

Back to school for marketers on teen basics



By Cathryn Treasure

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It's back to basics for marketers on teen marketing - between all the talk about millennials and the born-digital, marketers have been swept up in a wave that makes it easy to forget the fundamentals, such as who are these people you are really talking with (not to, with) and what value will they associate with what you post, tweet, broadcast or print.



Here are several fundamentals marketers need to keep in mind when talking with today's teens (age range 11-19), regardless of what channel you choose to use.

1. They are naturally curious and require easy access to knowledge

How did you gain knowledge and information when you were at school? From textbooks and encyclopaedias - the library? Today's teens have access to data on a scale not known before. They are part of a global classroom, with few limits on the information available to them at the press of a button or the touch of a screen. They are feeding their curiosity using all the tools available to them.

It can be as intimidating to brands as it can even be to their school teachers. How do we feed their curiosity, while ensuring that the engagement with them is seamless with the reality of their world today? Do you use the tools at your disposal to tick marketing boxes and to force yourself into their universe, or to communicate seamlessly via fewer but more engaging touchpoints?

As marketers, you need to ask yourselves: do you add to the clutter or do you add value through interaction? Teens will move on quickly from clutter as they strive to quench their curiosity about life and living through useful tools providing easy access to information.

2. They want to believe (in you and in themselves)

You remember a good teacher for the rest of your life. Good teachers have a genuine passion in the wellbeing of their kids. Are you one of those teachers? Do you care enough to know or know enough to care?

The teachers we remember and respected were accountable; they chose to hold themselves so - and they were honest. They knew their subject and how to transfer knowledge.

Teens care about teachers and those who believe in them, who allow them to believe in themselves. This is impossible without honesty, accountability and a real passion to encourage them to be all they can be. It makes an honest exchange of information, rather than one-way marketing messages, essential.

3. They love "against all odds" stories

We all have to survive those teenage years - talk about beating the odds! Teens love stories where people rise up above their circumstances - be it (for the younger set, at least) Justin Bieber, the regular kid who became an unlikely music star thanks to the web, or Natalie du Toit, whose story is as inspirational as any you are likely to hear.

Stories such as these nurture their desire to be something, achieve something, show them how they can make an impact and a difference.

4. They are part of the global classroom

Teens today are part of a global classroom that empowers them more than ever before in terms of allowing them to choose their own influences and inspirations. They know their knowledge of technology is empowering and that it is enabling. Geography doesn't limit the tools or information they have access to.

5. The quick and the dead

Teens believe they are great multitaskers - it's one of the biggest reasons they prefer bite-sized chunks of information, shorter texts etc. They want to get to the gist of the matter in seconds.

Give them the essence of your message - if they want to know more, they will Google it. They prefer shorter pieces of information because it allows them to absorb many different stories much more easily and at the same time.

Their multitasking agility has helped speed up mental response times as well; keep in mind they make instant decisions, though not necessarily well thought through.

6. Visual language

Teens are able to scan and filter large amounts of visual material. Visuals grab their attention - remember, they prefer information that immediately helps them grasp its essence, so make use of opportunities for infographics and remember visual calls to action (use a Facebook button rather than copy telling them they can find you on Facebook - the visual button already told them that).

Visuals also talk to a multi-cultural audience; it's a universal language for teens. But avoid too much of a good thing: too many visuals and too many design elements competing for attention equal clutter.

7. They are getting older younger

Teen development is still sequential (as per [Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development](#)) but they are growing older younger, aided by technology and influenced by popular culture and unrestricted access to information.

They are also getting treated as being older than they really are - even in schools, where often they work with subjects at levels previous generations only experienced in tertiary education.

Educators, parents and, indeed, marketers should be cognisant of the fact that it's easy to confuse their (tech, knowledge) "skills" with emotional or social development. Allowing a kid to skip several years ahead in class means he or she has academic skills but this hardly translates into an equal level of maturity and life experience. Keep your content relevant to their world - not to that of an adult.

Of course, a counter trend is also emerging where parents are seeking to allow their kids a full childhood experience - look at the rise of Waldorf schools - in a bid to keep their development in line with their years and experience. Techno breaks and holidays are also becoming popular as parents want their kids to 'wire out' for their physiological well-being.

8. Teens want to belong but...

They want to belong. They also want to develop their individuality and sense of self. These contradictory feelings of emotion are ranging during the teenage years. Self-identity is not yet formed; it is only starting to be revealed and this can lead to a steady state of uncertainty. They're constantly weighing up 'how to belong' versus 'being myself at the expense of going against the grain'.

The majority, due to this development stage, are more likely to succumb to group pressures of conformity. Most often, these pressures are not harmful and the rules of conformity apply to dress code, language, music and 'teen' activities.

By being part of a group, be it family or friends, their need to be connected is fulfilled, which is why social media is so appealing and scores top marks within this group. In this space they can connect and share loss, setbacks and disappointments, as well as triumphs, with 'the group'.

9. **These are people**

The language of technology and marketing, from "fans" to "followers", makes it easy to dehumanise people, and ultimately, Mr or Ms Marketer, that is whom you are dealing with/selling to. A person.

You need to engage with teens beyond social media competitions, where they become 'fans' and 'friends' of your brands' social platforms and over the long term, as people. Once-off competitions mean little to them - they will forget you quickly.

10. **They are socially conscious**

Teens want to contribute to society; they want to give back, environmentally and socially. They have a great sense of empathy and want to be part of something nurturing.

A lot of communication has shifted from product advertising to telling the story of how brands are impacting on and contributing to the communities where they do business. Teens respond to this - but, take note, your credentials are key. If you gain their interest, Google and your critics are easily accessible.

11. **Be confident**

They don't care if you tell them you are cool. They will decide for themselves. They hate being told what to do and how to behave or act; they will be less enthused about engaging in activities that they feel are imposed upon them.

Word of mouth is still one of the most important ways of spreading the word among teenagers. It's much more powerful through the integration of social networking by teens. They are fully aware that their knowledge of technology puts the power squarely into their hands. They are also savvy enough to know that marketers are vying for their attention.

12. **They are seen and heard**

Teens today, be they in an emerging economy such as South Africa or a developed one such as the US, are among one of the most progressive groups in history. They have and form their own opinions, and are not afraid to share them. Politically and socially they are confident, self-expressive, liberal and receptive to new ideas.

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