



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 2 to 3
About the Author:	This lesson was written for MediaSmarts by Ethan Anderson
Duration:	1-2 hours

Adversmarts: Understanding Food Advertising Online



This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

In this lesson, students are introduced to the idea of online advertising and look at the ways that marketers create immersive and appealing online environments that draw and hold children's attention. After studying common advertising techniques, students play an educational game online that lets them put their learning into action by "creating" a site advertising a fictitious cereal, Co-Co Crunch. Students then look at examples of real commercial environments and watch for "weasel words" used by advertisers.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- begin to develop an understanding of the commercial objectives of immersive online environments, specifically those characteristic of websites for food products
- identify the purpose and the intended audience of these types of websites and describe how audiences might respond
- recognize and identify the advertising and marketing elements and characteristics associated with commercial websites
- identify overt and implied messages of websites that market to children their age
- identify the characteristics and techniques used in the creation of online immersive environments
- utilize their information to simulate the creation of a media text
- begin to develop an awareness of the strategies marketers use to engage children online
- begin to develop an understanding of the commercial nature of the Internet



Preparation and Materials

- Arrange for students to play the educational game *Co-Co's AdverSmarts* (available online at <http://mediasmarts.ca/game/co-cos-adversmarts-interactive-unit-food-marketing-web>)
- Photocopy the handout *Co-Co's AdverSmarts: Handout for Parents*
- Arrange for an internet connection and a data projector or digital whiteboard

Co-Co's AdverSmarts includes audio with all of the game's text to accommodate different reading abilities. Younger children may, however, benefit from having a helper to navigate through the game. Here are some suggestions before you start:

- enlist a student from a higher grade to sit with two or three children as they play the game and help them out if they are having trouble. Children who need a lot of help on their first attempt should be given the opportunity to play again
- have a parent volunteer sit with a student while he or she goes through the game
- team up capable readers with less able readers to play the game together
- have pairs of students play the game and compare designs they create. Give them the chance to play again and create different playgrounds
- use a projector or whiteboard and navigate through the game with the whole class

Procedure

Talk About Advertising

Ask students:

- What is advertising? What is it for? Where do we see advertising? (Make sure to include TV, the Internet, and food packaging in the answers.)
- How do marketers try to convince children that a certain toy, game or cereal is really the best? What strategies do they use? Explain some of the strategies that marketers use to make children want to buy a particular product, such as:
 - featuring kids a few years older than the target age group, to make the product seem really "cool"
 - using sound effects, heightened colour, dramatic camera angles and music to make the products in the ads look exciting
 - showing everyone having a great time in the ads because they know people want to buy products that make them feel good

Once students begin to understand that advertisements are messages that are designed to make them want to buy things -- and can identify and talk about the different types of ads they see on TV -- you can then move on to advertising on the Internet.



Online Marketing

Ask students:

- Have they ever seen advertising on the Internet?
- What kind of ads have they seen?
- What things were being advertised?
- Do the ads they see online look like the ads they see on TV? How are they the same? How are they different?

Co-Co's AdverSmarts

Explain to students: To help you understand how companies advertise products to kids on the Internet, we are going to play a game where you help a cereal mascot – Co-Co – build a perfect website that kids will want to visit.

Have students complete *Co-Co's AdverSmarts* (consult *Preparation and Materials* above for different ways of having students play the game).

After students have completed the game, assure them that there is nothing wrong with playing on commercial sites, but explain that it's important to recognize the sites for what they are: online commercials. Remind students that they must be careful to protect their personal information and to avoid falling for gimmicks that are used to collect information.

In *Co-Co's AdverSmarts*, students learn about the following marketing strategies (or gimmicks):

- Words and graphics that give the impression that the location of the website is a faraway, special place.
- Words like 'my' and the ability to create customized content to give the impression that the website is your own personal space.
- Words and graphics that give the impression that you are about to start on a great adventure.
- "Weasel words" that sound important but can be misleading.
- Engaging cartoon spokescharacters.
- Gimmicks such as videos, quizzes, games, memberships and clubs

Based on your preference, you may lead the discussions below after students have played through the game, or have students pause for discussion after completing each step.

Each of the following discussion notes covers the gimmicks that are introduced by *Co-Co*.

Step 1: Picking a theme for the website

Ask students:

- Which theme did you pick for Co-Co's new website?
- What types of images come to mind when you hear a name for a website that includes the words *world*, *my* and *quest* in the title?
- What types of activities would you expect on a website like this?
- Have you ever been on a website that has a name similar to Magic Land, My Fun Zone or Castle Quest?



