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## **ADVERTASING AIMED AT CHILDREN - BETWEEN EFFICIENCY AND ETHICS OF MARKETING ACTIVITIES**

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary reality makes companies search for market potential in environments which were previously not at their interest. For that apart from research and development activity, most companies are searching for new target groups and they try hardly to create efficient ways to communicate with them. While a family, understood as a kind of social structure, started evolving into nuclear form and role of children became crucial,<sup>1</sup> the youngest started to be perceived as normal customers with their needs and purchasing power.

Due to the fact that children are a specific target group, especially in terms of their awareness and development, there appeared many questions concerning ethics of marketing communication aimed at children and potential of that target group. The goal of this article is to answer a question whether it is possible to ethically interest children with offered products and at the same time maintain economic effectiveness.

To discuss the topic of advertisements, which are targeted at children, it is worth starting with whom a child is and what are specific features of it, because those differences are actually a source for many questions for ethics in advertising. At the same time, awareness of those facts brings marketers greater chances to influence children and with that – enhance selling results. For that reason the article will be divided into three main parts. In first one, there will be examined in details a development of a child<sup>2</sup>. In second part, there will be some in-depth analysis of advertisements which are aimed at children. The last part will be devoted to analyze and find a balance between ethics and efficiency while discussing child as a customer, and that one will be ended up with a summary.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kowalczyk, *Socjodemograficzne uwarunkowania wspierania potrzeb i aspiracji dzieci w środowisku rodzinnym*, REIPRINT, Piotrków Trybunalski 2001, p. 9-13.

<sup>2</sup> For the Leeds of the article „a child” is understood as the one who is above 7 and below 13, because starting school is the first moment when a child receives own pocket money and at age of 13-14 we can say that there is another stadium of child's life – teenage.

## Methods

As for the need of this article, there were: documentary method and case study analysis method chosen to describe the problem. As for the documentary, it is deeply rooted in reality of social science research.<sup>3</sup> The method is based on the assumption that the documents are not only to be created, but also to be analysed in a detailed way. There are two variations of the mentioned method: one is more objective one and based on a prepared form, which is a base for analysis of the documents in a quantitative way.<sup>4</sup> The other variation is more spontaneous one and based on the perception of a document by a researcher. In this the second variation was chosen, because documents that were analysed differed too much between each other to create one single form applicable to all of them.

The second method was case study analysis. They were chosen on purpose to present the possibilities of marketing in relation to child's emotional, social and intellectual development. Intentional way of choosing elements or cases to be analysed is the main feature of the method.<sup>5</sup> Case study research is a method that concentrates on contemporary issues and presents the reality from a perspective of individual cases in relation to the prepared theory.<sup>6</sup>

## Child's development as a basis for marketing

As for physical development of a child, the main processes are growing and maturing. There is intense growth of power and immunity, related to an intense development of skeleton, gastrointestinal tract, respiratory and muscular system. In early education age efficiency of internal organs such as heart, lungs and gastrointestinal does also improve. Growth of brain (in terms of its weight) stops and due to that fact nervous system becomes more stable, moves become more precise and psycho-motion coordination is greater.<sup>7</sup> Those changes cause greater need for movement and lesser concentration, which influence greatly children's perception and ability to remember certain information, i.e. those about products and services. Communicates which are rather short and highly emotional are remembered easier and for a longer period of time.<sup>8</sup> Child's perception is different than adults one too. Although at the beginning it is a hard thing for a child to conduct a systematic observation, in age 10-11 he or she is ready to do it.<sup>9</sup> In early education age the process of attention is shaping. Their attention follows accidental stimuli and it is extremely hard for them to focus on one specific issue. Perceptiveness develops in children with cutting a task into some certain parts which are separated in line and presented for a child. Thanks to an intense development

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<sup>3</sup> R. Bohnsack, N. Pfaff, W. Weller, *Qualitative Analysis and Documentary Method in International Educational Research*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Leverkusen 2010, pp. 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> M. P. Grady, *Qualitative and Action Research. A Practitioner Handbook*, Bloomington 1998, p. 28-34.

