

# ***CPYU Trend Alert:*** **How Marketing's "Making" Your Kids**

by Walt Mueller

Take a look around and you'll quickly notice that advertising is everywhere. It's especially pervasive in the lives of our teenagers, who are, by the way, the most targeted market segment in the world. Consequently, marketing functions as a map that sits unfolded in the laps of vulnerable teens who are looking to find their way from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. What's especially scary is that while the advertising map sits in their laps, our kids aren't even aware that it's there and that they're looking. Advertising's 24/7 presence takes advantage of the fact that more and more kids are growing up in broken families, thus making them more hungry for the guidance and direction that they aren't getting at home. Marketing is telling our kids what to think, what to value, what to believe, what to worship, and how to spend their money and lives.

It's important for parents to know how marketing's nonstop barrage is specifically shaping their teens. As I've studied teen marketing over the years, it's clear that there are short and long-term effects and results of advertising. Parents must think about how these results and effects square up to who our kids should be as followers of Christ. Do they lead our kids closer or further away from spiritual maturity?

What follows is some of what I've discovered. Think about the implications of each for your parenting. And, consider ways you can become more proactive in addressing each of them with the kids growing up in your home.

First, materialism is becoming more deeply embedded in our teenagers' lives. Because they are being marketed to with increasing frequency and depth, vulnerable kids find it easier to believe advertising's messages and promises. As a result, they will increasingly define themselves by their possessions, seeking happiness, satisfaction, meaning, and redemption in the accumulation of things. More and more kids will buy into a *live to consume* rather than a *consume to live* mentality.

Second, there's a rise in impulse buying. As materialism takes root and grows, kids will become more impulsive, buying without evaluating or thinking about the difference between *wants* and *needs*. Kids will want to acquire products they really don't need, but they'll want them for the perceived emotional and quality of life benefits.

Third, kids are working more and more in order to have more and more. Over the course of the last two decades, more and more teenagers are taking on jobs. Those who have jobs are working longer and longer hours, making it difficult to stay involved in other activities including church youth groups, school activities, service projects, and family time. While some kids work to save money for future educational needs, a growing number are working long hours in order to fund and sustain large luxury items including cars, audio systems, cell phones, etc. They get themselves locked into the work to spend cycle.

Fourth, life is understood in primarily economic terms. Each and every one of us, including our kids, has been created by God, for God, and to be in a relationship with God, living His will and His way under His reign. It's not about us. But advertising consistently sends the message that "it's all about you." Consequently advertising leads our kids to get it all wrong regarding who should reside at the center of their worldview and who should be in control of their lives.

Fifth, the virtue of compassion is being replaced by competition. Those who are followers of Christ are called to self-sacrificing lives of compassion. The message of today's market-driven world is the exact opposite. Instead of looking out for others, we are to look out for number one. In this kind of world, there is a decrease in generosity and an increase in selfishness. In this kind of world there is less concern for neighbor and more concern for self. In this kind of world we do anything and everything possible – including using people as means to our ends – to get ahead of anyone and everyone else (who are seen as our competitors).

Sixth, we've got a culture of kids locked into consumer debt. Not a day goes by when my kids don't receive one or more direct mail advertisements for preapproved credit cards. One credit card company is constantly telling them "It's your life." The message they get from these and other ads is that life is about consumption, and whether it's their money or a credit card company's money they are borrowing, they are entitled to spend whenever the urge hits them. Sadly, many of today's kids will be buried deep in consumer debt long before they marry and start a family.

Finally, spiritual hunger continues to rise. Advertising and the materialism it fosters steers us away from the one true God and towards idols. They steer us away from Jesus Christ, the one and only source of redemption, to false promises of other "messiahs" and redeemers. Today's marketing blitz encourages our teens to create, pursue, and worship false idols, all the while leaving our kids more and more empty.

The good news is that when the emptiness grows, the hunger longs that much more to be fed. We must pray that they will see and embrace the only One who can fill their emptiness. . . and a great way to lead them down that life-giving road is to monitor and talk with them about the advertising that's become such a powerful force in their lives.

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the  
Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at  
[www.cpyu.org](http://www.cpyu.org).**