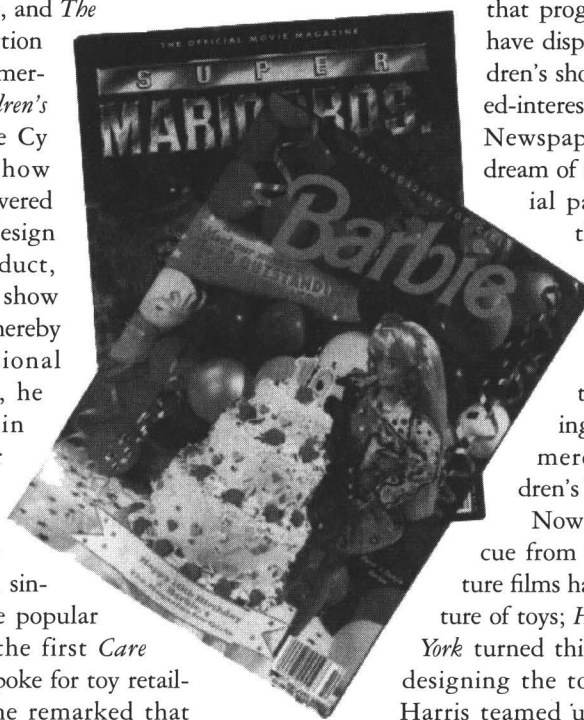
broadcasters got a pre-sold audience for their new programs."<sup>20</sup>

But how are kids served by the cozy symbiosis of toymakers and broadcasters? Action for Children's Television charged that program-length commercials have displaced other kinds of children's shows "in the name of vested-interest commercial speech. . . . Newspaper editors would never dream of turning over their editorial pages to advertisers; yet that's exactly what broadcasters are doing with children's television."<sup>21</sup> Consumer advocates also charge that broadcasters are trying to circumvent the commercial limits of the Children's Television Act.

Now movies are taking their cue from kids' TV. Countless feature films have inspired the manufacture of toys; *Home Alone II: Lost in New York* turned this process on its head by designing the toys *first*. Producer John Harris teamed up with toymaker Tiger Electronics to develop the many nifty gadgets used in the film, with an eye toward marketing them nationwide. Kids who saw the film no doubt clamored for MacCauley Caulkin's handheld radio or "monster foam" soap. Roger Shiffman, an executive vice president at Tiger, acknowledges that this scheme creates desires for unnecessary items. "I have two kids and I'd be hard-pressed to say they need even 1/100 of what I supply them," he says, but shrugs, "We are in the toy business, and we are trying to expose our products in such a way that kids will want them."<sup>22</sup>

## Invasion of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Toys make the leap from screen to store with the help of the licensing industry, a thriving enterprise capable of transforming any popular concept or character into a line of salable merchandise. Children are a



**Marketers publish children's magazines to showcase their toys and accessories.**

**Barbie: The Magazine for Girls contains mainly ads and pseudo-articles promoting Barbie dolls and accessories.**  
**Super Mario Brothers: The Official Movie Magazine pushes Nintendo videogames and licensed products.**



## ONLY OUR KIDS HAVE THIS MUCH POWER OVER THEIR PARENTS.

Today's kids influence over \$130 billion of their parents' spending annually. Kids also spend \$8 billion of their own money. That makes these little consumers big business. Kids who watch Turner's animated programming will consume 3% of the products purchased across a variety of kids' categories.

So if you need a lift in reaching these powerful consumers, let Turner help support your marketing efforts by calling Stan Weil at 312 852 6963.



**In addition to spending billions of their own dollars, kids influence about \$130 billion of their parents' spending. Turner Broadcasting, which owns several networks watched by kids, dangles those dollar amounts before potential advertisers in this trade magazine ad.**

prime target for licensed products, perhaps because of their tendency to idolize fictional characters and celebrities—from Davy Crockett to Barney.