Step 2: Picking a catchy phrase

Explain to students that by law advertisers must tell the truth, but sometimes they use words that can mislead viewers. We sometimes call these “weasel words” because they sound like they mean more than what they actually say such as “the fruity smell of this nutritious breakfast.”

Ask students:

- How are the following phrases from the game misleading?
 - *New and improved super crunch*
 - *The taste of real chocolate*
 - *One great tasty crunch*
- Can you think of other examples of weasel words? (Make a list on the board. Examples may include words or phrases such as: Raisin Bran’s “Two scoops of raisins in every bowl” (how big are the scoops?); Lucky Charms’ “Magically delicious” (so what does it really taste like?); Trix yogurt’s “Two fruity colours” (how can colours be fruity?); and Lego’s “It’s a new toy every day” (actually, it’s the same toy).

Step 3: Choosing a spokescharacter

Spokescharacters are effective when children recognize them from other media such as television, games, movies, toys and packaging; but they are even more appealing when kids can play and interact with them in online activities and games.

Children need to remember that although they appear friendly, these characters are really not their friends – they are salespeople who are trying to sell a product.

Ask students:

- Why might cereal companies create spokescharacters like *Cap’n Crunch* or *Toucan Sam*?
- What are some other examples of spokescharacters? What do you like about them?
- Have you ever wanted to try a product because you liked the spokescharacter?
- Have you ever been on a website where you could play with a product or its spokescharacter? What types of games and activities could you do?

Step 4: Selecting activities for visitors*“Create-Your-Own” Activities*

On many branded websites kids are able to customize their experience by creating their own characters or products, their own spaces in an online community or even design accessories for the product. Create-your-own activities encourage extended interaction with a brand, create a sense of ownership and control and allow children the opportunity to play with the product in new and creative ways.

Additionally, kids are often encouraged to share their creations with others, increasing the chances of positive word-of-mouth promotion.



Ask students:

- Have you ever been on a site where you could make your own space, like decorating your own house or room? If so, what type of site was it? What did you get to do?
- If you were making a website for kids, what kinds of things would you let them do to make their own special places?
- What other kinds of “do-it-yourself” activities can you do (this might include things like dressing up or getting extra things for your avatar). Do you have to do anything extra to do this?

Online Videos

For marketers, the popularity of online videos on sites like YouTube has given extra life to television commercials. Not only can visitors view these commercials on a product’s website, but users are often given incentives for doing so such as points or access to other activities.

Ask students:

- How many of you chose putting up a video as one of your gimmicks for *Co-Co’s website*?
- Have you ever been on a website that shows online videos? What type of website was it?
- Did any of these videos show products like toys or food?
- Have you ever been on a website for a toy or candy or cereal that had commercials that you can watch?
- Why do you think companies like to include commercials on their websites?

Advergames

One of the most effective ways for marketers to promote products online is through advergames, which is a term used to describe the seamless integration of product promotion in online activities.

Ask students:

- Did any of you choose to have Co-Co Crunch games on Co-Co’s website?
- These kinds of online games are sometimes called “advergames”. Can anyone tell me why they might be called this?
- Who do you think is the audience of advergames? How do you know this?
- Have you seen or played any advergames? If so, what products did you see?
- How do advergames compare with other kinds of advertising? Brainstorm a list of types of advertisements and the typical length of how long you think people interact with it.

Memberships and Clubs

For online marketers, one of the challenges is to find ways of getting Web visitors to come back as often as possible. Offering memberships and clubs for kids to join are one way marketers get kids to spend time on their website and encourage them to come back in the future.

Often, memberships on these sites offer additional incentives including access to games or points. Once they are part of the club children are informed of new promotions, products and exclusive offers.



Sometimes companies use clubs to conduct market research. Using polls, quizzes and surveys, marketers ask kids for feedback and opinions on products, collect demographic and product-use information and interact with users in a more direct manner than traditional forms of marketing.

Remind students before providing any personal information online that they should first ask a parent, caregiver or teacher.

Ask students:

- How many of you chose joining a club for your gimmick on *Co-Co's* website?
- Have you ever been on a website where you can join a club? Have you ever done this? What type of information did they ask you for? What did you get for being a member? Was there anything you didn't like about being a member?
- Do you think it's ok for a company to collect information about you so they can sell you things?

E-Cards

While many of the activities on branded websites can spark positive word-of-mouth and viral marketing, some activities are solely designed for that purpose. One example is e-cards. Many commercially branded sites offer free e-cards or messages that visitors can send to their friends.

