

Tweens and cool

James Myers, Arc, explains – with a bit of assistance – what makes tweens tick, and why it is important to so many marketers to understand them

HERE IS LOTTY, aged 10, and her class mates, explaining cool to grown ups:

“What’s cool? That’s so sad a question. You mean wicked or dread. Parents always try and be trendy but they just can’t do it. They always use the wrong word at the wrong time and show you up. Mum is all right but Dad is really bad. If we say waas-up or safe he just looks at me and tells me to speak properly. Yesterday he picked us up from school, we never walk. Mum says she always walked to school. He had a baseball cap and he looked at us all and said ‘respect’; I was so embarrassed. Adults are really uncool, my teacher is ok, she wears clothes with tassels on and she listens to Justin Timberlake and garage.

The cool girls in the year above use gel on their hair and they do their hair in break, some have colour streaks on it, jackets with writing on and they can do wheelies on their bikes.

I want diesel jeans and some fcuk. Alfie wants Nike trainers but I think he is too young, he is only 8. I am 10. Burberry scarves and handbags are really cool.

Ant and Dec – they’re funny, Nelly – just cool, Gareth Gates – nice hair gel, Craig David – really cool bandana, and David Beckham. They are nice people as well. They do charity things and are nice to their families. It would be better to be a celebrity when you are grown up because when you are like S Club Juniors you wouldn’t see much of your parents, you would not have an everyday life but everyone would be nice to you. I want to be famous when I am 18.

Girls Aloud, Eminem and Busted are cool. Britney is so not, she is for kids. Alfie likes Britney but he doesn’t normally like girls.

Year six is kind of different from year five. In year six all the girls wear dresses and the boys wear smart trousers and shirts but not in year five. Year three would wear something that doesn’t suit them because they don’t have any dress sense. And they wear lots of sparkly stuff.

You can always tell a kid because they wear a bit of skater stuff with some hip hop or grunge. They just get it wrong. I would wear a cat suit and it may be blue or purple. Maybe a mini skirt and a boob tube. I’m kind of tarty, not majorly tarty.

We go out to the shops together. I like the cosmetics at Claire’s Accessories. Mostly two or three of us go together.

Next weekend we are going to Pizza Hut on our own. Mum and Dad were a bit worried but we are 10, Carrie is 11, it is not like we are kids or anything, although mum and dad are going to take us and collect us. I tend to get what I want anyway. If we are in the supermarket it is easy cos mum is so stressed and dad just gives in. If I have my mobile with me, they don’t mind where I am but I have to ring. They always top up my phone if I ask. I love Cheese Strings and Crispy Squares, normally I chuck my sandwiches away. They make you fat anyway. The good ones advertise on TV. Lots of them have fab promotions. I get lots of free texts anyway.

Advertising is good otherwise you wouldn’t know what to buy. If it is on TV it stands out. They use attractive words but sometimes they just make it sound good but when you try it is rubbish. Nike and John Smiths are good ads. Nokia get David Beckham using its picture messaging so you think it is a good thing and so if David Beckham has one, I want one.

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We watch SMTV but we all love *East-Enders*, *Trinny and Susannah*, *Coronation Street*, *Footballers’ Wives* and *Big Brother*.

Everyone I know has a TV in their bedroom unless they are a real geek. Some of us have a computer and phone. One girl in the class has a microwave. Alfie is never off my PlayStation2 but Dad plays it more than I do. Sometimes I read books, Mum and Dad make a really big thing about it. I have read every Harry Potter.

I use the internet for projects, I like to get things right. Dad is always telling me to do as well as I can.

Sponsorship is when David Beckham’s football boots are sponsored by Adidas and they tell him what to wear. Coke sponsor the Premiership football and sometimes if you are doing something, people will give you money to help you do something good.”

James, aged 39 explains tweens to grown-ups

Who are tweens?

Tweens inhabit the half-world stuck between kids and teenagers. Definitions vary but for our purposes we think of them as children aged between 8 and 12.

Why all the interest in tweens now?

Several reasons. Advertisers and marketers are becoming more and more aware of the benefits of targeting them, either directly, as consumers in their own right, or as influencers of the purchase decision. Even automotive brands are thinking about kids, even if it is just to keep them happy throughout a test drive. While Datamonitor estimates that their ‘income’ will decline in the next few years, their influence will not. And of course the food and health issues have been brewing for some time and have come to a head in the UK with the parliamentary debate in November 2003.

Is marketing to tweens ethical?

‘Marketing to kids’ is an emotional statement. Some people lump it together ►



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with 'drowning puppies' and others just see it as a legitimate business opportunity. We all know that in the early 1990s Sweden banned TV advertising to under-12s, and advertising of food products to kids is the subject of much debate both in the UK and the US. The consensus seems to be that we should take a pragmatic view because policing it is too difficult and gets you into subjective issues as well as debates along the lines of 'no I wasn't', 'yes, you were'. Obviously if there are health issues or we are encouraging children to take out mortgages at the age of 12 then common sense needs to win over. But the evidence for the issue is rarely that cut and dried.

Who did the research and how?

Of course, not all the quotes can be attributed to Lotty herself but they are quotes taken from respondents in our qualitative research. What poetic licence there is has been derived from sources such as Mintel, Youth TGI, Datamonitor, books covering this market and a scan of the media. We do not tend to refer to it as research, it is broader than that. We prefer the term investigation.