<sup>5</sup> B. Gillham, *Case Study Research Methods* Continuum, London 2000, pp. 1-5.

<sup>6</sup> A. G. Woodside, *Case Study Research. Theory, Methods, Practice*, Emerald, Bingley 2010, pp. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> L. Wołoszynowa, *Młodszy wiek szkolny*, [in:] *Psychologia rozwojowa dzieci i młodzieży*, M. Żebrowska (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 1982, pp. 576-581.

<sup>8</sup> C. Meggitt, *Child Development. An illustrated guide*, Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford 2006, p. 131-138.

<sup>9</sup> A. Talay-Ongan, *Child development and education of young children* [in:] A. Talay-Ongan, E.A. Ap, *Child Development and Teaching Young Children*, Thomson Social Science Press, Sydney 2005, p. 8.

of perceptiveness and ability to concentrate, the ability to learn is better too. Attentional control causes ability to learn in a more effective way, but at the same time children are able to select information and to order them in greater structures to give them some logical order.<sup>10</sup> For that reason marketing communication aimed at the children is more efficient and fruitful. They have greater ability to justify their choices<sup>11</sup> and for that particular reason they gain greater influence on parental shopping decisions.

The process of development of child's thinking in early education age changes too. There are a few main features of it:

- 1) Thinking is aimed at gaining knowledge (especially school knowledge);
- 2) Scientific terms are absorbed gradually. At the beginning children get to know the most important outer features of phenomena and objects, and then they analyze them deeper to come up with rules of their way of working;
- 3) While remembering and absorbing new terms and issues, cognitive processes develop too, new ways of thinking appear. This lets children perceive matters in a more complex way;
- 4) The scope of imaginations and terms of a child grows and changes. The basis for analysing facts are not only the objects well-known by children, but also those with which a child had no previous contact;
- 5) The process of ordering terms happens. Each of the processes gain a space in system of terms built by a child individually;
- 6) In the late phase of early education age children gain ability to make operations on the material which is only built in their imagination, without its real existence. It is specially important, because it lets children to absorb information faster and act in a more logical way.<sup>12</sup>

What is also important, in early education age, there appears motivation which is aimed not only on physical activities, but also on cognition. First elements of competition appear and this makes children more fragile on stimulation to act through peer group activities.<sup>13</sup>

### **A child in post-modern marketing reality**

Due to all the dynamic changes in contemporary reality, there are many changes that influence modern children. First important issue is a growing consumption. Growing pression of a peer group and psychical necessity to buy more and more becomes one of central values and dilemmas of children. The problem used to be urgent in a group of children between 11 and 17, because the need to impress others was very strong in adolescence.<sup>14</sup> "To have" orientation, accompanied with the need to impress social circle and lack of parent's time create new problems among children like over-consumption, obesity,

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<sup>10</sup> P. Tassoni, *6 to 16 Child Development*, Heinemann, Oxford 2007, p. 117-119.

<sup>11</sup> L. Wołoszynowa, *Młodszy wiek szkolny*, [in:] *Psychologia rozwojowa dzieci i młodzieży*, M. Żebrowska (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 1982, p. 613-624; B.J. Wadsworth, *Teoria Piageta. Poznawczy i emocjonalny rozwój dziecka*, WSiP, Warszawa 1998, p. 46-71.

<sup>12</sup> L. Wołoszynowa, *Młodszy wiek... op.cit.*, p. 606-613.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 641-647.

<sup>14</sup> M. Kowalczyk, *Determinanty zagrożeń procesu wychowania we współczesnej rodzinie polskiej*, IMPULS, Kraków 2004, p. 21-30.

thefts, prostitution and so on.<sup>15</sup> One of elements creating an environment supporting the development of such negative processes is marketing communication fostering consumption and indirectly – the creating threats which were absent some years ago.

