

Targeting Kids

YOUTH MARKETING: Get them while they're YOUNG - Interactive TV allows companies to involve children in a two-way communication with their brands. Richard Jolley reports on the medium's advantages and the regulations governing its use

RICHARD JOLLEY Revolution UK 13-03-2002

KFC ADDS INTERACTIVE ZONE IN SM:TV TIE-UP

Saturday morning children's television show SM:tv Live extended its sponsorship by KFC to include an interactive offering launched toward the end of last month.

The interactive element of the programme, aimed at children aged four to 11 as well as teens and adults, is accessed via the red button on the remote controls of digital TVs receiving either digital or terrestrial satellite.

KFC linked up with the show to re-address an adult-focused bias in its marketing in previous years. It signed a year-long sponsorship of the show in November, which included a branded section on the interactive area.

The fast-food chain felt that interaction between kids and the brand on iTV could be as popular as it had been via its web site (www.kfc.co.uk).

"It appeared to be another great way of enabling us to communicate with a **Young** audience, says Darrell Wade, kids brand manager at KFC.

The interactive service offers competitions and dedicated sections on the show's presenters and guests. Viewers are encouraged to enter the area by prompts from the presenters during the show.

KFC's branded section, which mirrors the look of other sections, although it features the chain's corporate red and black colours, offers games and information on menus and restaurants.

In designing the interactive service, broadcaster Granada had to be aware of ITC guidelines governing the extent of product promotion allowed on interactive TV.

"The interactive offering has to be 65 per cent editorial to 35 per cent advertorial, says Fiona Robertson, head of iTV at Granada Interactive.

NICKELODEON PUSHED NEW SERIES THROUGH SMS

Nickelodeon sent out text messages to its 10,000-strong database of children alerting them to a new series of its most popular programme, Sabrina, the Teenage Witch.

A new episode was to be screened every day over a four-week period in what became known as 'Sabrina September' last autumn.

Apart from getting kids to tune in, the SMS messages had a secondary goal of encouraging viewers to enter a competition that would see the winners co-present the links between shows on the channel.

For a chance of winning, hopefuls had to spot a 'magic letter' that would momentarily float across the screen during an episode.

Over a complete week of shows, the letters added up to spell a word with a connection to Sabrina, the Teenage Witch.

Once they'd guessed the word, kids could phone in with the answer and enter the competition.

The initial message concerning the show and competition went out on the first Monday of the month, before the first episode was screened.

In the first week, a second SMS was sent out on the Friday as a reminder.

Messages were sent out on the Monday and Friday of all four weeks of the campaign, as the magic letter game was repeated each week.

"This was the first time Nickelodeon UK had run an SMS campaign, says Paul Lindley, deputy general manager of Nickelodeon

UK.

"The feedback was that kids liked receiving messages from us, but craved a two-way dialogue."

The event, says Lindley, has paved the way for further SMS messaging of the database, this time one which comes with a reply mechanism, although Lindley stresses that all kids on the database have to get parental consent before they can be included.

"So long as the messaging is appropriate both in frequency and content, it's a good way to communicate with your audience, he says.

"Kids are pretty savvy when it comes to messaging nowadays.

"If the messages aren't in their language or about what they're interested in, they won't work."

The internet, video games and mobile phones have changed the children's entertainment landscape dramatically, and, says Greg Childs, head of future TV at BBC youth arm CBBC: "Right now there is the danger of **Young** audiences turning away from TV."

A dwindling of children's TV audiences would create a headache for youth brands, as the box has always been an effective means of reaching children. But interactivity should be able to put everything straight on that score, ensuring TV retains its top billing in kids entertainment. It should also boost brand communication, making it a two-way process so that children can communicate with the brands targeting them. As Dave Lawrence, planning director of brand consultancy Logistix, says: "Young children are seeking a televisual experience that is more akin to what they get from the internet or mobile phones."

Advertisers that are over-zealous in this area are in danger of getting a rap on the knuckles from watchdogs, and complaints have already been mounting over corporate SMS messaging; in a leaked report from a working group of the EU Commission's Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection, the body voiced its concern over the way companies are targeting children through interactive communication.

