Adversmarts: Introduction to Food Advertising Online

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital 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 online game that lets them put their learning into action by "creating" a site advertising a fictitious cereal, Co-Co Crunch.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- begin to develop an awareness of the strategies marketers use to engage and advertise to children online, particularly for food products that are geared towards kids
- begin to develop an understanding of the commercial nature of the Internet
- identify overt and implied messages of websites that market to children their age
- apply their learning through a simulation of a cereal website

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 and for mobile devices in the Apple and Google Play app stores)
- Photocopy the handout *Co-Co's AdverSmarts: Handout for Parents*
- Arrange for an Internet connection and a data projector or digital whiteboard

Note: 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

Buy Me That!

Ask students:

- What's on their wish lists for birthdays or Christmas? (Write their choices on the blackboard or on a large sheet of paper.)

- Talk about the lists: How did they hear about the items they want?

- How many of them saw the items advertised on TV or online?

- What is advertising? (Emphasize that advertisements are trying to sell people things.)

Talk About Advertising

Explain to students: Sometimes advertisements are very obvious – like on TV, when there is a break in the show you are watching and then you get a commercial for something.

If possible, show students a "classic" commercial for a product that's no longer being sold, such as the one at this site:

- http://www.bestoldcommercials.com/

Ask students:

How do companies 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 who seem really "cool"

- featuring funny cartoon characters

- using sound effects, 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
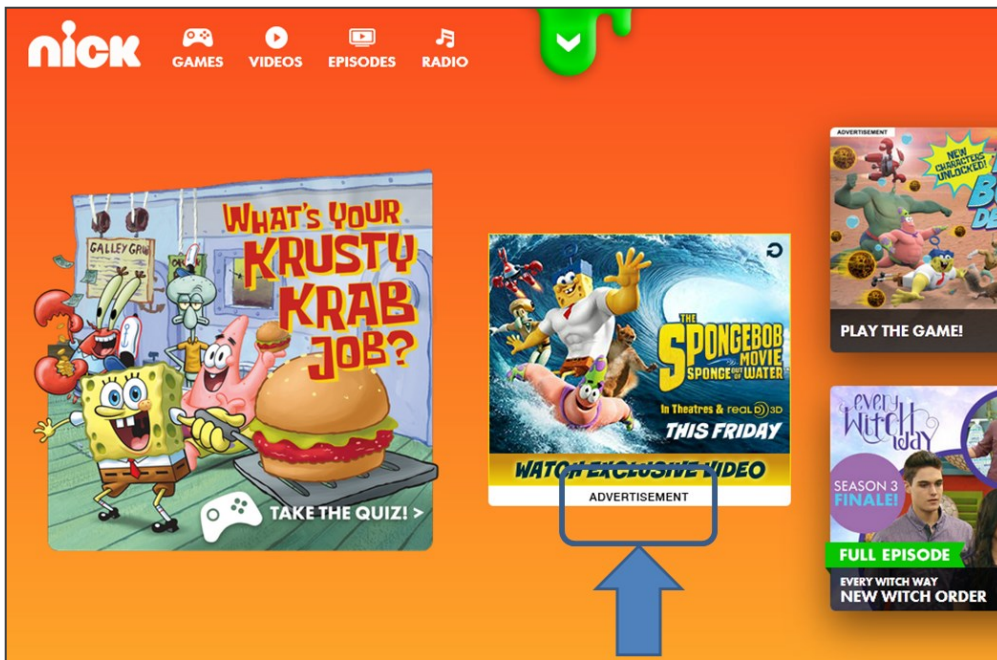
Has anyone ever seen any advertisements that do this?

Adversmarts

Explain to students: TV is one place where we see advertisements. Another place that we see them is when we are playing online. Like on TV, some advertisements are very obvious (project or show the image below with "advertisement" clearly labelled.)

Other times it can be harder to find the advertisement. Can you find the advertisement on this website? (Lead students

to the understanding that this whole website is an advertisement, because it is 'selling' Kellogg's cereals.)

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

After students have finished the game, talk about the advertising strategies that were used to help Co-Co build his website and ask students to share which of these "tricks of the trade" they chose for Co-Co:

Examples of strategies used by marketers:

- *Locations*: Words like *world*, *village*, *town*, *clubhouse*, *land* and *planet* give the impression that the location of the website is set in a faraway special place. Companies want children to feel that it's a special world and that they can have access to visit, play and explore.

- *Personal:* Words like *my* give the impression that the website is their own personal space. To reinforce this idea, these websites will also include activities in which kids can customize their experience. Some ask children to submit their names before entering a site in order to provide them with personalized greetings when they return.

- *Adventure*: Words like *quest, challenge* and *journey* give the impression that the user is about to begin a great adventure and give the sense that it is an active, rather than two dimensional, place. Sometimes these words are matched with a location, such as *Adventure Land.*
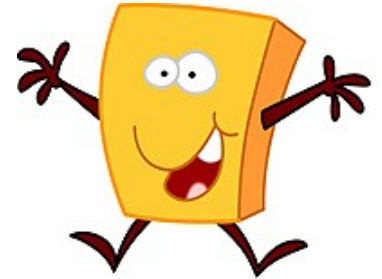
Assure students that there is nothing wrong with playing on commercial sites, but explain that it's important to recognize the sites for what they are: online commercials. Challenge them to play Co-Co with their parents and to see if they can spot any of these strategies in the places where they like to play online.

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 *Co-Co's AdverSmarts Teachers' Guide* http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/backgrounders/Co-Co_Guide_2013.pdf. 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.

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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. According to the Center for a New American Dream, babies as young as six months of age can form mental images of corporate logos and mascots. Brand loyalties can be established as early as age two, and by the time children head off to school most can recognize hundreds of brand logos.

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 "Advergames".

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.

Advergames 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 advergames online for as long as they want. These online playgrounds are very appealing: children are much more likely to visit websites with advergames 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:

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?

Know the difference between branded and non-branded sites

Branded commercial sites for kids are easy to spot. They're associated with a specific company or brand and feature products and characters produced and trademarked by the company. Their purpose is to build brand loyalty, to sell products and to use the information they get from visitors to develop their marketing strategies.

Non-branded commercial sites aren't as obvious since they don't appear to be affiliated with a specific company or brand. They may feature the products of a number of different companies or no product at all. Their chief purpose is to conduct surveys and research for the purpose of gathering personal information about the children who visit their site – either for the sole benefit of their site partners or to sell to other interested third parties.

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

To help you make sure that your child's favourite websites 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.