

Seeing it through their eyes

Research shows the power of telling a good story when creating advertising aimed at kids

From their earliest years, kids are exposed to a lot of advertising, and some of it, such as the advertising on Saturday morning television, is targeted directly to them. Advertisers trying to engage the attention and emotions of this younger audience face a difficult challenge because we as adults have outgrown the ability to see the world through the eyes of our childhood.

Given their level of cognitive development, kids relate better to concrete visuals than they do to abstract words. Indeed, the mental concept of a “brand” emerges late in childhood. If you ask an eight-year-old what brands are, they are likely to describe brands as simple product categories, e.g., “brands are like cars and trucks.” By age 10, most will understand that brands represent the advertised differences between different brands of cereal, for example. Younger children are more likely to be character-loyal than brand-loyal, meaning they are likely to ask mom for Trix because they like the Silly Rabbit they know from the commercials.

Researchers trying to understand how children respond to advertising need to develop nonverbal techniques for probing their reactions. Our own approach is to use the same Picture Sorts technique that we’ve developed for analyzing television commercials among a general adult audience. We have used the technique for conducting quantitative research among kids and it can even be used in a qualitative setting for children beginning around the age of four or five.

For us, an appealing aspect of using Picture Sorts with children’s research is that it brings a lot of “play value” to the interview. Watching children sorting pictures from a television commercial on various sorting boards makes it clear that kids feel that this part of the interview is more like a game. In contrast, the verbal part of the interview may feel like schoolwork so that children will sometimes struggle to find the answers they think the adult interviewers are looking for.

Even the online version, which is conducted with kids over the age of six, is designed to be a fun, game-like activity. The first picture sort, for example, brings up a sampling of visuals from the ad in randomized order and asks children to click a button indicating whether or not they remember seeing the image in the ad. Other sorts ask the children to click buttons reporting how they feel about each image, or what each image means to them.

Importantly, the information we collect from these picture-play activities produces results that provide valid



By Charles Young

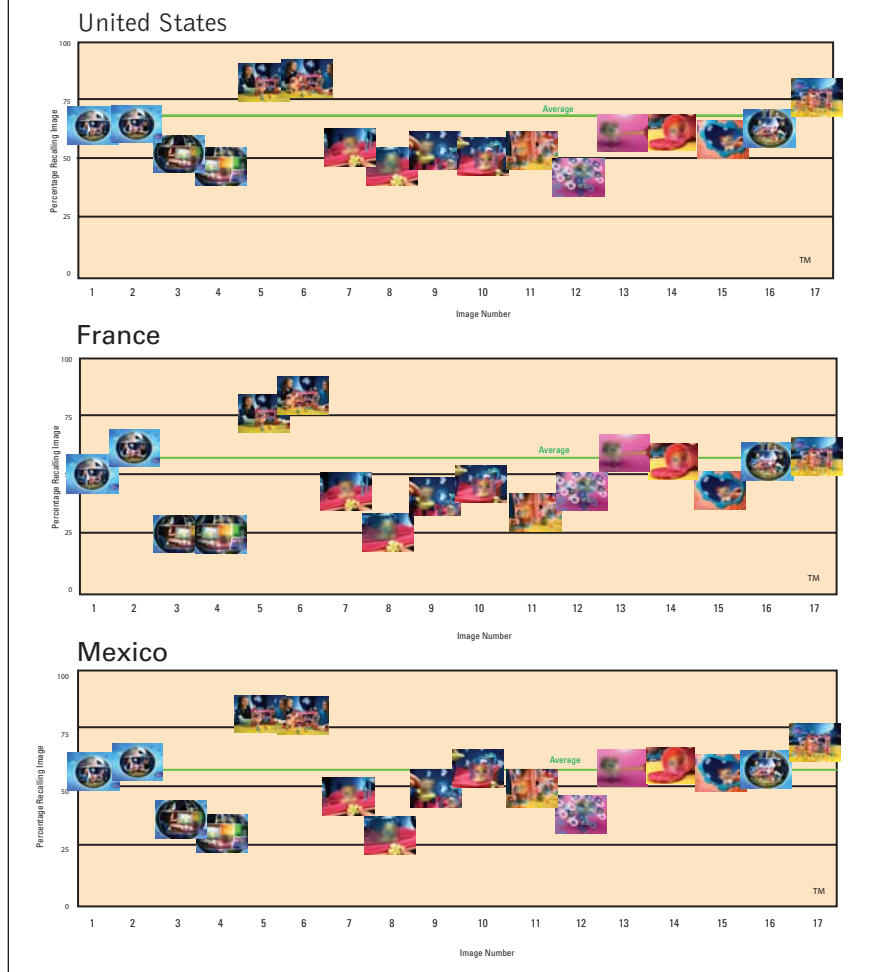
snapshot

Marketing to kids requires the ability to harness the power of pictures, the author argues. Teaching adult marketers how to look at a brand and view a commercial as a child does is the most valuable contribution researchers can make to the creative development process.

