

# Sages for Sale

Susan Linn

For several years, I have been actively involved in a growing movement organized around the principle that children have the right to grow up—and parents have the right to raise them—without being undermined by commercial interests. In my book, *Consuming Kids*, I look at the impact of corporate marketing from the perspective of the entirety of a child's development, laying out chapter-by-chapter its pervasive and overwhelmingly negative effect on childhood.

One would think that after spending so much time immersed in writing about the commercialization of childhood I would be unshockable. I'm not. Even though I've spent years monitoring a business that routinely exploits children, I still believe that some things—like the Talmud for instance—will be kept sacred. I'm wrong.

For 2,000 years, Hillel the Elder's profound teaching, "If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself what am I? If not now when?" has been associated with a call for social action and responsibility. It captures the essence of the human struggle to maintain a balance between self-interest and the interests of the community and suggests that the struggle itself is essential to being human. To only think of ourselves transforms us from sentient beings into objects—from "who" to "what."

Primo Levi titled his novel about resistance to the Holocaust, *If Not Now, When?* Civil Rights leaders invoked the phrase to call for an end to segregation. Czech Students used it in 1989 to foment the Velvet Revolution. Today, Frito Lay is using it to sell Black Pepper Jack Doritos

"If Not Now, When?" (or INNW in text message jargon) is the slogan for a hip new integrated campaign using cell phones, TV, radio, billboards, and the Internet to sell kids Doritos. According to the Frito Lay website, INNW.com, the line means, "Livin' life in the now. Don't procrastin8. Don't hesit8. And bring a bag of Doritos with you."

I find it more than troubling that for millions of children, the phrase tying Judaism—to say nothing of the state of being human—to social action will forever mean Doritos. If you think I'm exaggerating, think about your own relationship to Rossini's *William Tell Overture*. If you're of a certain age, I

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*Susan Linn is a psychologist at the Judge Baker Children's Center, a founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood ([www.commercialfreechildhood.org](http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org)), and the author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (New Press, 2004).*

suspect that you can't hear it without visions of the Lone Ranger.

To understand why it's important to preserve and fight for commercial-free space in children's lives, it's important to understand the extent to which corporate interests—through advertising and marketing—have taken over modern childhood. One reason for this is the proliferation of electronic media. On average, children spend almost forty hours per week after school engaged with media, most of which is commercially driven. Even TV and movie characters that have something positive to offer have been ruined for children by branding. Harry Potter sells coke; Elmo sells just about everything; and SpongeBob Squarepants has been Kraft's best-selling macaroni and cheese.

The time children spend in schools is increasingly branded as well. In 2000 the Federal Government identified marketing in schools as a growth industry, with Coke and Pepsi leading the way. This means that many children are targets for marketing all day, every day. At the same time, marketing is known to be a factor in a myriad of childhood ills: obesity, youth violence, eating disorders, precocious and irresponsible sexuality, family stress, and the erosion of creative play.

For people concerned about children's spiritual, social, and moral development, it's important to remember that marketing sells values along with products. For instance, a series of commercials for McDonald's begins by showing children engaged in pro-social activities such as listening to classical music, visiting a museum, or doing homework. They are bored out of their minds until, suddenly, Ronald McDonald appears and transports them to McDonald's, where the music gets lively, the colors get brighter, the children are joyous and where, presumably, they live happily ever after—before dying of an obesity-related disease such as Type II Diabetes. The message in these commercials is not just, "McDonald's makes kids happy." It's also that classical music, homework, and museums are boring. And in the museum ad, where an elderly docent is portrayed as strict and grouchy, there's the extra message that old people are mean.

The primary value sold by marketers is that products will make us happy. Yet those who buy into that philosophy are actually less happy than their peers. Things don't make us happy, and the belief that they do has been found to be harmful to children. Studies show that children with more materialistic values are less happy, have lower self-esteem, and report more symptoms of anxiety. These studies similarly report that children who possess such values are less



sumption. We discard the things that don't make us happy in search of the thing that will. The result is a spiritual/psychological void that can render life meaningless.

It's a void that marketers are all too happy to fill. Branding media, clothing, and toys is not enough for an inherently predatory industry that thrives on discontent, insecurities, and vulnerabilities. As marketing expert Andrew Tuck said on *Forbes.com*, "We try to understand what drives people's anxieties and aspirations—that's what influences their buying habits."

Having successfully transformed popular culture and its icons into commercial culture, the Industry is going after the very fabric of children's existence in an attempt to brand their spiritual, social, and ethical lives. An article in the marketing publication *Brand Strategy*, headlined "Brands: The New Religion," begins solemnly, "Identity and belonging are key issues for humanity today." The next paragraph observes that "What used to be trusted, reliable, and consistent sources of support and direction (education, government, religion, and royalty) are now objects of a great degree of cynicism and rejection." So far, so good. But then comes the following. "Could brands take over the role that religions and philosophical movements used to own?" I

generous and allocate less money to charity when they imagine getting lots of money. Nor are materialistic values good for the environment. It's not just the packaging or the consumption of resources that's a problem. Children who are more materialistic report engaging in fewer positive environmental behaviors like recycling. Self-esteem is lower, and psychosomatic complaints are higher. Materialistic values seem to be correlated, at least among middle-class or upper-class families, with more stressful parent/child relationships.