Ask students:

- How many of you chose sending e-cards as an activity for *Co-Co's* website?
- What are e-cards? Have you ever received or sent an e-card? What did it say?
- Why might companies want kids to send their friends e-cards from their websites?

Contests

Another way marketers get attention about their product is by offering contests and sweepstakes. This is an easy way to get people excited, since who wouldn't want to win a fabulous prize.

However, it is important to remind students that contests are a form of advertising and to be cautious about the information they provide to enter.

Ask students:

- How many of you choose contests and sweepstakes as your activity for the *Co-Co Crunch* website?
- Have you ever seen any contests while you're surfing on the Internet? If you did, do you remember the website or the type of website that offered the contest? What was the prize? Have you ever entered an online contest?
- What do you think are the chances of winning the prize in online contests? Do you know anyone who has won a prize through an online contest?
- Why do you think contests are popular? Why do you think marketers like to use contests?

Remind students that if they ever want to enter an online contest or survey, they should get an adult to help them to make sure they don't give away too much information.



Activities

Weasel Word Blast

Activity One: Media Log

Watching for weasel words can be fun for students while at the same time they will be developing an awareness of language. Have students create a weasel word media log of advertisements on television, Internet or magazines.

In their media log students can record:

- weasel words
- when and where they encountered the ad
- type of media
- product promoted
- how the words may be considered misleading

Activity Two: Weasel Words in Action

Ask students to design and draw a new product and then write a number of weasel words or phrases to promote the product to other children in their age group.

Extension Activity

Ask students: Why do you think marketers aim their ads at kids? What makes kids such a valuable audience?

Show students the TVOKids Original video [Wacky Word Songs: They Really Like Us!](#)

Now ask: What are some of the ways that marketers target kids? (Cute characters, video games that feature their brand, putting products at kids' eye-level.)

Why do they sometimes show you ads for things you won't be ready to buy for a long time, like cars? (So that you'll have good feelings about the brand by the time you're old enough to buy.)

Home-School Connection

Have students share the game with their parent(s) or guardian(s). Background information on the topic of commercial branded and immersive Web environments is included in the *Handout for Parents*. A package can be put together for students to take home, including activity sheets found towards the end of the guide. Have students play the game with their parents and describe each of the different gimmicks. As a variation, students can show their parents an example of a commercially branded website and explain the advertising techniques behind the site.



Co-Co's AdverSmarts: Letter and Handout for Parents

Dear Parents/Guardians,

We are currently doing a lesson about online advertising. In this lesson, your child will learn about the ways that marketer's engage and advertise to children on branded websites.

As part of this lesson, students will be playing an educational game called *Co-Co's AdverSmarts*. In this game, they study online advertising strategies as they help a cereal mascot – *Co-Co* – create a website that will appeal to kids.

To help reinforce what they've learned, we are encouraging students to play *Co-Co* at home, to show their families what they have learned. You can access the game online at: <http://mediasmarts.ca/game/co-cos-adversmarts-interactive-unit-food-marketing-web>

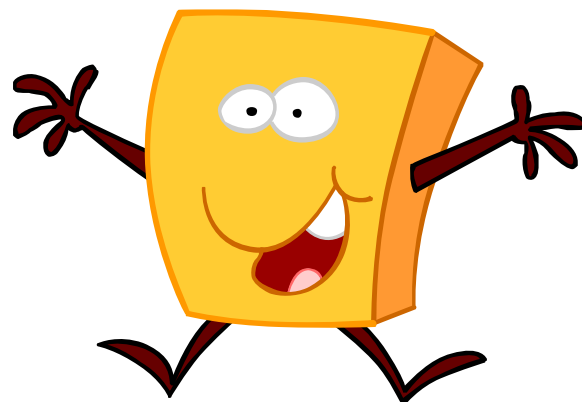
To help you talk to your children about this issue, with this letter we are sending home some fact sheets about online marketing to kids.



Why Marketers Target Kids

Kids are an important target audience for marketers because they have lots of purchasing power; they influence their parents' buying decisions and they are the adult consumers of the future.

Marketers plant the seeds of brand recognition in very young children, in the hopes that the seeds will grow into lifetime relationships. Kids are a highly desirable market for advertising: they control almost 150 billion dollars of spending in the U.S. alone and have a lifetime of spending ahead of them. Advertising has an impact on kids from very early on: 90 percent of preschoolers recognize the Coke logo and 60 percent recognize Pepsi, and positive brand impressions last well into adulthood.