Editor’s note: Charles Young is CEO of Ameritest, an Albuquerque, N.M., research firm. He can be reached at 505-856-0763 or at chuck@ameritest.net. To view this article online, enter article ID 20100206 at quirks.com.

insights into the performance of kid-targeted TV ads. For example, Figure 1 shows the Flow of Attention for a commercial that was tested online in the U.S., France and Mexico. This is a normal-looking pattern of moment-by-moment visual recall that we have found to be predictive of commercial attention-getting power and recall across a variety of product categories. What's unusual about this attention graph is that it was generated by online interviews among girls aged six to nine years old!

Figure 1
Flow of Attention® for 6–9 year-olds



In some respects the information conveyed in the Flow of Attention graphs is akin to the distraction-attention research used early in the development of Sesame Street as reported by Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point*. In commenting on what engages the attention of young children, Gladwell said: “Kids don’t watch when they are stimulated and look away when they are bored. They watch when they understand and look away when they are confused.”

The Flow of Attention graph measures more than whether kids are looking toward the television or not; it is designed to measure how images are filtered by the mind, the processes of selective perception that are essential to the act of seeing. As with adults, the contour and peak content of the attention flow graph is a predictor of the overall attention-getting power of an ad, which we measure in

the context of a clutter reel of other ads competing for kids’ attention.

The most important factor shaping the Flow of Attention is the narrative structure of the commercial. Does it tell a good story? As you can tell from the parallel peaks and valleys of the attention flow graphs shown in Figure 1, this form of research is quantitative proof of the universal power of film. Visual storytelling engages the attention of kids at a very early age, regardless of differences in culture and language.

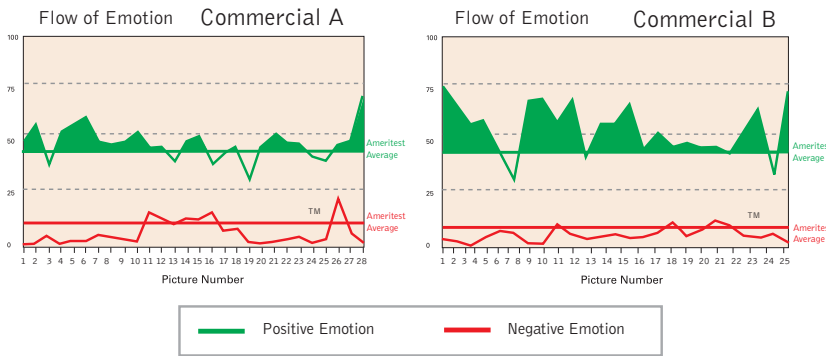
Continues to develop

Current scientific research on the biology of the brain shows that the underlying neural circuitry of the brain continues to develop throughout childhood all the way to early adulthood. Importantly, modern brain imaging techniques can now show how the brain develops from back to front. The frontal lobes – which make

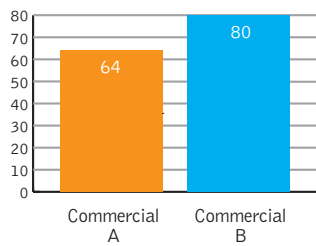
Figure 2

Flow of Emotion Comparison

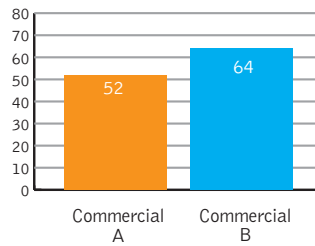
Positive emotion is higher, and negative emotion is lower for Commercial B.



"I can relate to the kids in the commercial."



"I want to tell my friends about it."



up the part of the brain that controls reasoning, problem-solving, planning and impulse management - are not fully developed until our late teens.

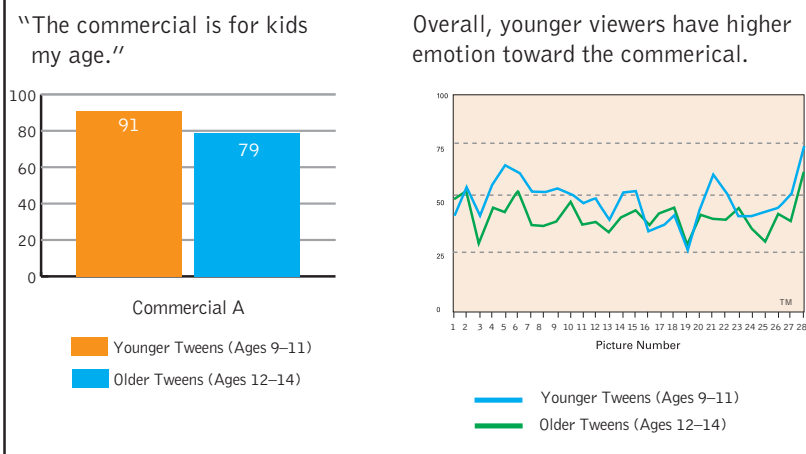
The frontal lobes manage emotional urges. This explains why tweens can interpret a parent's normal tone of voice as yelling, or why they may misinterpret nonverbal cues and quickly turn aggressive. Emotional response to advertising, therefore, is an important aspect of how advertising works with a young audience.