Nevertheless, programme creators continue to urge children to get involved with their favourite shows either via SMS or the red button on remote controls hooked up to digital televisions, which is good news for brands that want to market to kids. "It makes it less of a passive message, says Darrell Wade, kids brand manager of fast-food company KFC, which has extended its sponsorship of Saturday morning kids show SM:tv Live to a section of its on-screen interactive offering (see panel, p28).

Developing a programme in this way does not take a great leap in imagination, according to Andrea Lippett, controller of iTV sales at Granada. "Children have so little fear about new technology and they want to get involved with shows, she adds.

All children's broadcasters have an eye on building an iTV offering. Childs says all CBBC's new programmes are looked at for their interactivity potential while still on the drawing board.

The BBC recently launched an interactive channel for under-fives, called CBeebies, and an interactive version of CBBC, which is aimed at six- to 12-year-olds. Both are available through digital satellite via Sky Active and digital terrestrial. Satellite digital viewers of CBeebies can choose storylines for shows featuring their favourite characters or play games.

The experience for terrestrial digital viewers is less rich, with text-based interaction and fewer game-playing options.

CBBC limits some of the more interesting interactive features to satellite digital viewers at present. Audiences of The Saturday Show, CBBC's interactive flagship, for example, can get a behind-the-scenes live broadcast of the show, request highlights of the previous week's show, or call up favourite cartoons.

"Children's programming is going to be at the forefront of the development of interactive TV, says Childs. "Kids don't find it difficult to interact with TV. In fact, they are demanding co-authorship of programmes. It begins at school, where they are encouraged to interact with information through CD-Roms, for example. It follows that they'll demand some kind of interaction when they go home and watch television."

The BBC is also encouraging CBBC viewers to interact with broadcasting through SMS, under the banner 'Get Stuck In'. Viewers are asked to text daily magazine show Xchange with votes on issues and comments on its topical features. Meanwhile, kids' favourite Newsround, which now offers seven bulletins a day, is calling for editorial comments, and the between-programme presenters will soon receive votes, comments and competition entries via SMS.

Childs has no fears of the BBC being swamped with text messages that could paralyse the telecommunication networks, as the current audience is relatively small. "It's an audience whose size means texting numbers should be manageable, he says.

The channel's SMS offering has been put together by wireless youth marketing agency Aerodeon, whose managing director Andrew Jones says TV is only just catching on to text messaging's potential for developing a two-way channel of communication. "Magazines are far ahead of TV, having built databases of readers who send and want to receive text messages,"

he says.

Jones believes TV aimed at children, teenagers and young adults is catching up, though, and points to how hit TV show Popstars successfully integrated an SMS offering. More than 200,000 SMS messages containing gossip, behind-the-scenes insights and questions were sent to fans during the series.

"This age group is a fast-growing segment of the mobile phone audience," he adds. "They also love television more than they do the internet, which means combining TV with SMS is a great way to enable interaction."

Aerodeon has also worked with children's channel Nickelodeon, which targets seven- to 13-year-olds. Nickelodeon has embraced SMS and remote control interactivity, but it has yet to exploit interactive brand sponsorship possibilities. However, Paul Lindley, deputy general manager of Nickelodeon UK, promises: "We intend to take interactivity to another level this year."

Until now, the channel's incursions into interaction through texts and digital TV have focused on events such as the launch of series or school half-terms, which has helped it compile a database of viewers willing to receive SMS alerts.

Last autumn, the channel sent out an SMS teaser message to the database telling kids to tune in to a new series of Sabrina the Teenage Witch (see panel, p29). It also sent out alerts prior to its 'Watch Your Own Week' programming event, which allowed kids to vote for the shows they wanted to watch during half-term. Neither alert came with a response mechanism for kids to reply to the message, but the channel plans to add this feature to future messages.

Viewers could vote for the 'Watch Your Own Week' shows in a range of ways. The channel received 578,000 votes during the week - 293,000 via the remote control and the remainder through SMS, phone, email or the web site. "Kids clearly like to interact with our channel and I see this offering great opportunities for brand communication, says Lindley.

Broadcasters are actively seeking sponsors in this area to take up some of the cost of interactivity. A brand can put up the cost of the outbound text messages and pay for, or subsidise, the cost of the return SMS or remote control vote.

Simon Gunning, head of business development for interactive media at Telewest-owned Flextech, which oversees youth channel Trouble, is excited about the opportunities and envisages a raft of sponsorships in the near future. The channel is currently seeking sponsors to back SMS chat rooms, where viewers can share opinions on shows.