Although licensing has been around for years, sales of licensed products grew five-fold in the 1980s, reaching an astonishing \$63 billion worldwide by 1993.<sup>23</sup> Licensors acquire the rights to a character, image, or logo, then rent out those rights to manufacturers, who produce and market the product. We have the licensing industry to thank for such products as Looney Tunes frozen dinners, M.C. Hammer pencil cases, Vanna White dolls, Bart Simpson hair gel, and Batman breakfast cereal. By 1993, character licenses made up approximately 64 percent of products advertised to kids.<sup>24</sup>

One of the licensing industry's greatest triumphs is the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT). The pugnacious, pizza-eating Turtles spawned 200 licensed products, which raked in \$1.87 billion in

1990.<sup>25</sup> (In contrast, ticket sales for the TMNT movie totaled a mere \$135 million.<sup>26</sup>) Theoretically, a child could outfit herself exclusively in licensed TMNT clothing, shoes, and accessories—and subsist (although unhealthfully) on licensed TMNT foods. The Turtles concept was hatched in an advertising agency and launched with a massive multimedia advertising blitz—the ultimate fusion of children's entertainment and marketing. As TMNT producer Andy Heyward candidly admits: "The success of 'Ninja Turtles' was not solely due to the creative merits. There was a five-part miniseries, a toy line, a Burger King video promotion, the movie, and the TV show. By the time it came to CBS there was no part of the kids' market not exposed."<sup>27</sup>

The Turtles have since shared the licensing spotlight with other profit-making phenomena. *Jurassic Park* garnered approximately \$1 billion from 5,000 different dinosaur-oriented licensed products (compared to \$880 million in world-wide box office sales).<sup>28</sup> Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Little Mermaid* produced more than \$1 billion in sales of related merchandise.<sup>29</sup> And the latest licensing marvel to waddle forth is Barney, a corpulent purple dinosaur whose saccharine persona has been accorded near-cult status by young kids. When he's not filming his show, *Barney and Friends*, Barney makes appearances in shopping malls to promote his extensive line of licensed products, the sales of which totaled more than \$200 million in 1993 alone. Some are troubled by the commercialization of Barney because his show appears on non-commercial public television and is subsidized with public broadcasting funds (see Chapter 2, "The Private Life of Public Broadcasting"). Larry Jarvik, who has studied public television, believes it is unethical for a private production company to use public TV as a marketing vehicle. "They pretend they aren't selling to children," he says, "But everyone knows they are."<sup>30</sup>

## What Advertisers Are Selling to Kids

Clearly, many advertisers use exploitative *methods* to sell to children. But what, exactly, are they selling? Plenty of kids' products are well-made and useful, but many others are worthless, unhealthful, or dangerous.

Into the benign but worthless category fall such products as Fun 'n' Fresh, a deodorant for children as young as seven years old. Then there are products that cater to the basest instincts of their target market, such as the Savage Mondo Blitzers toy line from Kenner, which featured characters with names like Snot Shot, Barf Bucket, Puke Shooter, Eye Pus, and Knight to Dismember. (In response to a consumer boycott, Kenner changed the names.)

Most of the foods hawked on kids' TV are downright unhealthful. A 1992 study by the Center for Science in the Public Interest found that nine out of ten food ads on Saturday morning TV were for candy bars, sugary cereals, salty chips, or other nutritionally flawed foods. Researchers have discerned links between TV commercials and obesity and elevated levels of cholesterol in children.

Ads also blatantly reinforce gender stereotypes. In the world of children's commercials, boys play with trucks and war toys; girls play with dolls, makeup, and miniature appliances. *Still*. Spurred by ads aimed at little boys, sales of war toys rose by more than 200 percent in the 1980s and now exceed \$1 billion per year.<sup>31</sup>

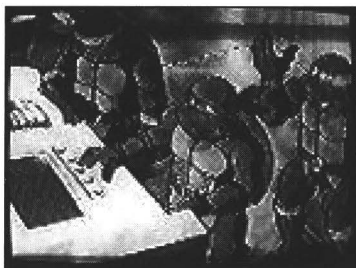
A game called Careers for Girls, created by Hasbro's Parker Brothers division, featured such remunerative positions as "supermom" and secretary (this was in 1991, mind you, not 1951) and was discontinued after it drew protests. But that didn't stop another Hasbro subsidiary, Milton Bradley, from introducing games called Mall Madness and Electronic Mall Madness, which simulate an out-of-control shopping spree. According to *Adweek* reporter Fara Warner, Mall Madness

"makes women out to be bargain-crazy, credit-happy fashion plates."<sup>32</sup> Although the game is ostensibly for boys as well as girls, boys are nowhere to be seen in the game's TV commercials.

## The Solution to All of Life's Problems

Advertising sells more than products. When kids hunker down in front of the tube to receive their daily dose of commercial messages, they absorb more than the desire for specific items. Taken as a whole, the collective body of advertising sells a vision of the world, a way of life. Each ad is a parable that illuminates the same theme: All of life's problems can be solved and happiness attained by *buying things*.

