

### Connecting With Teens

Understanding the fickle ways of teenagers is an age old challenge faced by parents and marketers alike. Global teens today have a very different outlook on life than the iconoclastic teens of the GenX generation. In fact, they are even quite different from the "I can do anything" teens of the nineties. So how are marketers supposed to connect with these capricious adolescents? Before marketers can engage teens, they need to have an understanding of the events and situations that shaped the world in which these teenagers are developing. Second, marketers need to tap into the "teen trend leaders" for inspiration. Finally, to break through to teens, brands need to speak to them on a level and through channels they understand.

### Understanding the Context

September 11th, the Madrid bombings, the London terrorist attack, the War in Iraq, global stock market crashes, catastrophic tsunamis and hurricanes...These are events that few are likely to forget. However, for impressionable teens, these shared experiences have had a profound effect on their psyche. The world is no longer bright and optimistic. In fact, only 14% of global teens agree that the world is becoming a better place. War and terrorism are listed as top concerns for teenagers today. When it comes to ambitions, their goals are practical: take care of my family and create a life of personal fulfillment. Even though 70% of global teens say "being financially secure" is a major concern, money is seen as a vehicle to help them achieve their goals rather than a goal in itself. Despite the chaos and uncertainty of the times, teenagers today are ready to stand up for their passions and beliefs. The number one attitude expressed by teens in a recent poll conducted by Energy BBDO was, "I would fight for a cause I believe in."<sup>1</sup>

These teenagers are growing up fast, and they are more informed and engaged than ever. As a result, marketers need to approach them with sensitivity and honesty. Forget about the hype. Teenagers today are looking for something to believe in, so brands need to respond with a purpose. Empower these teens to achieve their goals and re-ignite a sense of optimism.



### Tapping into the Teen Trend Leaders

It used to be that anything branded "made in the USA" – be it music or fashion - was synonymous with cool around the globe. A marketer who wanted to uncover the next global teen trend could simply research urban adolescent in America. Not so anymore. Today's teen trends are being defined by a group known as the Creatives. These individuals are curious, open to new ideas, and into creating their own culture through self expression. Approximately 30% of global teens fall into this category, but they are most highly concentrated in Western Europe. The United States actually has a lower concentration of these trend-setters with only 23% of its teens considered Creatives.<sup>1</sup>

So who are these "cool" kids? Unfortunately for marketers, they are fairly apathetic about brands with only 37% saying they "like wearing brand logos". 64% of Creative teens think there is "too much advertising and marketing in the world." Yet Creatives are among the first to try new products and services because they value novelty and are willing to experiment. They are highly connected with 70% going on-line every day or almost every day. The Creatives are driving the original content creation trend among teens through blogging, websites, personal networks, and personal media creation. They are all about authenticity and figuring out "who am I and what I stand for", and they choose brands that reflect what they believe in.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BBDO Energy, "GenWorld: The New Generation of Global Youth", 2006

Brands that are interested in innovating should talk to the Creatives. These leading edge adolescents are expressive, imaginative and connected. They have their fingers on the pulse of what's to come. In addition, these teens are interested in co-creating, which gives innovators the opportunity to leverage insights from the Creatives to develop successful products and services. As an added bonus, once relationships are established with these individuals, they are more likely to act as advocates than their peers, spreading the word through self-generated content and social networks.



### Making the Connection

In the 1990s, American teens were the primary ones surfing the information superhighway. Today, there is a global class of these "SuperConnector" teens who are actively engaged in technology on a daily basis. 56% of teens aged 13-18 fall into this category.<sup>2</sup> They are communicating with each other via instant messaging, cell phones, texts, and email. Gone are the days of note passing in class. Today's teens send mass text messages.

Virtual communication and entertainment has become a way of life. A recent study by Buzz Marketing Group found that among US teens, 90% prefer actively participating in online communities versus passively watching television.<sup>3</sup> The tremendous growth in popularity of social networking and personal content generation through platforms like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter reflects this demand. Virtual worlds are also very popular. As of October 2008, Habbo, a virtual world targeted towards teenagers, had 111 million registered users from 32 different countries. Each month 9.5 million teens log onto this world with their alter ego avatars to meet new and existing friends, play games, and check out new music.<sup>4</sup> Major corporations like Nintendo and Target are responding by buying advertising space and sponsoring virtual gathering spots on Habbo to interact with this captive audience.<sup>5</sup>

Even video games have taken on a social twist. Gaming is ubiquitous among teenagers. However, far from the image of anti-social adolescents playing video games in isolation, Wi-Fi has now made it possible for teens to connect with multiple players around the world. Major gaming consoles like Nintendo Wii, Sony Playstation, and Microsoft Xbox 360 have all integrated social networking components into their systems, allowing teens to compete with friends remotely.

In conclusion, what does this mean for marketers and innovators? First of all, brands need to connect with teenagers through the channels they are using every day. Embrace the fact that tech-savvy teens are turning to each other for entertainment as well as recommendations. Given that word of mouth and peer recommendation are top influencers for teens, these "peer network" channels are a valuable resource for brands to use. Second, brands should empower teens by connecting them with each other and with topics they find important. A brand that masters the art of effectively engaging and creating meaning increases its chance of winning over tumultuous teen market.



<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.clickz.com/showPage.html?page=3590801>>

<sup>3</sup> <<http://replicatorinc.com/blog/2008/06/teen-trends-2008/>>

<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.sulake.com/habbo/?navi=2>>

<sup>5</sup> <[http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/aug2007/id20070813\\_140822.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/aug2007/id20070813_140822.htm)>