If children's interactive television is in its infancy, interactive youth-focused iTV marketing has only just been born. But KFC's Wade is optimistic.

"Brands aimed at **Young** audiences are definitely looking into these new communication areas, he says. And Logistix's Lawrence adds: "Any brand oriented to children that is actively advertising now will be looking into new fields such as interactive television."

Coca-Cola Enterprises' fruit drink brand Capri-Sun, which has a target audience of seven- to 11-year-olds, has its digital media agency i-level looking into the possibilities of iTV. "It's something we're quite keen on getting involved in, says Ben Simmonds, who plans and buys for Capri-Sun at i-level. The brand has already launched its own web site, planetjuice.co.uk, where visitors are offered interactive games, which Simmonds believes will smooth a transition to interactive television.

"Children will have already been communicating with the brand through the web, which should make it easier to build a dialogue through iTV," he says, although he thinks iTV needs to improve its functionality first. "The web is far superior in gaming at the moment.

With iTV, the functionality isn't quite there."

Simmonds and Lawrence cannot agree on whether the remote control or mobile phone is the best way to interact with children.

Lawrence is on the side of SMS. "It's safer territory, he explains. "It's a great response route and there's a big buzz around it.

But Simmonds disagrees.

"I would have all communication go through the remote control handset," he argues. "It's simpler."

However, both agree that brands must be aware of the danger of falling foul of organisations such as the Independent Television Commission (ITC) due to an interactive communication strategy with children being deemed inappropriate.

An EU working group recently compiled a report concluding that there were grounds for concern over the proliferation in commercial communication aimed at children leading to the compilation of personal data on youngsters.

In response to this, the Direct Marketing Association has launched an information offensive called 'It's Your Choice'. Through

leaflets and a web site, www.its-your-choice.org.uk, the organisation informs consumers that they can legally demand a company stop sending them messages.

The telecoms industry's involvement in SMS marketing is overseen by the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS). It fears mobile phone owners, especially young children, are being duped into replying to text messages via premium-rate SMS services by unscrupulous businesses. The number of complaints to the ICSTIS over unsolicited messages, lack of pricing information and inappropriate subject matter has been increasing with the rising popularity in text messaging.

ICSTIS, which can fine service operators or bar access to lines, wrote to all companies working in the SMS services sector on 1 February calling on them to build consumer trust by stating the cost of responses if they are premium rate.

"There's great potential to exploit people, particularly children, through SMS, says a spokesman for ICSTIS. "It's harder to recognise whether a text message is at a premium rate compared with a telephone call, whose 090 code is normally enough of a clue."

Nickelodeon says it ensures that no reply text message can cost the sender more than 12p. The channel also asks parents to provide consent in writing (a form can be downloaded from its web site) before adding kids to the database. Lindley says that apart from the fact that it's required in codes of conduct laid down by the ITC, there's a common sense element to having parents on-side before communicating with their children. "At the age group we're talking about, parents play a big part in their lives, he says.

Logistix's Lawrence believes that parents, especially mothers, are the gatekeepers through which brands have to pass to have an effective relationship with **Young** children. The amount of caution needed in creating a dialogue with youngsters through SMS is similar to that required when creating branded sections on interactive television. The ITC demands transparency between what is programming and what is sponsorship.

Whatever the target audience age, any branded section of a show's interactive offering must be 'two clicks' away from the broadcast stream. This means you can't suddenly go from watching a show to a section with an advertiser's message through one click of your remote control's red button, as the ITC believes it could create confusion over where the programme finishes and the advertising starts.

The regulation is added to by restrictions during breaks between kids shows, which bans commercials for alcohol, slimming products, medicines and adult films. With all these rules and the concern over communicating to kids in their language in a way that doesn't upset parents, it's no wonder brands are taking a cautious approach to marketing through iTV and mobile phones.

But there is an inevitability about marketers coming to see interactive television as a great medium through which to target youthful audiences.

"Children are good at using handsets. There's the size of their hands and their experiences of gaming,

says Lawrence. "Brands also want to create a two-way relationship with their audiences. It's a good match." With a recent NOP survey revealing that 65 per cent of 11- to 12-year-olds and 23 per cent of nine- to 10-year-olds own mobile phones, and ever more households discovering digital TV, the audience is certainly there to be targeted.