We can see the important role that emotion plays in kid-targeted television advertising by looking at the response to two commercials for the same brand of kids' snacks, shown in Figure 2. In our test of these two ads, Commercial B scored higher than Commercial A on the key report-card measures of attention and motivation. The most important diagnostic measure explaining the differences in performance between these two commercials is our Flow of Emotion, which shows that the level of positive emotional engagement is significantly higher for Commercial B than for Commercial A.

The way we measure emotional engagement is to use a second picture-sorting technique where kids are simply asked to sort pictures based on how they were feeling at different moments in a commercial rather than on what they remember. The flow graphs show the positive feelings (indicated by a simple “smiley face” emoticon in the survey) versus the negative feelings (indicated by a “frowning face” emoticon in the survey) for each moment in an ad. This is an easy task for even

Figure 3

Drivers of Attention: Age Comparison



young children to perform (we can do it with children as young as four years old in a focus group) and it is predictive of a commercial’s overall performance.

To gain additional insights into kids’ reactions to these two ads, we can also ask a battery of commercial ratings statements, which is an abbreviated version of the list we use in our adult test.

These ratings tell us that tweens find the kids featured in Commercial B more relatable than the kids featured in Commercial A. And, as a result, Commercial B will likely generate more buzz – that is, it is more likely to be “a commercial I would tell my friends about.”

Kids are quite sensitive to differences in development between kids slightly older compared to kids slightly younger than themselves. Indeed, one of the strongest predictors of advertising effectiveness among kids is the perception that the advertising is targeted to their own age group or to kids who are slightly older.

When we drilled down into the data by age of respondent in the case of the snack-food commercials we just described, we found that the weakness of Commercial A is due to the fact that the commercial generates less emotional engagement among older tweens, age 12 to 14, than it does among younger tweens, ages 9–11, as you can see in Figure 3.

The reasons for this are both the casting of younger-looking actors in Commercial A as well as the fact that some of the effects used in the com-

mercial are more likely to appeal to a younger child’s sense of magic and are less credible to older kids. As a result, older kids are less likely to rate the commercial as one that is “for kids my own age” and are more likely to report, in response to open-ended questions, that this is a commercial for “little kids.” As anyone familiar with marketing to children would know, the perception that something is for kids younger than rather than older than the respondent is the kiss of death.

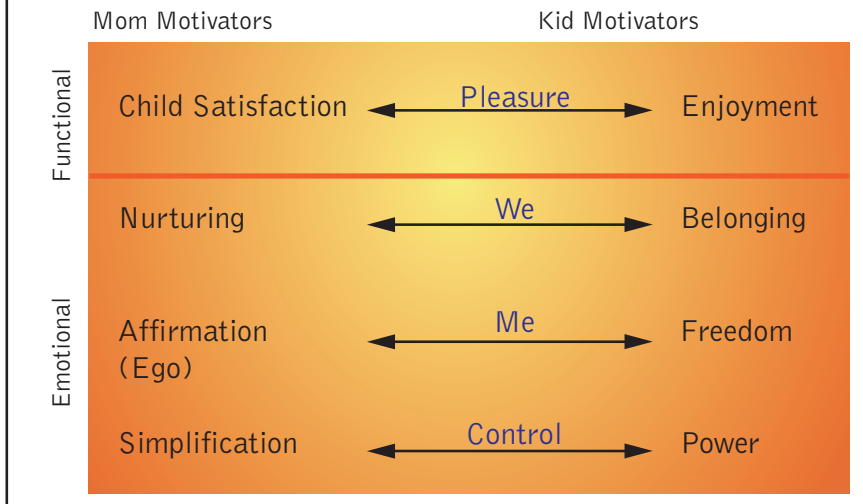
Functional and emotional

As with adults, kids respond to brands both on a functional and on an emotional level. On a functional level, for example, a snack-food product needs to be tailored to fit a child’s palate, or a toy needs to be age-appropriate in terms of the demands it makes, e.g., on small motor skills and physical coordination. On a less rational level, kid brands satisfy higher-level emotional needs, and advertising effectiveness depends on how well these emotional benefits are communicated.