Online marketing

The Internet is an extremely desirable medium for marketers wanting to target children:

- It's part of youth culture. This generation of young people is growing up with the Internet as a daily and routine part of their lives
- Parents generally do not understand the extent to which kids are being marketed to online
- Kids are often online alone, without parental supervision
- Food advertisers prefer the Internet to TV, which has codes regarding advertising to kids, because the Internet is less regulated
- Sophisticated technologies make it easy to collect information from young people for marketing research and to target individual children with personalized advertising
- By creating engaging, interactive environments based on products and brand names companies can build brand loyalties from an early age

One of the best ways to reach children online is to create fun and engaging playgrounds where content and advertising are seamlessly integrated into graphics, games and activities. These branded playgrounds are called “Advergimes”.

Special Issues for Young Children

One of the problems with younger children is that it can be hard for them to tell the difference between ads and entertainment. This is difficult enough for them to do on TV, and is even more difficult for them to do on the Internet.

With growing levels of obesity among young children, questions are being raised about the impact of aggressive food marketing on the Internet for products such as fast food, soft drinks and candy. Research has found that almost all of the food products advertised to children online are high-sugar, high-sodium and high-calorie foods.

Advergimes can also contribute to issues with excessive screen time and exposure to advertising. Unlike ads on TV, which may only last a few seconds, children can play advergimes online for as long as they want. These online playgrounds are very appealing: children are much more likely to visit websites with advergimes than other sites, and spend much more time on these sites than on other sites for kids.



Dealing with Online Marketing

To help your children avoid the many traps and pitfalls set up by online marketers, parents should teach their kids to:

Understand that the main goal of advertising is to make them buy things

Explain that advertising is big business, one of the largest businesses in the world. Tell kids that the purpose of advertising is to persuade you to buy or to like something. Make sure they understand that not all ads make a “buy this” appeal: a lot of it is just aimed at making us feel good about a brand, by doing things like using cartoon mascots or hiring social media influencers to endorse it.

Think critically about commercial websites

Kids need to be educated about online marketing so they can recognize when they're being sold to and how.

Because young children have difficulty recognizing ads, talk to your child about advertising from an early age. It is important for kids to understand that while commercial sites may be fun to visit, they exist for two reasons: to build brand name loyalty and recognition for their brand and to collect information from kids for marketing purposes.

Protect their personal information

Have your child always check with you first before submitting any personal information online. If they absolutely must give out an email address to participate in a commercial website, you can set up a "dummy" email account for them. (This is an email account that is only used when providing an email address to websites.)

Read online privacy policies

While most kids' websites have privacy policies, it's important to learn to read the fine print. A good privacy policy will come right out and tell you what information is being collected from kids and how it will be used. It should also allow parents to view any information collected on their child and edit or delete it if they wish.

The privacy policy is usually linked to at the bottom of each page. Here's what to look for:

- What information is being collected or tracked? How will this information be used? (It is especially important to understand whether it will be sold or transferred to a third party.)
- Do parents have the ability to change or delete any data that has been collected about their children?
- What steps are being taken to safeguard children's privacy when they participate in chat rooms, message boards and email activities on the site?

Spot advertising in places where it isn't obvious

Public spaces, stadiums, schools, even our clothes often have branding on them. Sensitize your kids to the ads they see that promote brand awareness, so they can spot them in more subtle contexts like product placements in TV shows and movies. If your kids watch unboxing videos or video game streamers, ask them if they think the people who made them got paid or got things for free. Does that change what you think about their opinion?



Recognize online marketing gimmicks

Help your children build up their own 'adversmarts' by explaining how advertisers:

- use words and images to make a website feel as if it is a real place kids can join in
- put activities such as colouring pages and games on their sites to keep kids playing there for long periods of time
- use online contests, quizzes and surveys to collect personal information from kids to help them create marketing strategies to reach other kids
- use friendly cartoon mascots to attract kids and create good feelings about their products

Also explain that banner ads on commercial websites may link to other websites that may not be suitable for children, so they need to check with you before clicking on them.

Recognize responsible children's sites and apps

To help you make sure that your child's favourite websites and apps respect their young users, look for sites that:

- identify their partners
- clearly label any advertisements
- have a privacy policy that is easy to understand and can be reached both from the home page and from any other pages where kids are asked to submit information
- clearly state in their privacy policies that any information collected from children will **not** be sold to a third party
- ensure that parents are aware of any possible safety risks relating to various activities and take steps to safeguard the children who participate in them
- provide monitored chat environments
- require that parental consent be obtained before any child under 13 releases personal information.

