

Make Way, Future Coming Through

Kevin Roberts - author of Lovemarks: the future beyond brands - offers 10 ideas on how to connect with kids in the Screen Age.

If 60 is the new 40 – and I’m banking on it – then 12 is the new 16. Kids today have never been more wired, more mediated, more connected. And the demographic borders between child, teen and young adult are dissolving, in my view a happy thing. Here are five recent findings to helicopter you in:

1. A large majority of 12- to 24-year-olds are bored with their entertainment choices some or most of the time.
2. By the age of four, 45% of children have used a mouse to point and click and 27% have used a computer on their own at home
3. On mobiles 70% of 13 to 17-year-olds do social networking or otherwise create content; and Italy’s teens do so more than the US and the rest of Western Europe.
4. In 2005, children under 14 influenced around 47% of American household spending, worth more than \$700 billion.
5. Around 60% of Generation Y (range 9-29 yrs) say they are personally responsible for making a difference in the world and around 80% think that companies have a responsibility to join in.

More than any time in history, it’s a kid’s world. The fundamentals of being a kid haven’t changed. To play, to be popular, to stand out (or not), to be ferociously curious. The big questions are still: who am I? Why can’t I? Kids will always be one step ahead of adults and adults will always be kids in disguise. At the American Museum of Natural History’s "Night at the Museum" sleepovers for kids, dozens of adults ask if they can sleepover without children (they get dropkicked into Central Park).

What has changed is the world around kids. Entertainment, technology and brands are forming a seamless culture of sight, sound and motion. Everything is media. Everyone is connecting. Everywhere is connected. And if mum is the gate keeper in this Consumer Republic (see my last L’Espresso article), then kids are the key masters. The multitasking Generation Y is “Always On”. Recall, they were the first generation to grow up with the Internet.

In fact youth – saturated in crap advertising - are the most sophisticated of all consumers. As Malcolm Gladwell has said: “Kids are experts on their world and know the difference between the marketer’s version and the real version.”

The truth is that young people are smarter than adults, they spot duplicity faster and they alert others quicker. Generation MySpace is elusive, sceptical, interactive and influenced most by their friends. They care about brands, yes,

because brands speak to who they are, but switching brands is easy. To be a sustainable brand proposition for kids *and* for their concerned parents today demands an irresistible magic, the lifetime affair we call a Lovemark.

The digital age overwrites you. When your 8 year old daughter downgrades your computer privileges from “administrator” to “user”, the valkyrie has landed. The Internet? It’s an extension of the school playground, with all its wonders and dangers multiplied. Last year a 13-year-old Chinese boy jumped to his death after playing online games for 36 hours straight. The boundaries matter; both for adult access and for youth participation, and the challenge for we “grown ups” is to set them right. But the Consumer Republic, the culture of capitalism, will not suffer limitation of choice. The long game is about open dialogue not censorship, about educating young consumers to make the right choices from their own worldview, not from yours. An academic colleague of mine at Cambridge sums up the paradox of sustainability: “you can’t empower and secure regenerative actions and at the same time control.”

Whatever your standpoint – mother, teacher, marketer or mentor – from the global marketplace here are ten angles on how to connect with kids.

#1 LOSE CONTROL If you want to reach young people, let go. Kids are in charge; parents just think they are. From household to supermarket, kids now decide. They have grown up with the controls in their hands. They shop with their hands, not your heads. As soon as an adult head takes over, they lose interest. To reach and influence them, involve them in decision making *earlier*.

#2 MYSTERY RULES Kids love surprises, secrets, what’s hidden under the bed. They love the treasure hunt more than the treasure, a metaphor for life! Knowing the outcome makes the story no fun. It doesn’t have to make sense to be a hit. If you give kids a beginning, middle and end, they race for the finish line. Then what? Give them an elastic-sided sand box, a white space; they’ll play for hours, be more creative, maybe change your world.

#3 GET REAL Kids will see right through a fake and move right through a fad. When “what’s cool” changes daily, the one constant is authenticity. Kids seek the truth, real feelings, the real thing. A San Francisco clown nails it: “Kids are honest, they’re the toughest audience, you’ve got to be real to make them laugh.” Authenticity is non-negotiable. Bloggers blasted Coca Cola Australia’s viral launch of Coke Zero to the youth market with entries like “Dude! My marketing campaign is sooo, like, you know, rad!”

#4 YOUR NAME IS GLADIATOR Kids know they have to be brave and take chances. If they fall off, they get back on. The coolest kid on the playground is the one who pushes the limits. Your boldness and bravery will earn their respect. Kids are multitasking at warp speed and if we have the guts to go with it – to create new possibilities in a moment – we can truly connect.

#5 ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME Teens are looking to new touch points, Internet-based and cause-related. Media moguls no longer control the flow of

content. Youth choice is based on exponential word of mouth. To reach young people, find their super influencers, the brand sirens, the Inspirational Consumers who get there first and share what's cool. After seeing a movie, more than a third of teens and young adults will tell their friends the same day.

#6 LET'M SELF-ESPRESSO!! Young people love to self-express, and personalization is the new black. MIT's Sherry Turkle is right: "Online life is like an identity workshop - and that's the job of adolescents--to experiment with identity." Teen sites like MySpace, Xanga and Facebook allow this in cool ways. Toyota's youth-orientated brand Scion sells computer-generated virtual cars in Second Life. They are fully customizable. Owners have added everything from off-road tires to two giant pieces of toast.

#7 LET THEM PEEL THE ONION Confucius was two and a half thousand years ahead of digital-age marketers: "Tell me and I will forget, Show me and I will remember, Involve me and I will understand." In Auckland I champion a Youth Development Programme (TYLA - Turn Your Life Around) that lifts kids from lives of crime to lives of empowerment. If Confucius turns up at TYLA, we'll teach him rugby.

8# DO WHAT'S RIGHT From family breakdowns to global warming, youth are watching adults screw things up. Kids are searching for love and inspiration, and they'll reward it. The role of business is to make the world a better place, that's the standard. Studies show most Gen Ys will switch brands for a cause.

Enterprises that systematically target the easiest or lowest common denominator of desire - carbon to fat to sugar – are being phased out. In America Wendy's has stopped using trans fats in its fries and chicken. Take note the second most recognized figure in the world after Santa Claus, one Ronald McDonald. As for exploiters of innocent minds, they won't go the distance; kids have memories like elephants.

9 TRIPLE OR BUST Business is a three-way non-exclusive deal – economic *and* social *and* environmental profit. Tomorrow's winners will deliver combinations that enhance each other. To fight obesity, Mattel has a new Smart Cycle for preschoolers. It connects to the TV and kids can play games while they pedal. The latest kids' cell phones are child watching gadgets – GPS to locate, PC controllable and security guards on call.

#10 REMEMBER TO UNPLUG In 2005 a Scottish couple went to jail after neglecting their children because they spent too much time on internet games. Media literacy can develop us so far. To build emotional connections, we need to be together, to eat, cry, laugh and love like Italians - not get strung out on gadgetry. No wonder UNICEF reports a better quality of life for Italian children compared with British and American. The best time is face time. We owe that to our future.

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Websites: www.lovemarks.com; www.saatchikevin.com

Books: Lovemarks: the future beyond brands; the Lovemarks Effect – winning in the consumer revolution; Sisomo: the future on screen (powerHouse Books)