



When kids and business click

Companies are increasingly wanting to connect with children through the web. But are they getting their pitch right?



From the greenest detergent to the coolest shopping spaces, children are playing an increasing role within families in choosing the 'right' products to buy, places to visit and brand names to adopt. Kids may be getting older younger, but trends today also encourage them to *expect* to be involved in decision-making processes - and that's why an increasing number of already marketing-savvy businesses are realising they need to get child-savvy too.

Big brands have long seen that there is a correlation between children and custom, and that kids can be key influencers within the home, able to get a product accepted and endorsed. But more medium sized-players are now waking up to the benefits of child and family communication and it's no surprise that they see the web as being the prime point of contact with young customers.

Yet when you take a look at the online experience that many organisations provide for their potential child customers, it's clear that plenty don't fully understand how to use this medium to connect with them yet. Like the overgrown playground behind the pub, kids' areas on commercial, government and NGO sites are all too often hidden and neglected, hacked together as an afterthought by the regular web agency, placed at a safe distance from the 'serious' stuff. The gate is as good as locked - ever tried to get a ten-year-old to click on a link called 'Education?' Not a chance. Even less enticing are gaudy buttons marked 'Kidz Korner' - a grimace-inducing moniker from the era of cheesecloth shirts and Rod Hull.

Ever tried to get a ten-year-old to click on a link called 'Education?' Not a chance

So how can the forward-minded business use the web to get the next generation involved with what they do - and how do you avoid the Kidz Korner experience that is guaranteed to turn them away?

Paperhorse LLP, a children's communication business based in Bath, is re-defining how corporate clients reach a young audience and is well placed to answer such questions. The consultancy believes that the key to building a successful web destination for kids lies in putting *user before content* - concentrating first on getting into a child's way of thinking, and then using that as a basis for developing routes for them to follow through a site, which are natural and engaging.

Even humour plays a part - and is an extremely powerful tool, according to Michael Phillips, Creative Director and founder of Paperhorse. 'Humour puts the child visitor immediately at ease and creates rapport between them and the client. It can also help to quickly engage parents and older siblings, and persuade them to take a closer look at a site aimed at children' he says. 'You could say that

reaching kids is as much about family communication, since at some point the parent needs to be won over as well.'

Engaging a whole household with a product that is ostensibly for the under-twelves sounds like a marketer's dream. But Hollywood has used such a formula for decades - think Shrek - and Paperhorse applies similar techniques liberally throughout its new media work. However, the consultancy is also innovative, and has developed its own methodology for reaching child users. So are there ten commandments of web design for kids?

'It's true that there are some rules to follow which can make or break a site' says Michael. 'But actually many usability issues are the same for adults and children - starting with remembering a site's address. No child wants to be done with www.onekoolrideskateboard-park.org.uk - would you? You need simple URLs for kids to decipher and recall.'

Engaging an entire family with a product ostensibly for the under-12s sounds like a marketer's dream but is a genuine possibility with a well-designed site

Beyond the basics, Paperhorse's approach includes developing child-sized metaphors to explain a client's proposition, adopting vocabularies for different age groups, using colours as visual aids and key sounds to help create specific memories of pages. The process sounds exhaustive, but this attention to detail works - and was one reason judges gave Yahoo!'s top web award to a Paperhorse children's site, cowforce.com, earlier this year.

Young web users may be smaller of stature, but what they need from a website is no different to adults. 'Any good site requires audience-specific, creative communication' says Nick Coates, Paperhorse's Commercial Director 'and achieving that involves a number of professionals doing specialised jobs. Those who maintain that children just don't require this inevitably waste the money they do spend and litter the web with yet more Kidz Korners which young surfers never

THE TEACHER'S TAKE: how do your children use the web at different ages?



Infant Stage

Alison Howe teaches Reception and Year 1 & 2, (ages 4-6).

'The young children I teach work best when exploring specific environments - they're good at games for instance, but they lack keyboard skills. They have no fear - they'll click anywhere, but it's all quite a random process, and they may well not find their way back again! They can quickly get familiar with a particular program, but their skills aren't developed enough to be transferable to other applications and tasks.'



Junior Stage

Anne Barry teaches Keystage 2 children (ages 7-11).

'Many of our children are very web-savvy and use the internet primarily for gaming and research, but this ability is largely related to whether or not they have a computer at home. In school we work in group settings in the IT suite, often using programs which pit users against one another. 95% of successful use is based on confidence, which has to be encouraged over time.'



Secondary Stage

Simon Coxton is Head of IT for Keystage 3 children (ages 11-14).

'By this age most of our kids know how to research but have a scattergun approach and don't necessarily know how to judge the quality of their sources - or how to spot hidden agendas on the part of the producers of that information. We have to teach them that they shouldn't always take things as read. They may be very smart in certain techniques like searching for music or images but often flounder beyond the limits of their knowledge.'

find. At Paperhorse we believe that both client and child deserve better.'

So what's the bottom line? Children increasingly expect to be included, and it will be impossible for corporates to marginalise them forever. Since that shift has already begun it's arguably better to ride the wave than be swamped. Plus, reaching kids has other benefits - it can demonstrate corporate responsibility, helps build a brand over time,

and is a key tool for any business targeting families.

But if you really want to join the elite group of companies which have kids on their side, you'll need to find partners to work with who really understand the audience. Be prepared to step into a young world, be ready to take a long-term view - and never assume it'll be child's play.

Horse Sense - some of those extras that help children to explore your site

Use vocabulary that your target age group can understand - keep things clear and simple.

Create pages that a child could tell a friend about.

Remember that child publications require a higher density of images than adult publications and that words, pictures and images must work together to tell a story.

Avoid bought in arcade games - they don't make a visit any more memorable.

Use humour, alliteration and a natural tempo within each paragraph of copy -

write pages you'd want to read if you were a child.

Avoid tired titles like Kidz Klubs, Kidz Korner or Kidzones.

Consider sounds, vocal effects and voiceovers as extra navigation tools.

Ascenders on letters (the vertical stick of a 'b' or 'h') can serve as visual breaks in a URL and help it to be remembered correctly, such as in www.treehousekids.com.

Don't allow limp characters onto your site - the Sarnie the Squirrel, Peter the Postbox, Bertie the Bogbrush type - they'll only embarrass you in the end.

for really child-friendly sites that get kids on your side call Nick Coates on:

+44 (0) 1225 831 333

or email: stable@paperhorse.com

Paperhorse LLP
Isabella Mews Bath BA2 5EH England

Paperhorse is a Limited Liability Partnership registered in England and Wales, registration number OC306581.

© 2007 Paperhorse LLP.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication should be reproduced without the prior written consent of the publishers.