The speed of life is also crucial. It causes not only lack of parental time. Children get information from many sources, they feel glut with its amount which is unfortunately impossible to be digested instantly. On the one side, this makes children more feel lost in a complex market offer, but on the other hand such marketing upbringing makes them more aware of brands, but at the same time – less able to filter information. Such cognitive chaos causes dismay and anxiety for impossibility to pick up all the offers, try them and compare to chose one or a few.<sup>16</sup> For that particular reason creating marketing buzz aimed at children is sometimes perceived as unethical and harmful.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless it is hard for companies to act in an ethical way while the competitors do not follow such rules. An average child watches during about 40 000 ads on Television per year and 3000 ads per day in all the media (TV, Internet, billboards, magazines).<sup>18</sup> Their fragility on marketing communicates is lesser with time, but at the same time children are not able to differentiate the abstract world of marketing communicates from the reality and it leads to accidents like the legendary one when a child thought that it can fly as Batman does.

Polish law is rather liberal while considering advertisements aimed at children. The only limitations are that: “the gullibility and lack of experience of children cannot be used”. In other European countries the regulations are far more strict, i.e. in Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark and Grece any advertising of toys is not allowed, and in France there is a law preventing from presenting child’s image in ads and no ads aimed children can be presented.<sup>19</sup> Such regulations influence the marketing communication possibilities very highly. Content of advertisement has to be adjusted to the needs of adults and the information role is specially exposed in the ads. On the other hand – children are not perceived as customers which may influence their future consumer behaviours and level of customer education and awareness. It is hard to imagine a situation in which there is no child on TV ads, especially while products for children, such as diapers are advertised. Sometimes a solution is usage of animated forms of children, but it is not always sufficient.

There are other elements of the reality that might interfere normal development of a child. The transfer of values reflected in advertisements may also be harmful to children. An example for shaping new generation of females who believe only in a beauty is an advertisement of Barbie. Children imitate their behaviours because they find Barbie doll a model for their own life. They are not only imitating them, but they are also invited to create that world with preparing projects of clothing for Barbie during competitions.

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<sup>15</sup> For editorial limitations the other threats related to socio-economical, demographical and cultural development shall not be discussed.

<sup>16</sup> C. Meggitt, *Child Development... op.cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> B. Gunter, C. Oates, M. Blades, *Advertising to Children on TV. Content, Impact, and Regulation*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah 2007, p. 103-119.

<sup>18</sup> E. Goodman, *Ads poplute most everything in sight*, Albuquerque Journal, June 27, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Reklama skierowana do dzieci w perspektywie prawnej*, available through: <http://www.lex-pol.pl/2011/03/reklama-skierowana-do-dzieci-w-perspektywie-prawnej>.



Picture 1 A child in Barbie world. Source: <http://www.iswinoujscie.pl/artykuly/21664/>

The other threat might be growing popularity of McDonald's restaurants and an attempt to create the vision of free time spent in a restaurant serving unhealthy dishes which cause obesity and many diseases. The fact that a child is not able to filter information is crucial again. For a child there is no logical relation between often consumption of fast-foods and chips with a growth of weight and decrease in general fitness.<sup>20</sup>



Picture 2 A child eating in Mc Donald's. Source: <http://polscott24.com/mcdonald-ujawni-kalorie-uk>

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<sup>20</sup> B.B. Reece, N.J. Rifon, K. Rodriguez, *Selling Food to Children. Is Fun Part of a Balanced Breakfast?*, [in:] *Advertising to Children. Concepts and Controversies*, M.C. Macklin, L. Carlson (ed.), SAGE Publications. Thousand Oaks 1999, p. 189-191.

