

Generation Now and the Virtual Worlds of Girls, 6-12

“Gen Now”

As kids plug into the internet at younger and younger ages they are becoming an increasingly important part of the web and the web economy. Yet, reaching them directly or even indirectly is a perilous task for marketers who must be sensitive both to kids' maturity levels and to parents' concerns.

Children age 6-12 are an influential part of “Gen Now,” a generation that is accustomed to and expects instant communication and feedback. They absorb information like sponges but the exchange of information is not just one-way. Consistent with the Web 2.0 phenomenon in other demographics, even the youngest web users participate in creating rather than simply consuming content. The internet is increasingly an outlet for Gen Nows' creativity, curiosity and interconnectedness.

This age group has a powerful voice in purchasing power. Gen Nows quickly master details of product categories and are especially adept at pitching their parents on products and practices. They are a generation most comfortable with using computers and other electronics.

Gen Now Girls and their Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are increasingly popular with Gen Now girls. According to eMarketer, there are currently 8.2 million children who are members of a virtual world and there will be 20 million in 2011. Such online spaces allow kids to play with online pets or avatars, decorate their rooms and play games alone or with others. Some of the more popular sites allow limited communication between site users, but fun and creativity are the primary attractions.

Among the hallmarks of successful virtual worlds is authenticity. Kids have an acute sense for recognizing sincerity. Gen Nows almost always learn about virtual worlds and Websites from their friends. Not until about age 11 or 12 do girls begin reading socially influential magazines such as *People* or *Cosmogirl*.

The most popular virtual worlds for Gen Nows ages 6-10 include such sites as Webkinz, Club Penguin, Whyville, Nicktropolis and Tweenland. More fashion and style-oriented sites, such as Barbie Girls, Bratz and the celebrity-focused Stardoll are also popular.

As girls reach age 11 or 12, they spend more time on homework and have less free time to spend playing in virtual worlds. They also take their first steps in more open forms of communication such as instant message services on AOL or Yahoo, and they begin searching for screensavers and pictures they like using search engines such as Google or Ask.com.

New virtual worlds and social networking sites continue to appear with high frequency. The appeal of making a new site is the relatively low startup costs and potential for high exposure. However, many new sites fold as quickly as they appear and starting an entirely new virtual world or social networking site is not necessarily the best approach to securing a target market.

Additionally, most sites that target girls ages 6-12, and especially girls ages 6-10, are ad-free zones. (A notable exception is Toontown which allows free membership for users that agree to use an ad supported version.) Using sex appeal to market to young girls is often scorned by press and parents alike, while marketing videogames or unhealthy snack foods can lead to legal consequences.

Parents of the Gen Now Set

Parents generally supervise Gen Now closely online, but within recognized online safe havens, parents are beginning to allow their children more and more independence and flexibility. Overall, parents seek to balance online fun with offline fun and learning. They appreciate fun, creativity and competition but enjoy competition-free zones online where their children can learn and explore safely.

Many parents comment that a child's first meaningful encounter with the idea of money or budgets today might occur online, specifically in a virtual world. For example, Club Penguin uses virtual coins and Webkinz uses KinzCash. Virtual worlds are not only a place for learning the basics of financial literacy but they teach budgeting. If a child wants to buy new furniture or clothes for a virtual pet, she will have to know how to budget the money she has acquired in the virtual world.

While Gen Nows are particularly skilled at selling their parents on new products, parents do their own research as well. Parents want their children to be involved with exciting new games and to meet their children's wishes, but they need to feel comfortable with the sites themselves. Parents look for websites and online games that are safe and that send positive messages their children. Ideally, the sites would also support a charity or cause through their child's participation.

Parents search the media for positive messages about the Websites that their daughters visit. On parenting and issues pertaining to children online, mothers speak with one another, look for segments on TV and read such publications as *Good Housekeeping*, *Women's Day*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Recommendations: Further Engaging Gen Now

Younger Gen Nows (age 6-8) are difficult to reach through direct marketing, and as such, parents are the gateway to establishing kids' preferences and interaction with a brand. As Gen Nows reach age 10, they begin to consume traditional media and frequent sites such as Google and Yahoo for information. Establishing a connection with their parents is critical to generating permission for kids' engagement, but ultimately the decision is based on peer influence and interactive experiences outside the home. Malls, fairs, kids' hangouts and other experiential activities tied to learning experiences that emphasize creativity, connectivity, ease of use, learning and fun are direct influences on Gen Nows.

Digital games that younger computer users, particularly ages 0-6, can play alone or with parents will have increased value. Parental involvement is continually expanding beyond monitoring and into co-participating.

The increased tendency of Gen Nows to multitask has implications on marketing to and with them. In general, offering a broad spectrum of experiences, environments and activities across a variety of media sources might better capture Gen Now's attention than more homogeneous, one-dimensional offerings. Gen Now's interests are fluid, evolving and often inconsistent at this age and that's a tendency not expected to change.