

www.CultureSpy.com
MARKETING LITERACY FOR EDUCATORS
By Steven Ciampaglia
© 2005

Over the past two decades, media ownership has consolidated at such a rate that currently seven conglomerates account for nearly all the media produced in the world. They are Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp, Disney, Viacom, Universal Vivendi, Bertelsmann AG, Sony, and AOL/TimeWarner. These transnational conglomerates are the prime motivators in the push toward corporate globalization. Worldwide, they see teenagers as the next frontier to be conquered (Dretzin & Goodman 2001). That is because globally, teenagers total 560 million in number and annually spend \$100 billion dollars (Moses 2000). They are the largest generation of teenagers ever to exist with the most income at their disposal (Dretzin & Goodman 2001). The volume of their current purchases combined with their future spending potential makes this group of teens the most sought after consumer demographic in history. As such, there is a feeding frenzy among these media conglomerates to get a share of this global teen market.

While the global scope of the current teen market is a relatively recent development, the concept of selling merchandise to teenagers is nothing new. Teenagers were first recognized as a distinct segment of the American consumer population in the 1950s. The surging post-war economy combined with the Baby Boom to produce an enormous population of teenagers with an unprecedented disposable income. The media industries capitalized on this and produced what is arguably the first youth culture product: rock and roll. Rock and roll's impact was immediate. It informed nearly every facet of teenage life, from hairstyle and fashion to language and sexual expression. Never before had big business had so thorough an impact on the cultural development of such a young population. And so was born the youth culture industry (Frank 1997).

Since then the stock in trade of the youth culture industry has been the selling of "cool" as a commodity. The problem this poses to the media conglomerates is that what is considered cool is always changing. Today's fashion is tomorrow's cultural trash. To combat this upward curve, the media giants hire specialized marketing agencies devoted to analyzing the teen consumer. These marketers have developed tactics designed to infiltrate the innermost sanctum of teen culture (Gladwell 2000). Their tactics are not dissimilar to the ones utilized by the CIA and FBI in their intelligence gathering: spying and surveillance (Garfinkel 2000).

Marketing agencies regularly employ teenagers to spy on other teenagers. Their job is to document with video cameras, still cameras, and tape recorders the thoughts, attitudes, fears and hopes of their peers. In short, they are "culture spies," hired to inform marketers of every subtle nuance of teen expression (Dretzin & Goodman 2001). The media conglomerates use this information to craft sales strategies designed to penetrate every facet of teen culture, including movies, music, video games, magazines, books, DVDs, and the Internet. In this way, they are better able to leverage their cultural influence on teens by selling and promoting their products via all of their varied media divisions

simultaneously (Dretzin & Goodman 2001).

This cross-promotional free-for-all is extremely effective at maximizing profits, but what effect does it have on the teenage consumer? Does it leave any room for them to actively participate in the production of their own culture? And if so, how exactly does it inform what they produce?

The CultureSpy.com Web site is the result of a study that attempted to answer these questions. The study was a yearlong critical participatory action research case study conducted with teenage collaborators from the Chicago area. During the course of the study, the participants collected cultural data on their peers using the same type of culture spy surveillance techniques used by teen correspondents working undercover for marketing agencies. From this data, the participants formulated a profile of contemporary teen culture. The participants then compared their profile of teen culture with representations of teen culture presented in popular media texts marketed specifically to teenagers, including movies, television shows, commercials, magazines, catalogs, Web sites, etc. The participants expressed their findings in commentaries produced in the media forms they were critiquing: video, audio, photography, and digital graphics. These commentaries form the content of the CultureSpy.com Web site for teenagers.

This portion of the Web site is designed to assist educators in the development and implementation of “marketing literacy” curricula in their classrooms. Unlike media literacy studies that usually focus on media critiques and production practices, marketing literacy curricula mandates that students critique the entire commercial media process, from market analysis to production to distribution. This process engages the students in an active methodology that removes them from the passive role to which they are accustomed as media consumers. In essence, they become guerilla video ethnographers, marketing analysts, producers, and distributors. Ultimately they are forced to look at teenagers in the third person, as a demographic to be researched and analyzed. Then they can fully achieve a level of critical self-awareness that is crucial to preserving their cultural autonomy.

References

Dretzin, R. & Goodman, B. (Producers), & Goodman, B. (Director). (2001). *The merchants of cool* {Videotape}. Boston, MA: WGBH Educational Foundation, distributed by PBS Video.

Frank, T.C. (1997). *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Garfinkel, S. (2000). *Database nation*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly & Associates, Inc.

Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

Moses, E. (2000). *The \$100 billion dollar allowance: Accessing the global teen market*.
New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.