For sure the role of parents is crucial here and it is impossible to guilt companies for attempts to increase selling. Creating awareness of customers and presenting them what is inside a standard hamburger or actions which are aimed at diversifying menus are worth supporting. There is also another advertising trend noticeable as for influencing value transfer among children. Advergaming, which was previously used only by companies to enhance selling results,<sup>21</sup> now they are also used as a tool to fight with corporations and values presented by them. There was a game created to oppose activities of McDonald,<sup>22</sup> which presents its activities in a funny way, adjusted to needs of children.<sup>23</sup> What is important to be noticed, such campaigns are rare, nevertheless usage of knowledge about specific needs and perceptual possibilities of a child in marketing communication is getting more and more common.

What is another problem, it is the fact that children have contact with advertisements not only via TV or billboards. Usage of Internet by younger children is growing and this causes also enhancement of contact points of children with advertisements that may be inappropriate for them.<sup>24</sup> Siegel in her work presents numerous examples of usage of Internet in marketing communication with children,<sup>25</sup> which are presented and described in details by S.M. Neeley in the context of children and their specific perception.<sup>26</sup> There are not only chances to present advertisements of products on dedicated pages. There is also a possibility to show banners or pop-ups on webpages which are dedicated to children and here is another risk – to present children only those ads that are really aimed at them. And this is strictly related to the company allowing for advertising.

Not only the content of an ad may be discussed. Other issue is a way of presenting the advertisement. The best example can be a Teletubbies children TV series which was taken out of TV programme as a form of punishment for using subliminal advertising. Advertisements of products were hidden between scenes in a period of time which made it unnoticeable for an eye, but still read by human brain. Selling of an advertised product almost tripped.<sup>27</sup> Of course this might have been caused by other factors such as price or product's quality, but still – usage of such a form of communication should be banned strictly.

## Conclusions

A child is a fragile person who is still not able to use all the perception defensive mechanisms to protect itself from some inappropriate marketing

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<sup>21</sup> B. Gregor, B. Gotwald, *Advergaming i grywalizacja jako trend i szansa dla marketingu*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego. Problemy Zarządzania, Finansów i Marketingu”, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2012, p. 199-211.

<sup>22</sup> Available on: <http://humanflow.pl/2008/08/28/mc/>, 18.03.2013.

<sup>23</sup> The game available on: [www.mcvideogame.com](http://www.mcvideogame.com), 18.03.2013.

<sup>24</sup> L.A. Peracchio, D. Luna, *How Do We Persuade Children Not to Smoke?*, [in:] *Advertising to Children. Concepts and Controversies... op.cit.*, p. 211-213.

<sup>25</sup> C. Siegel, *Internet Marketing: Foundations and Applications*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 2006.

<sup>26</sup> S.M. Neeley, *Internet Advertising and Children*, [in:] *Internet Advertising. Theory and Research*, D.W. Schumann, E. Thorson (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah 2007, p. 350-356.

<sup>27</sup> W.S. Brown, *Ethics and the Business of Children's Public Television Programming*, “Teaching Business Ethics”, February 2002, Vol. 6, Issue 1, p. 73-80.

communicates. Irresponsible marketing communication led by some companies may cause plenty of dangers, among which there may be “to-have” orientation, consumerism, egocentrism, accelerated development. Usage of the marketing tools which are aimed at children is various in form. It stretches from press ads through TV to Internet. Effectiveness of campaigns may be diagnosed easily with the increase of sales, nevertheless companies are not allowed to forget about ethical usage of knowledge about a child, its needs and development, and also about keeping balance between efficiency and responsibility, even if they are not strictly regulated by a local or national law. For that reason here appears a question: whether companies are ready to follow CSR policy more than their need to achieve selling goals, even if the target group are children.

## Summary

The role of marketing communication in contemporary reality gains special importance. Children are still a specific group of customers for their development, structure of needs and difference as for perception. Due to that fact it is crucial to analyze the development of a child in relation to marketing usage of that knowledge and this is the aim of the article. It consists of two parts: first one devoted to child’s development and the second one – devoted to advertising and usage of the information on child as a creature in marketing communication in social context. The other goal of the article is to present the need for balance between efficiency and ethics while marketing activities are aimed at children.

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