Perhaps more than any previous generation, today's kids have taken that message to heart. By many indicators, today's young people are an exceptionally brand-conscious and materialistic lot. Selina Guber of Children's Market Research says there are "significant differences" between kids reared in the 1980s and their predecessors. Today's children, she says, "are aware of brands and status items even before they can read."<sup>33</sup>



**Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the movie, has turned into TMNT, the TV series. Both help promote the multi-billion-dollar licensing industry of TMNT products.**



**Resident suggests that its acne cream is a prerequisite for young love. Oxy10 threatens horror and ridicule should a teenager discover a pimple on her face.**



**"If you don't know the taste of Honey-Comb," goes the voice-over in this commercial for Honey-Comb cereal, "get a life!" Each ounce of Honey-Comb contains eleven grams of sugar—one of the highest sugar contents of any cereal on the market.**

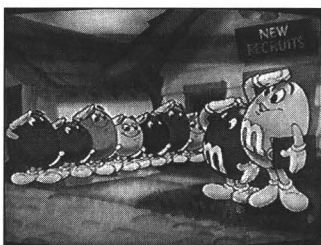


Advertising may even skew children's values. In one study, four- and five-year-olds were asked if they would prefer to play with a "not so nice" boy who had a toy barn or a "nice" boy who didn't. Kids who had seen the ad chose the "not so nice" playmate and the toy barn two to one as compared to children who had not seen the ad.<sup>34</sup> In a 1993 survey of parents, 92 percent said that commercials are making their kids too materialistic.<sup>35</sup>

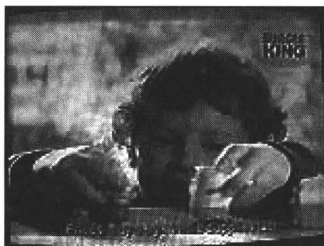
Values learned in childhood generally stick. A study of high school seniors by researchers at the University of Southern California found that from the 1960s to the 1990s, making money has become much more important as a life goal. Concurrently, the importance of "finding purpose and meaning in life" has taken a sharp downward turn.<sup>36</sup> Of course, marketers and advertising are not solely to blame for the ascendancy of materialism; myriad forces contribute to the gestalt of a given era. But advertising is the insistent voice of the consumer culture, and the sheer ubiquity of its messages can drown out other voices, other views.

### Obsessed with Designer Duds

As ads stoke children's material desires, the cost of satisfying those desires continues to escalate. A Barbie doll mansion goes for up to \$400, an Alva skateboard for \$150, an Atari Lynx video game for \$180. A pair of Killer Loop sunglasses, marketed to teens by Bausch and Lomb, retails for \$120. The clothing industry, in particular, has targeted kids with ads for pricey brand-name clothes and shoes. These ads have helped fuel a nationwide obsession with designer duds.



**Kids are inundated with ads for junk food like M&Ms, while nutrition education on TV is practically non-existent.**



**Burger King makes collectible toys that personify burgers, fries, and soda—encouraging frequent visits to the restaurant and creating early attachment to its brand of fast food.**



**MCI distributes an MCI Kid Card—which closely resembles a regular calling card—on which to keep home and emergency numbers.**



**Milton Bradley's "Electronic Mall Madness" game cultivates impulse shopping among young girls.**

According to a 1993 USA Today-CNN-Gallup Poll, 61 percent of boys and 44 percent of girls considered brand names on clothes "very important" or "somewhat important."<sup>37</sup> As Aime Lorenzo, an eleventh-grader from Miami, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1989, "When people look at you and you're not wearing something that has a name brand, they'll comment on it."

Ten-year-old Darion Sawyer from Baltimore adds, "People will tease you and talk about you, say you got on no-name shoes or say you shop at Kmart."<sup>38</sup> Even the much-hyped "grunge" look, which briefly defied the national preoccupation with designer labels, has been co-opted by the fashion industry. Back-to-school shoppers in fall 1993 encountered such upscale grungewear as \$48 prefaded flannel shirts and \$135 Doc Marten shoes.<sup>39</sup>

Advertisers cultivate the forces of peer pressure that fuel fashion faddism.

Nancy Shalek, an ad agency president, says: "Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you're a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them they'll be a dork if they don't, you've got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable."<sup>40</sup>

Countless ads play on kids' insecurities. For example, one ad for acne medicine shows a boy ostracized because of his bad skin, another depicts a girl's date laughing out loud at her skin problem. An ad for Sega Genesis video games shows a nerdy outcast tormented by his peers; they sit behind him in class, tweaking his