

Schools are a marketer's dream venue

Paul Harrison, October 22, 2009

I DID live in hope that we would not go the way of US schools, but I guess it was always going to be a bit difficult to resist.

News that "leading educators" are willing to back sponsorship of schools by food companies such as McDonald's, and other commercial brands, puts children at more risk than being exposed to what Institute of Public Affairs executive director John Roskam says will be "five minutes of advertising a day".

Of course, numeracy and literacy programs are critical, but at what cost?

A sensible educator, whose role it is to put the needs of students before other factors, must look at the issue from several perspectives - not just the income generation opportunity. Companies such as McDonald's are not sponsoring schools as a community service - these are marketing exercises, focused on introducing young consumers to brands, and influencing their behaviour over the long term.

Businesses sponsor schools to increase sales and generate product loyalty. Schools provide brands with the ability to reach large numbers of children and adolescents in a contained setting (what others might call a "closed market"), and corporations exploit the financial vulnerability of schools by offering to help out with literacy and numeracy programs.

Over time, these sponsorships can even allow brands to undertake a range of marketing research activities, from gathering basic data about attitudes towards the brand, through to detailed insights into consumer behaviour of adolescents and younger children that will influence future strategies, including product development and promotional activities.

It is likely that the schools will become reliant on the money and incrementally reduce barriers to the brand's involvement in the school. What starts out as a simple poster thanking the brand for their sponsorship, may lead to preference of that brand's products over others at the school. As far as the brand is concerned, this is part of a broader corporate strategy. This is what businesses do - this is marketing.

One of the best ways to examine the influence of school sponsorship would be to look at US schools, which have had sponsorship by fast food and soft drink brands for more than two decades.

In *Fast Food Nation* (2001), Eric Schlosser highlighted a brochure put out by a promotional company that encouraged brands to make sponsorship deals with school districts. The brochure claimed: "Whether it's first-graders learning to read or teenagers shopping for their first car, we can guarantee an introduction of your product and your company to these students in the traditional setting of the classroom."

It is an effective way to get children, including adolescents - who are highly vulnerable to promotional messages - to be "nudged" towards your product.

Research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 1982 found that children exposed to just five minutes a day of advertising while attending a summer camp were influenced to make choices different from control groups. Each day, after the exposure, children were given a selection of fruit, juices, lollies and soft-drinks. Children in the

lollies group chose significantly less fruit (25 per cent) than those in the fruit group (45 per cent).

There is a naivete among many commentators that allows them to argue that single exposures to brand messages is harmless, because it is only five minutes of advertising or just some posters or branding in the gym.

But the reality is that these sponsorships are part of a broader integrated marketing strategy. All of the brand messages, whether delivered on school grounds, or outside the school, add up to provide an incremental inevitability that makes it "easier" for the child to choose one brand or product over another.

Usual defences, such as parents controlling their children's healthy eating, are circumvented by this type of strategy.

Parents are not with their children when they are being exposed to these positive messages about their brand, and the schools' implicit support of the brand means that parents are not in a position to influence their children's developing attitudes towards the brand at that time.

Of course, parents are able to say no to their children when they insist on eating at a particular take-away food "restaurant", but this becomes more difficult when the school their children attends is implicitly supporting it.

It also becomes a particularly onerous responsibility to place squarely, and solely, upon parents, in the absence of any corresponding responsibility placed upon schools, government and commercial businesses.

In marketing, it's all about building familiarity, trust, and the promise of a better life. Funnily enough, marketers know this - that's why they spend so much money on research into consumer psychology.

One thing that they know is that the more we are exposed to a particular ad, or product, or brand, the more we are likely to believe that it is a good product or brand.

It is hardly rational, but we don't really think about it. We should, but if we spent our time thinking through every decision in a rational, methodical manner, we would hardly get out of bed in the morning.

Much of advertising creates only marginal differences, but small differences can build into larger differences.

Even small differences can tip the balance in favour of the advertised brand. And in marketing, it is all about degrees of difference.

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