

Kids will (and want to) be kids

Understanding kid and tween brand affinity

Marketers estimate that young consumers participate in more than \$500 billion in consumer spending each year. While the dollar amounts vary, there is consensus that kids and tweens are critical consumers to reach for three basic reasons: they spend their own money on goods and services; they influence how their parents (and grandparents) will spend their money; and they will, ideally, become even more lucrative brand consumers in the future.

How young consumers really feel about brands and, consequently, how to create brands that resonate with young consumers across all ages and genders, however, has yet to be a topic of serious investigation. The market research industry has been vigilant about understanding brand perceptions, value and loyalty among adults, but this type of work has been absent in the youth market research space - where ethnographies, mini-groups, online product evaluations, lifestyle studies and trend reports dominate.

To fill this information gap, our firm created Young Love, a study designed to bring statistical and strategic rigor to the understanding of how young consumers think and feel about brands. The nine-month study of 6-to-12-year-olds and their parents consisted of more than 9,000 interviews across 260 brands and over 20 categories. From apparel to beverages to entertainment brands, the study measures youth brand affinity on a scale of 0 to 1,000. Referred to as a brand's Kidfinity score (K), this metric is a weighted algorithm that factors in data on variables such as brand awareness, love and popularity.

Young Love is the combination of exploratory qualitative research, online surveys with more than 4,700 kids and their parents (separately) and follow-up qualitative research to enrich the quantitative findings. Begun in May 2009, the quantitative component is the heart of the study. From the quantitative data come:

- the Kidfinity metric and scores;
- the identification of core drivers of affinity - by category and across

snapshot

Rather than being me-focused and anxious to grow up, most kids and tweens are interested in brands meant for them that bring families together, according to research by the author's firm. This article provides eight key drivers in creating a brand that will win with kids/tweens and their parents.



By Wynne Tyree

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categories;

- the exploration of the statistical relationship between Kidfinity and usage, frequency of usage and future usage; and
- the means by which the study attempts to demystify the intricate relationship between kid and parent brand affinity.

The online survey of a representative sample of U.S. households with children was designed so that each child/tween evaluated 12-25 brands of the 260+ brands, depending on his/her age. The total number of brands each child/tween assessed was capped by age to minimize survey fatigue and maximize data reliability. All brands were randomized to ensure that each kid/tween had an equal likelihood of evaluating any given brand, and age quotas were set per brand to ensure that at least 60 respondents of each age (6-12) assessed each brand. The end result was learning from approximately 420 kids/tweens per brand.

Brands were assessed using brand logos rather than brand names (in text only). The visual representation of brands via logos was a critical decision as logos:

- make the survey instrument more visually stimulating and engaging;
- help young/rudimentary readers easily participate;
- immediately evoke brand associations/relationships in a way text does not; and
- serve as the primary means by which brands are represented to young consumers.

Smarty Pants' learning in the youth research space has shown that the insights yielded from exposing the golden arches, for example, is considerably richer than when exposing the word McDonald's. The former makes an immediate, real world-replicating connection; the latter requires kids to do additional cognitive work to move from the written word to the brand association.

Top 50 Kidfinity Scores		
Overall Ranking	Brand	Kidfinity Score
1	Wii	916
2	Nintendo DS	897
3	Oreo	887
4	McDonald's	880
5	M&M'S	875
6	Doritos	860
7	Nickelodeon	860
8	Kraft Macaroni & Cheese	857
9	Cheetos	849
10	Disney	846
11	Popsicle	846
12	iPod	846
13	Disney Channel	843
14	PlayStation	840
15	Reese's	839
16	Crayola	838
17	Cartoon Network	838
18	Chips Ahoy!	835
19	Pizza Hut	834
20	Toys" R" Us	832
21	Burger King	831
22	Nick.com	829
23	Starburst	829
24	Skittles	828
25	Lunchables	824
26	Pringles	821
27	Capri Sun	821
28	Fruit by the Foot	814
29	Drumstick	810
30	Fruit Roll-Ups	809
31	PSP	806
32	Kool-Aid	805
33	Fruit Gushers	804
34	Eggo	801
35	SpongeBob SquarePants	801
36	You Tube	799
37	Pop-Tarts	799
38	Pepsi	798
39	Twix	798
40	Bubblicious	796
41	Ring Pop	795
42	Xbox	794
43	Wonka	794
44	Chuck E. Cheese's	794
45	Bubble Tape	791
46	iCarly	791
47	Coca-Cola	790
48	Subway	789
49	Goldfish	789
50	Mario	788

The online user interface was designed to be highly engaging for young participants, allowing them to drag and drop logos, match brands to attributes and type in their own reasons why they love specific brands. The outcome was a Kidfinity model with a .87 correlation with current usage and .90 correlation with future usage; clarity on which variables drive affinity and to what degree; and more than 100,000 verbatims.

Who's winning?

So who's winning in the kid/tween market? Results show that kids are not as me-focused and anxious to grow up as we might have thought. Instead, young consumers gravitate toward affordable, cross-gender, cross-generational brands their parents would approve of. The Wii (K = 916), followed by Nintendo's DS (K = 897), top the chart for boys and girls, across ages. The two brands deliver engaging, age-appropriate content that doesn't alienate parents, and there are games/activities to delight almost all kids/tweens. Oreo (K = 887), McDonald's (K = 880) and M&M'S (K = 875) round out the top five, meeting kids' needs for permissible indulgence, variety and affordability - not to mention great taste.

