

## ADVICE

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## *It's a fine line when brands target the youth*

**A**S MARKETERS we understand the need to capture minds while they are young, fresh and untainted. Marketing successfully to the youth has been the objective of many brands worldwide for decades.

Some have come and gone, others have mastered it. From Disney to McDonald's, Barbie to Barney, these brands have found a hidden place in the hearts of many. They've come to know the timeless, emotional needs that children share. They have capitalised on their fantasies, hopes and dreams and know the many guises of fun.

As a parent, however, one cannot help asking if it has gone too far and where the line should be drawn.

There is a poster in a comparatively impoverished local school. Consonant sounds and letters are depicted pictorially by local brands. I found this alarming and was disturbed by the visuals and the associations.

I recall the alphabet being characterised by fun, food and nature (A is for apple, B is for ball, C is for Cat, etc) — all representation pertaining to fundamental needs. But this poster was lacking in authenticity, it was fake, and it was frightening.

School is a sensitive area. It's the place where "the line" needs discussion and consideration. In this example it feels as if there is a major force at work in the slow distortion of reality.

Admittedly, there are many brands doing amazing things such as sponsored education programmes, schools and desks. Who are we to question their intentions when their contribution is so vital? But at what price? And what are the long-term effects of such exposure? When do we allow a brand to simply fulfil a need and when do we allow it to permeate the lives of these young minds? Can this be

considered "brand washing"?

Authors Naomi Klein and Paul Dickinson have gone to great lengths to describe the organic evolution of communities in brand land.

They explore anti-branding and ideas associated with sustainability and social justice in the corporations' role in a changing world. These concepts need consideration if marketers are to sustain their success.

And what do we, as advertisers and marketers, do? How do we ensure the success of our brands while still giving consideration for the world in which our children live?

I think we should strive to behave sensitively. On one hand, there is a need for sales and awareness; on the other, the requirement for greater sensitivity and understanding of what it is that the marketplace wants and what the world needs. Brands need to be cognizant of their power.

I think we should seek authenticity. Conscious consumers want what's real. They want it to be ethical and honest, simple and unspun.

We need to dispel the suspicion that advertisers are buying reality and twisting it to suit our needs rather than meeting the real needs.

Brands must take into consideration the long-term effects of their branding and their messaging, the sentiment being that it is not only thought-provoking, but thoughtful too.

Most of all, it should be relevant. There is no point in putting brands in places that are irrelevant. Nor is there any merit in communicating in a manner that is irrelevant. We need real engagement, by real brands. If it's not relevant, it's not real. And if it's not real, it's wrong.

*Wapnick is managing director of design and advertising company Cross Colours*