

## ***Let's talk about...*** the business of publishing

Follow the money.

Do you ever find yourself suddenly realizing that drastic changes have occurred in some aspect of your life, and you were completely unaware that changes were happening?

Answers can usually be found along the money trail. How are profits generated? From where do revenues come? Where is the potential growth for that organization or industry?

Follow the money.

Whereas in past generations, children were considered sacred and untouchable to marketers, the past two decades have seen the opposite. Beginning with the latch-key generation of the 1970's and 80's (Generation X as it is called, born 1965-1978 or so) who were left alone after school while parents were at work, America experienced the impact of television upon children. During this time, cable television was born and, with it, the variety of sources of impact upon children multiplied. Thus the streaming of messages, ideas and *ideals* into homes directly to children of all ages via programming and advertisement took root without parents even being present or aware.

In the realm of psychology, classic conditioning theory puts forth that if a person or animal repeatedly experiences a positive consequence from their action, they will repeat the action. This is no different for businesses too. If success is achieved from an action, it will be repeated. Thus, as the advertisements to children proved to evoke more purchasing of products, those advertisements were increased in number and power of message. Where in past generations, "pestering" was simply considered poor behaviour of the child, it has now been transformed into "pester power", a standard marketing strategy relied upon heavily by business to get their products purchased. In the popular television shows of the 1950's such as Leave it to Beaver, pestering children would have been punished. In today's media, children are surrounded with images, messages, music, games, movies and programs all of which presume and portray the child in power and control. Television and entertainment in particular give examples of how children wield this power. This, then, reinforces a child's self-image of having or needing power.

Children represent one of the fastest growing and most lucrative markets for businesses. In a study commissioned by the FTC of the brands that were marketing food and beverages to children age 2-17 in the US, it was determined that over \$1.6 billion was spent annually just in food advertising (2008, p. ES-1). Many reports indicate children are exposed to 40,000 television commercials of

all sorts each year (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006, p. 1 is merely one study). This does not include advertisements from other sources such as posters in classrooms, product displays in movies, and the Internet. The *Media Awareness Network* provides an easy-to-understand overview of marketing towards children, particularly alerting to adult entertainment intentionally marketed towards kids:

'The FTC studied 44 films rated "Restricted," and discovered that 80 per cent were targeted to children under 17. Marketing plans included TV commercials run during hours when young viewers were most likely to be watching. One studio's plan for a violent R-rated film stated, "Our goal was to find the elusive teen target audience, and make sure that everyone between the ages of 12 and 18 was exposed to the film.'" (2009)

Those of us who are of the Baby Boomer generation (born prior to 1965) may recall the joy of order books through our classroom. In a world where products for children were marketed primarily to the parent, it was a thrill to have a thin catalog of books intended just for us! Many of us chose too many books, and our parents had us revise our "wish list" over and over again until it was whittled down to a reasonable number of books that the family could afford to buy. The parent, providing the money, was aware of the book choices made by the child. We read, and read, and read some more! And we cherished those books, reading them over and over again.

At some point in recent history, the American classroom has been redecorated with posters from the publishers advertising those books the company wants to see successful. The book sale publication handed out to the students has been enlarged. Classic literature, if appearing at all, is minimized while the newest releases, often tied to a television show or movie, are emphasized.

The classroom is one of the most effective marketing vehicles today for media and entertainment, using co-branding strategies to tie well known publisher names to movies, video games, cable and television programs. Elementary school aged children have spending money as well as incredible influence upon parents to spend. *{In case you don't believe that statement, read the American Psychological Association report of a decade ago confirming that children under 12 spent \$28 billion a year and teenagers \$100 billion. Pester power brings in another \$249 billion as of the year 2000. (Clay, 2000)}*

But that is not all...

With just those strategies in use, the book industry does not experience growth. So how can more books be sold to kids? Two ways:

- 1) Increase the number of book purchases by each child
- 2) Find new readers for older books

Looking at the first strategy, it is easier than one might think. The current generation (Generation Y, born after 1978 as well as the unnamed younger generation) has already been raised with instant gratification. Video games provide pixel stimulation conditioning the brain towards this. Even if there are no televisions or computers in the home, just outside the door is a world of advertising on busses, benches, billboards, walls, in-stores, etc. Retail stores use a strategy of putting certain items at the cash register counter specifically to encourage impulse buying. And gas stations can no longer survive without a mini-mart attached, the ultimate in impulse shopping. In the late 80's/early 90's, the use of beepers transforming from a business tool to a common product used by the everyday person started our need for instant communication. Telephone service has now morphed into the smart phones of today, and children of all ages have a phone for texting. Coupled with the instant communication of IM, Facebook and other Internet technologies, this generation does not know a world without instant gratification.

