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Take a Page From the Kids: Enjoy Media

Youngsters, Who Navigate Platforms With Ease, Show Us What Multimedia Is About

Story continues below...



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**Jacob Javits
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By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

I was fortunate to have attended the recent Media Research Club of Chicago's Biennial Symposium. Among the many speakers was Scott Hess, for Teenage Research Unlimited. One of the follow-up notes I made to myself was to do some confirmation research of his observations when I got home, given that I have a newly minted teen in my house.

Beyond confirming a number of TRU findings, my pursuit of really paying attention to my teen and her younger sister during their media consumption experiences provided me with some valuable reminders.

It should never be forgotten how valuable it is to spend time with your consumer, understanding life from his perspective.

There is significant power in multimedia platforms.

Media consumption can be enjoyable.

It is tempting to pore over data and think you can get a good picture of target consumers. But for a media person, there is really no substitute for observing them or talking with them directly about their lives or media behaviors.

Digital Obsession

TRU's observations were dead on: The kids' habits are not at all reflective of their parents. They are more engaged with all things digital, from the computer to the cellphone to the MP3 player.

And interestingly, the little one's habits flow directly from what she sees her big sister doing. They both demonstrate much less patience with media. They are both much more inclined to go to the trouble of forwarding through what they view as superfluous scenes on a DVD or forwarding through commercials than are we parents. They also hate slow download times and streaming buffers online.

Also, as conveyed by TRU, there is the "pass up" phenomenon: When teens have moved on to a new piece of technology, they pass it up to their digitally challenged parents. Our teen consistently masters features of the cellphone, software or streaming before we have grasped it or knew it was there and then passes her knowledge up to us.

Power in Multimedia

In a short time, I tallied five examples of the kids diving into the multiplatform aspects of various properties. And it wasn't just for games.

Dinnertime is an hour when we are assailed to turn on the tube to watch the Disney Channel over supper. Both kids seem to have graduated from animated fare to shows with real, live people they can relate to. The Disney Channel sure has a bevy of properties in that bucket. We get treated to "The Suite Life of Zack & Cody," "That's So Raven" or "Hannah Montana" frequently over pasta.

The kids are inclined to clean up their dishes and then beg to jump on the computer so they can check out Disney-channel.com. There are many games and video clips there, as well as activities tied into the Verb public service effort to encourage physical activity for tweens. They spent a lot of time watching the summer competitive games online there as well.

When the school's annual magazine drive rolled around, we got a number of requests to add Disney Adventures to the list. And just a week or so ago, the family had to make a special trip to Target to pick up the new "Hannah Montana" CD.

Part of me wanted to think that this was an idiosyncrasy peculiar to my family, but driving into the city a few weeks ago, "Mike & Mike in the Morning," one of ESPN Radio's national shows, digressed into a conversation about which of the Disney Channel programs was best liked in their homes and by the hosts personally. And humorously, it was another dad at Target who directed me to the "Hannah Montana" CD display. It seems that not only does Disney have traction with a lot of teens, it has a way of drawing parents into the content along with their children.

Unfortunately for advertisers, there do not appear to be obvious traditional ways to include messages into Disney Channel programming, but brands including Fruit Roll-Ups have taken an approach very similar to the underwriting sponsorships on PBS. That suggests Disney may be open to having conversations with marketers to include messages in a way they would consider consistent with the properties. And since the properties cut across so many channels, it may be advantageous for brands to initiate a conversation.

ABC also gets a lot of cross-media consumption with my teen in particular. "Lost" is one of her faves, and she also enjoys

"Dancing With the Stars." Wallpaper gets changed constantly, depending on who dances well or what the "Lost" story line is in a particular week.

"Lost" has been the gateway for my teen and our home into viewing episodes online, and has provided a learning experience for us as well. A strictly enforced bedtime keeps live viewing at a low level in our home, contributing to a high incidence of episodes being viewed online. Plus, we were all taught by my teen how to load phone wallpaper, using "Lost" as an example.

"Project Runway" on Bravo also got a lot of traction in multimedia space with my teen. Not only did the shows get watched or taped when needed, but Bravo's Web site was also frequently visited.

Girls' Life magazine has also served as a content initiator for my teen. Among other things, the monthly online contests have made her a frequent visitor to the magazine's Web site. A subscription was requested for a birthday gift, and I could see why when Miley Cyrus, aka Hannah Montana, showed up on a recent cover. Print content feeds my teen to the Web site month in and month out.

Little Ones Get It

Not to be outdone by her big sister, my little one has caught on quickly to the fact that if you find something you like on television, you can also find it online. She knows how to get to her favorite sites without any help from Mom and Dad.

PBS has become one of her favorite destinations. Not only does she like the games, she enjoys simple things like finding coloring sheets and printing them out so she can do them later. We've noticed that there have been one or two shows she was introduced to online before she ever saw them on television.

Many of us are guilty of disengaging from the media we consume and analyze. In many ways, media have become background noise in our lives, no longer having importance except for special occasions. The exercise of watching my kids consume content left me wondering whether there is really a lack of quality content in the media landscape or if it's just that we adults have become so jaded with the glut of choice that we have ceased to find enjoyment in what's out there.

Years ago, it used to be a special occasion when the family went to McDonald's. Now that there's one on every corner they're not so special. Is content less good because we've gone from a handful of choices to hundreds?

My kids' behavior didn't demonstrate that perspective. They consistently showed how much fun they were having while engaging in their media choices. Laughing and giggling were frequent. Smiles, dancing and energy were in healthy supply, whether partnered with "High School Musical" or an MP3. A number of times, I wondered what it was about the content that was so compelling. It seemed pretty hokey to me. But there again is the importance of seeing things from your consumer's point of view. If my kids found big enjoyment in what they were doing, who am I to judge?

Recently, at the local pizza parlor, we all picked up menus, studied them and began discussing what we should select. In the midst of the discussion, my 7-year-old quipped, "I think I'll have the roast duck with the mango salsa." I'm reasonably sure she's not going out to buy insurance anytime soon, but her reference to the Geico commercial made me realize that there's still plenty of fun to be had in media consumption.

Media planning professionals could benefit from taking a big enough step back from their microscopes to do the same thing.

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