A wide literature exists describing the emotional need-states of children. But we have found that a short list of emotional motivators for kids can provide a useful framework for ad researchers analyzing how well a kid-targeted ad is working on an emotional level. These four motivators, described in a model developed by marketing researchers Tim Coffey, David Siegel and Gregory Livingston in their book *Marketing to the New Super Consumer:*

Figure 4

Emotional Motivators for Kids Mirror Moms' Motivators



Mom & Kid, are the need for: 1) enjoyment (fun), 2) belonging, 3) freedom and 4) power.

Interestingly, we find that the emotional need-states of moms mirror the emotional needs of children. They are

merely two sides of the same coin (see Figure 4). The four primary emotional motivators Coffey and team cited for moms are the need for: 1) child satisfaction, 2) nurturing, 3) affirmation (ego) and 4) simplification.

To determine if an ad is working on any of these emotional levels, key pictures from the picture-sorting exercise can be used to probe the emotional meaning of the imagery in an ad. Young children find it relatively easier to talk at length about concrete images taken from an ad than to express their feelings about the meaning of the ad as a whole. The following examples illustrate the kind of insights into the elements of advertising effectiveness provided by such simple photographic probing.

Motivator 1: Enjoyment/child satisfaction

The underlying dimension of emotional response is that of pleasure. From a child's perspective, the pleasurable emotions are expressed as enjoyment that is made visible by showing kids his or her own age having fun playing with the toy or eating the food. If you're marketing to kids, fun is a benefit that needs to be built into the product at its core. For example, kid-targeted snacks like Kellogg's Gripz appeal to kids on the

basic level of taste and satiety, while the size and portable design also offer amusement and a level of interactivity with the food.

From the mom's perspective, a bite-and-smile image of kids enjoying the product provides reassurance that her child will actually eat the food. A chief source of dissatisfaction for moms is to waste money by buying food that a child won't eat or a toy he won't play with.

Motivator 2: Belonging/nurturing

This underlying dimension of emotional response turns on relationships to others, and in particular the “we-ness” of parent and child. There is a fundamental emotional need to belong, which is expressed as a feeling of being close to others. For very young children, this explains the appeal of stuffed animals, which children may see as companions, and dolls, which young girls can care for. As kids get older, they develop the need to relate to other kids and be accepted by their peers. Transformers are an example of a physical product – now a movie franchise – that helps introduce young boys to the concept of belonging to or identifying with a group, e.g., the Autobots or Decepticons.

Parents experience this need in the opposite direction as feelings of nurturing. One part of mom's need to nurture is reflected in advertising that reassures her of the healthiness of the food that she serves her children. Ads that communicate the educational value of toys that aid her child's development, both mentally and physically, also tap into this emotion.

Motivator 3: Freedom/affirmation

The third underlying dimension of emotional response is centered on self-identity, the “me” that is separate from the “we.” As kids develop, the need for freedom becomes an increasingly important emotional motivator. Products that offer choices and independence, like the Game of Life, appeal to kids on this level. One recent Heinz Ketchup commercial leverages this emotion by showing a boy building his perfect burger.

Babies aren't born with handbooks, and new moms seek affirmation that they are doing a good job. As children grow and pursue the need for personal freedom by seeking emotional distance from their parents, moms' need to feel appreciated evolves. Images in ads that demonstrate the appreciation of the family – for example reaction shots that overtly acknowledge mom's role in providing an appetizing, albeit healthy meal – provide important affirmation of her identity as the mother.

Motivator 4: Power/simplification

The fourth underlying dimension of emotional response is the emotional striving for control. As kids develop physically and mentally, they feel the need to control their environments and master increasingly difficult tasks. Video games tap into this need for mastery. Dynamic action figures like Transformers also tap into this emotion by giving kids control over what shape the toys take. A recent Eggo waffle commercial appealed to this emotional need by featuring different ways that kids customize their breakfast.

From a parent's perspective, the increasingly complex developmental needs of maturing children evoke an opposite desire for simplicity. One form in which this longing is expressed is in the importance of durability. Mom wants to know the things she buys will last. Tonka appeals to this need with its “built for boyhood” tagline. Another version of this emotional benefit is the desire to eliminate family conflict. Mom wants to feel confident that the products she buys will be accepted and used without a fight. Furthermore, product appeals that bring the family together for quality time without conflict, for example the Monopoly board game, touch on this mom motivator.

Most important thing

After testing a great many kid-targeted ads for clients in a variety of categories, we draw an overall conclusion that emotion is the most important thing and the thing that's hardest to get right in developing effective advertising. Visuals are the primary source of emotion in a television commercial, and teaching adult marketers how to look at a brand and how to see a commercial through the eyes of a child is the most valuable contribution researchers can make to the creative development process. | Q

References

Coffey, Timothy; Siegel, David; and Livingston, Gregory. *Marketing to the New Super Consumer: Mom & Kid*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Paramount Market Publishing Inc.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.