Meanwhile, exactly because it's false, a population embracing the tenet that things will make them happy is a gold mine for corporations and the ad execs who shill for them. Relying on consumption for happiness leads only to more con-

certainly hope not.

The article concludes that religion and brands are converging. The former needs to demonstrate its relevance to contemporary values, and the future of the latter relies on "their ability to go deeper into the emotional/spiritual needs of their customers." The author assigned various religions to brands (Judaism and Islam, by the way were lumped together as embodied in a campaign for the Czech car Skoda.)

Articles like this one may sound like a joke, but all too often they herald very real trends. Apple Computer, whose marketing strategy was identified as Buddhist, is now advertising iPods with the slogan, "Life is random." More important, the author's construct that if fed the right propaganda,

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## MY IDOL, MY DELL

with a scanner), recognize the pattern of a voice, and (mechanically) answer back? In some ways, my paranoia is only a fancier version of the science-fiction fear that robots and computers will grow smarter than we are and force us to do their will. But the fear I'm describing has less to do with computers actually controlling our lives than with our eagerness to think they do. For anyone who believes in God, idol worship is a sin because it puts a finite *thing* between the worshipper and God. But even to an atheist, idolatry remains a sin. The idol requires that we give up our own volition and project it on our god. We stop thinking for ourselves. We agree to be less free. We dwell in an illusory world in which supernatural forces control our fate.

As Cynthia Ozick has pointed out, idols require sacrifices. My computer saves me time. But my obsessions with reading email, searching the Web, and playing solitaire rob me of hours I otherwise would spend talking to my son, meeting my friends for coffee, traveling to real places, being outside in the world. As much as I love the ease with which the Internet allows me to locate a fact that would otherwise require several hours in a reference room to find, I miss the feel and smell of the leather chairs and books in the reading room at the University, a world that once made me feel cut off from the outside world but now feels more vividly real than the amorphous, barren cyberspace in which I spend my days. I have allowed my computer to become the primary Being in my life, a Being to whom I turn for most forms of stimulation (considering how many people turn to their computers for sex, it's as if the idol were a pagan god for whom worship and sensual ecstasy are devilishly intertwined). Life felt more frightening and uncontrollable but also grander and more mysterious when I woke in the dread-filled night and asked my questions of God rather than my computer.

For most of his early life, my son loved playing games on his PC. His favorite CDs simulated worlds in which he was an emperor or a king who controlled a vast army, or a sort of minor deity who supervised the evolution of new forms of life or orchestrated a family's fate. As powerless as children feel, I doubt these experiences harmed him. But lately I have noticed he only spends time in front of his computer when he is working on a school assignment. Otherwise, he prefers to exercise his newfound powers to take a bus downtown, buy himself lunch, hang out with his friends, browse in a book store, bike along the river, or get lost in the arboretum. I almost hope I'll come home one day and see that he's taken an axe to my brand-new Dell, smashed the totemic tower and blinded the blank-faced screen. Because that's the only way I will ever be free of the compulsion to check my email, lay out yet another hand of solitaire, check my horoscope or the weather, and ask another question of the all-knowing astrologer inside that box. Although I am also quite sure that I would only go out and—as quickly as I could afford to—buy a new god. □

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people will turn to brands for meaning and higher purpose seems actually to be happening.

Marketers exhort companies to form "relationships" with their clients. The more they can blur the lines between commercial life and personal life, the harder it is for people to distinguish between the two. It's no accident that customers at Toys "R" Us are referred to as "guests." In past summers Toys "R" Us stores held "summer camps" for children at its stores. Advice on sex and sexuality is dispensed on corporate web sites by companies like Alloy, Inc., that market clothing and accessories to teens and pre-teens.

Marketing companies now promote what's called "buzz" or "stealth" marketing. Bypassing media, they enlist ordinary people to tout products, such as new CDs, accessories, or junk food, to their friends—often without letting the friends know that the "spontaneous" conversation about a new candy bar was actually a premeditated sales pitch. According to a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, one of the reasons people give for manipulating their friends on behalf of a brand is that the experience gives their lives meaning. They like feeling part of something bigger than themselves—kind of like organized religion, or social/political movements. And now children are increasingly involved in these kinds of stealth marketing campaigns as well.

Other than myself and a couple of bloggers, I know of no public outcry about Frito-Lay's desecration of a central tenet of Jewish ethics. And perhaps that's the most troubling of all. One prominent Jewish educator was puzzled about why I found it to be a problem. His daughter had seen the campaign and thought it was cool that a Jew must work for the ad agency that created it.

It's been hard to help people see the links between child-targeted marketing and life-threatening problems like youth violence and childhood obesity. It's even harder to get people excited about assaults on the more ineffable splendors of life. But it's upsetting that the guardians of children's spiritual lives are not up in arms about the Doritos campaign. The message to be for yourself and only for yourself abounds in the marketplace. We are exhorted to indulge, to be first, to take care of ourselves, and to do it now. Consciousness, another component of Hillel's philosophy, is replaced by blind impulse. In the context of selling Doritos, "If Not Now When" becomes an anthem for immediate gratification rather than a call for community or for social action.

The irony of Hillel's teaching having been hijacked by commercialism is that our collective humanity, as he characterizes it, is threatened when we allow marketers unfettered access to children. Bought and sold as audience share in a commercial culture that is only for itself, our children are in danger of becoming things rather than people.

We need to stop marketing to children. It's not good for them.

If not now, when? □