Past generations would hold onto a book for years, reading and re-reading it time and again. While this still occurs, more common is to buy more and more books.

Bowker LLC is the “exclusive US ISBN and SAN agency”, the folks who assign ISBN numbers. Their studies show that the number of new book titles and editions published in the juvenile market alone ranged from a low of over 29,000 (in 2008) to a high of almost 38,000 books (2004) per year. Yes, that is between 29,000 and 38,000 books published each year in the US for children. (See their report at <http://www.bowker.com/bookwire/IndustryStats2009.pdf> ).

Informal conversations with representatives of book publishers reveal that authors are pressed to publish new books more frequently, rather than relying upon reprinting of their existing titles. More new titles gives reason to market again to child readers with a new product, rather than the same old ones, and this generates a desire for the new book which is purchased, gratifying the need and conditioning the child to want again (rather than be satisfied with books on hand). When this occurs with sufficient frequency, the industry creates needs for more. Doing so with a book series creates almost a fervor. Yes, the planned obsolescence that has been built into many other consumer products is now often a part of the strategy of marketing towards children as well.

Thus, strategy 1, Increase the number of book purchases by each child, is successfully accomplished.

Now for strategy 2...

Follow the money.

It costs a business a certain amount of money to develop and produce a product. So instead of creating new products all the time, it makes sense to make some changes to the existing product and sell a new version of it. For example, cell phones are now camera phones, and Sony produces a Walkman phone. This ingenuity helps to fuel our economy and has made us a prosperous nation.

Such changes to products are usually done in a manner that the buyer knows and understands it. In fact, changes now are often made due to feedback from customers on the existing products. So all of this is transparent and good for us.

Some changes in the marketing of products are covert rather than transparent. When these changes are not harmful, and the products sold to competent adults, this is ok. It can bring concern, however, when covert changes are made to products that are sold to people who are considered vulnerable. That is, less able to make a good decision for themselves or easily taken advantage of. In business marketing, vulnerable populations would include those of ill health, disabled, elderly, minorities and children. Covert changes intended to exploit the vulnerable should be looked at more closely when determining if it is ethical.

An interesting phenomena underway with children's books seems to be the pushing down of age/grade reading levels for established books. Let's use as an example *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, one of our favorites for occasional "potty" humor (we admit dad's probably like this series more than moms!). This book was originally written towards the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reader in the late 1990's. Editorial reviews posted on Amazon.com refer to the grade levels as 2-5 and 2-4 respectively, with Amazon's recommended age as 9-12 year olds. [http://www.amazon.com/Adventures-Captain-Underpants-Dave-Pilkey/dp/0590846280/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1263078321&sr=1-1-spell](http://www.amazon.com/Adventures-Captain-Underpants-Dave-Pilkey/dp/0590846280/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1263078321&sr=1-1-spell) Now fast-forward to the collection of the series printed in 2002, 5 years and a whole lot of marketing/Internet/Video games later, and Amazon lists it as for ages 4-8 [http://www.amazon.com/New-Captain-Underpants-Collection-Books/dp/0439417848/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1263078387&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/New-Captain-Underpants-Collection-Books/dp/0439417848/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1263078387&sr=1-1) Meanwhile, its publisher Scholastic lists the book as age 7 reading.

Hmm, we think four year old children should be reading books that teach good behavior and a loving appreciation of the world around them so that, when they are 9-12 year olds, they can read books such as this and understand the humor is *founded in the outrageousness of the characters' behavior, clearly intended to be the opposite of their own*. Children first should be allowed to develop a clear moral foundation prior to adventuring into older titles whose characters' actions may conflict with that foundation.

But pushing older titles from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading list down into 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading lists expands the market for that book without detracting from its current market of 9-12 year old readers. And as those 4-8 year olds age, they can then

be sold the newer books (of 30,000+titles a year) because they've already read the older titles for the 9-12 age group. They are groomed for future consumption.

So strategy 2, find new readers for older books, is successfully achieved.

The problem is that parents and even teachers would trust the age and grade level recommendations provided to them, not realizing the book is more appropriate for the older reader towards whom it was originally written.

Reviewers at Litland.com do not take such recommendations at face value when placing a title in a recommending reading level. We consider publisher and bookseller recommendations, those provided by reviewers such as associated with libraries, the book's content matter in terms of issues and ideals portrayed as well as its complexity of storyline and composition, and ultimately our own judgment. When recommending an age or grade reading level, we consider the average good reader but also take into consideration whether it would be appropriate for a younger gifted reader too. If you ever feel we have placed a title inappropriately and should move it to a higher level reader category, simply contact us with an explanation and we will take it into consideration.

In the meantime, if you are ever suspicious about the reasons behind products being marketing towards your children or students,

Follow the money.

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