Interestingly, the boy and girl lists are more similar than expected. With few new additions, the Top 50 lists for boys and girls are a reshuffling of brands. The same takes place when looking at kids (6-8 years old) versus tweens (9-12 years old). The data serve as a reminder that it's possible to create brands that delight 6-to-12-year-old boys and girls. In fact, it's a necessity in today's competitive business climate.

Eight key drivers

The study finds that the brands that win with 6-to-12-year-olds across gender are those that deliver on eight key (cross-category) drivers.

Age-appropriate. Kids and tweens embrace brands that feel safe and kid-friendly. Contrary to

popular perceptions, teen- and/or adult-centric content, ads or product executions actually decrease Kidfinity. This is one of the reasons brands such as Capri Sun (K = 821) and SpongeBob SquarePants (K = 801) outperform brands like Red Bull (K = 411) and *The Family Guy* (K = 574). The data clearly show that while, yes, kids and tweens don't want brands that are "for kids younger than me," they also shy away from those that they believe are "for kids older than me" - an attribute that essentially means "not for me."

Parent approval. Highly correlated with age-appropriate, parent approval increases Kidfinity. In fact, it's the No. 2 cross-category driver of youth brand affinity. This debunks popular myths that kids want what they can't have. The data clearly show that the opposite is true: When brands are approved, access is greater, and affinity grows with consistent brand interactions. Approval also leads to greater family cohesion - something kids/tweens want just as badly as parents.

Quality family time. In 2010, young consumers will continue to connect with their families much like they did in 2009. With game-changing brands like Wii (K = 916) dominating family interactive leisure and Kraft Mac & Cheese (K = 857) leading main meal offerings, it's easy to see that those brands that kids/tweens can share with their siblings and parents rise to the top. It's important for marketers to remember that winning brands for kids/tweens don't divide the family; they allow for co-consumption, co-entertainment and, simply, cooperation. Think M&M'S (K = 875), not Pop Rocks (K = 724); think Monopoly (K = 727), not Pokemon (K = 579).

Ease of use. When a kid/tween can easily engage with the products offered by a brand,

it increases the likelihood that they form a relationship with the brand. The result is that Kidfinity increases as "easy to do/make/use/eat" increases. Flagship brands like Easy Mac (K = 767), Lego (K = 743) and iPod (K = 846) rank among the 20 easiest brands from a kid/tween point of view, reminding us that complexity is not always a good thing.

Variety/choice. Coming of age means gaining independence, exploring new options and the excitement of making your own decisions. Brands that meet these needs through variety (i.e., color, form, shape, flavor, etc.) keep kids/tweens coming back. Whether in the plethora of products offered by Crayola (K = 838) or the seemingly-limitless number of flavors offered by Pop Tarts (K = 799), kids and tweens are clear that they love brands that help satisfy their desires to try new things and make their own choices. Subway is a great example of a brand that is gaining considerable traction by leveraging the variety/choices that are organic to the brand. With a Kidfinity score of 789 and a No. 3 rank on the variety/choice attribute, it's a brand to watch, particularly among the tween set that is more ready to experiment and call the shots.

Cool. Not surprisingly, the elusive "cool" is a driver of Kidfinity. But what our study helps elucidate is that cool really means fascinating in form or function. When kids/tweens are intrigued, impressed or surprised (in a good way) by a product, they believe that the (consumer-facing) brand that makes that product is cool. They also believe that quality impacts cool. Apple (K = 742), for instance, is cool because it makes products that kids think are aesthetically pleasing, high quality and have a "wow factor." Keep in mind that these product-based

attributes ultimately drive cool; the social perceptions of cool are a by-product of design and functionality fascination.

Chatter-worthy advertising. Great advertising matters to kids/tweens, but it doesn't have to be kid-directed. M&M'S (K = 875) and Oreo (K = 887), for instance, have great ads that speak to kids/tweens, although they are not youth targeted. In an era of co-consumed media and family co-consumption, chatter-worthy advertising that drives Kidfinity is just as likely to come from a Coca-Cola (K = 790) as it is from a Lucky Charms (K = 759). Look for ways to deliver on humor, simple messages and the unexpected, because kids/tweens enjoy advertising not only for what it teaches them about a brand but also for its entertainment value.

Affordability. Kids and tweens, particularly in 2010, understand value and want brands that are affordable. Affordability to kids/tweens translates to either "I can buy it with my own money" or "It doesn't cost too much money." Both of these dimensions of affordability help brands like Popsicle (K = 846) and Snickers (K = 772) stay on top. At the end of the day, affordability either becomes a reason a child will personally purchase or request from a parent (with the affordability leverage point called out).

Delight kids and parents

So, what do kids and tweens want? They want familiar, iconic brands that delight kids and parents with variety, value, family-friendly content and simple pleasures. Gadgetry and just-for-kids messages diminish in importance when considering that young consumers care as much about those around them as they do themselves. It's a gentle reminder that childhood is still childhood and family is more important than ever. | Q