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Mining youth market

Savvy advertisers aim entire lines at echo boomers

BY PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

To many, Alex Yeung may be just a kid.

But for marketers intent on reaching the coveted youth segment, the 14-year-old Grade 10 student at Richmond Hill High School is a goldmine of information.

For the past three years, Alex has been offering his input to Big Orbit, one of several Toronto-based marketing firms focusing on youth.

By responding to online chat boards about everything from soft drink advertising campaigns to politically charged issues such as same-sex marriage, Alex accumulates points he can redeem for cash from the agency.

"It's more of a hobby. I'll spend about 15 minutes on the computer," he said.

"I like that I have some influence over what (products) come out. But it's not like I'm being enticed to go and buy more."

With baby boomers' influence in the marketplace dissipating, marketers are looking to today's youth, dubbed echo boomers, to fill that void, said Chris Pereira, a second-year York University student and York Region resident.

Today, about 23 per cent of Canada's population can be considered echo boomers. However, the question remains as to whether young people's opinions are truly valued.

"I'm not sure our voices are being taken seriously. But our money is," Mr. Pereira said.

Considered the demographic echo of their parents, the generation born between 1982 and 1995 has savvy marketers scrambling for their attention.

With earning power and marketplace awareness unrivaled by past generations, today's youth are driving much more than just clothing and music sales.

Car makers such as Toyota are peddling the sport Scion line of vehicles at the youth demographic, while cell-phone companies continue to push the technological envelope with youth leading the charge for text messaging and music downloading.

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>
> Sean Bittle
> *managing director, Big Orbit*

So it should come as no surprise when U.K.-based Virgin Group announced it plans to launch mobile service in Canada by March 1 by courting the high-growth youth market.

Now, that same penchant for technology is being used to prod deeper into youth culture, said Sean Bittle, Big Orbit's managing director.

But the results can often be sketchy.

Big Orbit's clients can be reluctant to follow the advice of youth, even it helps to decipher current trends.

For instance, well-entrenched brands are unwilling to change to appeal to each generation.

"Gathering feedback (from youth) is often a Pandora's box. Don't ask someone's opinion unless you're prepared to listen to it. Otherwise, you can alienate them," said Mr. Bittle.

York University marketing professor Alan Middleton suggested one reason today's youth don't see a problem acting as conduits for marketers is because they aren't easily fooled.

The biggest barrier faced by marketing has remained constant: connecting with young people, Mr. Middleton said.

"Word-of-mouth has always been the most powerful way of reaching youth. Technology has given marketers a better way of reaching them," Mr. Middleton said.

There has been little opposition to this high-tech assault on young people's wallets over the years, as concern from parental groups, for example, can be described as tepid, he added.

Youth marketing has remained unchecked throughout Canada, where rules remain relatively lax on how young or how aggressively marketers can target youth, Mr. Middleton said.

Quebec is the only province with legal limits on marketing to children younger than 12, Mr. Middleton said.

"I wouldn't anticipate any legislation. (Concerns) are issue driven, rather than generational or age concerns," he explained.

For instance, marketers courted negative attention when child obesity became an issue to parents and educators several years ago.

As a general rule, the most aggressive of youth marketing targets children 12 years old and up, Mr. Middleton said.

While numerous products can be more closely linked to the younger age bracket, competition for the 20-something crowd is equally fierce within York Region's hospitality and entertainment industry, where there is no shortage of venues.

With a central location and a 10-year stranglehold on the 19-to-24 crowd Wednesday nights, Rocky Mountain High in Richmond Hill has found a winning formula to keep young people coming back.

The key, said bar and restaurant owner Maury Kalen, is knowing who your customers are and giving them what they want.

Business looks to tap into that niche with cross-promotion, he added.

Whether it's vacation giveaways or new beverages, companies bring them into the nightclubs.

"If you're introducing a new product, you go where the people are," Mr. Kalen said. "There's no magic here. You've got to have a strong product."

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