What Lotty failed to tell you ...

► There are around four million so-called tweens in the UK, and marketing awareness and savvy-ness seem to develop around 10 years old. As William Damon, head of Stanford University Center for Adolescence, would say, 'There are two times when a human goes through tremendous neurological growth. One is just after infancy and other is around 10, 11, and 12. Kids begin thinking in more complex ways' (1). In the UK 10 year olds are thinking about 'big' school, and this focuses the mind on growing up.

► The average discretionary income (pocket money, odd jobs and handouts) for UK tweens is £8.10 per week (1) and they do not want to spend it all on sweets and chocolate, but on CDs, clothes, games. The tweenie pound is estimated to be worth around £3.1 billion a year (1). Some retailers have woken up to this and the ones that actively cater for this age group get their approval. New Look and JD Sports, for example.

► Kids are being protected by their

parents; 30 years ago, 80% of 8-9 year olds went to school unaccompanied by an adult, compared with just 9% now (2). Kids are encouraged to stay in their bedrooms and are constantly warned about the dangers of strangers. Kids as young as 9 seem aware of the media coverage of paedophilia and abduction but don't seem overly worried. They think they know what a weirdo looks like and they know when to run.

► The bedroom is where they spend a big part of their lives. They have friends round more and earlier than previous generations, and they invariably have access to TV, PlayStation2, DVDs, and perhaps the internet and a phone. They do not have bedrooms, they have multi-media bedsits.

► Kids will not regulate their own diet, but then did we? This does not distract from the fact that child obesity is at a high, even though calorific intake (and exercise levels) is at an all-time low.

► Peer pressure is alive and well; 30% of kids say their parents ask them for advice, 28% claim they tell their parents what to buy (3). A 2001 Mintel report revealed that six out of ten housewives' purchase decisions are influenced by their children. So we have guilt-ridden parents who have less and less time to spend with children assuaging their guilt with pocket money,

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acceding to pester power and putting the wrong food on the table ... probably at the wrong time.

► Parents are encouraging their children to make more and more decisions for themselves, so it is not surprising they are making more and more choices about brands and products.

So what is new to tweens in the last five years?

Gaming, celebrity for celebrity's sake, an understanding of advertising, altruism as part of cool, multi-media centres in the bedroom, kids growing older even younger (KGOY); brands targeting tweens, an interest in the wider world (post-September 11), children taking more and more interest in adult programming and brands, books are back thanks to Harry Potter, ever increasing parental fears, child obesity, SMS, txt, instant messaging, buddy groups and marketing working harder than advertising.

The exciting learnings from the research

► These kids are already aspiring to adult brands, so how do you pitch your marketing and communications? Effectively you are walking a tight-rope: on one side there is 'that's for kids, not me', and on the other you are in danger of missing the mark. The gap between who you are targeting and the age group at which you pitch your communications is widening.

► In the ideal tween world parents reluctantly accede to buying their children the latest clothes/games/music. But in reality we have, in b2b language, a complex decision-making unit made up of parents, siblings and peers. The influence of each will vary from category to category, whether it be food, clothes, skincare or whatever. Brands need to understand this.

► Everyone knows there is peer pressure, but we forget how powerful it is. To put it in perspective, how do you feel if, or indeed when, the rest of the office scream 'new trainers, you sad loser'? And that is before they try and scuff them with mud. Imagine what it is like for a 9 or 10 year old. So, instead of communicating to an audience, we need to think of communicating to people who are in themselves transmitters of information. Everyone is a

‘To be a cool celebrity you have to be three-dimensional. Human values are just as important as talent. The right celebrity has enormous influence over this group’

potential advocate or brand terrorist.

► Brands that try to be cool and get it wrong really suffer – and they suffer really quickly because of the viral nature of the school playground. It almost feels as if the marketers are victims of the whims of tweens, rather than the other way round.

► Kids understand advertising and what it is trying to do: it is their information source and they can see it coming. Kids even warn of brands over-promising and under-delivering. But marketing tends to go under the radar and is potentially more powerful. Text-to-win promotions are not seen so much as advertising and marketing but a fair trade-off or an opportunity to get something more. With the advent of technology, bedsit culture and the different roles of the ‘influencers’, the ‘tweens’ communications model is probably more complex than other consumer segments.

► Celebrity culture is big, even in this age group. But to be a cool celebrity you have to be three-dimensional. Human values are as important as talent. The right celebrity has huge influence over this group.

What does this mean for the marketer?

The easy answer is it depends on the specific nature of your category: so instead of summarising with ifs and maybes, we would rather give you the five questions we would try to answer. There may be more, but five will do.

1. What is the relationship between the target market and their influencers?
2. Do we need to communicate with them differently?
3. How does information ‘flow’ across your audiences?
4. Is there an opportunity for a sub-brand focusing on a tween audience?
5. Would we be better redirecting monies towards marketing and away from traditional advertising? ■

1. Datamonitor. *Tweenagers*, 12/02

2. *Daily Telegraph*, 2001.

3. Millward Brown, *Brandchild: 1,920 global tweens*.

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What you see is not always what you get



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