

THE CLOSER

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GUEST COLUMN

YOUNG SOPHISTICATES

Kids are smarter and more media-savvy than ever. So why do we think they can't handle ads? BY ERIC CONROY

Schoolyard talk in past generations revolved around idle gossip, trading cards, playing games with glass marbles and the latest adventure series on TV. Cereal packages had headlines that screamed "HEY KIDS!" and offered trinkets like baking soda-powered submarines and plastic discs bearing pictures of sports personalities. TV channels had set programming for kids on Saturday mornings and early afternoons. There actually were stores that sold "men's and boys' wear."

Those days are long gone. So too is the innocence of the young people being approached by marketers. Now, kids clothing is anything but a smaller version of adult clothes. Choosing a cereal is based on the ingredients shown on the package, sugar is a known evil, and TV channels and programs are chosen based on school-age trends combined with young viewers' personal interests.

TODAY'S YOUTH ACCESS THE WORLD THROUGH THE INTERNET, American magazines and TV from around the globe. Banning advertising aimed at them would have the same effect as banning mosquitoes in Winnipeg

Based on my experience—first as an educator and then as a youth magazine publisher for more than 25 years—I can tell you that today's youth read at a level far above those of the same age 10 to 15 years ago. They actually start homework in primary school, they know about wars, drugs, famine and tsunamis. They have witnessed events through television, movies and video games—all of which makes them aware, concerned and inquisitive.

This then begs the question of why politicians and government authorities feel Canada's youth should be protected from advertising. There have been many officials over the years advocating an outright ban on ads targeted to youth. Of late, the most eager promoters of ad bans have been Dr. David McKeown, Toronto's chief medical officer, and Rosario Marchese, an Ontario MPP. Earlier this year, both called for a ban on children's advertising. And with the headline "Carbonated beverages and sugared cereal cause fat kids and soaring health costs," they got a lot of attention. Not only is this statement untrue, but banning youth advertising on Canadian TV would have no effect at all on the problem of obesity. With kids connecting to the world through the Internet and American magazines, and bundled channels



giving unlimited numbers of TV programs from around the globe access to Canadian living rooms, it would have the same effect as banning mosquitoes in Winnipeg.

More important, what the ad ban advocates have forgotten is the youth of today are not naive. If these champions of healthy behaviour took the time to question this target audience, they would find that young Canadians know all about nutrition. The subject is taught in schools from the first grade. They know they need to eat healthy and exercise. Our magazine gets hundreds of submissions monthly from young readers in every part of Canada on a column we call "Eats" with opinions, suggestions and requests.

Industry organizations like Concerned Children's Advertisers spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on non-commercial programming delivered to just about every school in Canada covering the subject. What is missing here is the government and community effort to promote these known facts and, more urgently, promote involvement—like the concept of Participaction. It is up to parents, educators and politicians to encourage youth to apply what they know towards a healthy, positive and active lifestyle. (As an aside, Toronto is closing a number of swimming pools that encourage thousands of kids to exercise. Not a word of disagreement came from either the Toronto Board of Health or the politicians at Queen's Park.)

Education and encouragement is the solution, and it seems there are some bright lights in the Ontario legislature at least. An MPP from eastern Ontario, Randy Hillier, remarked about the public comments of his government colleagues: "Unfounded concerns and poorly conceived recommendations like this have led us down roads unknown over the years and many of the problems faced by youth today are a direct consequence of this coddling. Are we a nanny state that justifies having no respect whatsoever for any person's judgment other than that of officialdom?"

As the bank ad says, "I couldn't have said it better myself." Perhaps common sense may yet prevail. **M**

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