

You Don't Mess Around With Toys

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- *Children's advertising has become one of the most sensitive territories in the debate about the protection of children as consumers. The social responsibility of advertisers and advertising agencies is currently the focus of consumer and regulatory organisations. What legislative limits are there on advertising aimed at children? What attitude should companies and communicators take? What are the features of the arguments used in toy ads? This text reflects on these questions on the basis of the reports on toy advertising the CAC has been doing since 1998.*

1. Introduction

The aim of this text is to highlight, from the advertising viewpoint, the most important aspects of the reports on toy advertising that the CAC's Content Analysis Service and Research, Studies and Publications Service have been doing on Christmas campaigns since 1998 and frame them within a broader context that includes data from the sector and other studies and publications on the issue.

It is clear that the characteristics of children as a target public requires a specific advertising treatment that is more meticulous and adapted to the social requirements of the way children are targeted. It is therefore not surprising that

particular spheres, including toy manufacturers, promote initiatives to regulate and control the advertising of these products.

Children are indirect consumers, in that they do not acquire products but prescribe the ones their parents buy. As Victoria Tur said, "By the age of five, the child already knows his or her favourite brands and distrusts imitation and unknown ones. It is important for children to memorise toy names and brands, as they have to ask their parents for them correctly in order to get what they want" (1).

Parents have a budget to facilitate the 'happiness' of their children, which determines the response from adults with regards the volume of demands from their children. The peculiarities of this relationship between children and consumerism and the secondary role of adults in the election of products justify the interest of parent, consumer and teacher associations and of public authorities in calling for control on the features of toy advertising. It is important to bear in mind with regards this aspect that the sources of toy information available to children are television (32.4%), stores (16.5%) and catalogues (13.8%) (2).

Policies to protect children change from one country to another. Greece and Sweden are the two EU states most resistant to broadcasting advertisements during children's viewing hours, while the US is the most permissive. Japan imposes important restrictions. The regulatory criterion predominates in Europe: articles 8 and 16 of the Television Without Frontiers (TWF) Directive and article 37 of Catalan Act 8/1995 on assistance to and the protection of children and adolescents regulates against encouraging minors to purchase an item by exploiting their inexperience and credulity and bans presenting children in situations of danger. The laws also say it is important to clearly define product features and prevent forms of discrimination and any type of expression of violence. With respect to

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teleshopping, it must not directly encourage children to purchase goods.

2. The Attitude of Advertisers

The business tradition of the Spanish toy-manufacturing sector is exemplified by the existence since the 1980s of initiatives to reflect on and discuss children's advertising. The Spanish Association of Toy Manufacturers (AEFJ) has been sensitive to toy-related claims and advertisements and in 1987 was the first industrial sector in Spain to establish an agreement with consumer associations to define the features of advertising aimed at children. From this agreement stemmed the Code of Ethics for Children's Advertising (1993) with the Consumers' Union of Spain and other consumer associations across the country. The Commission for the Monitoring of Children's Advertising (3) was also established, which has been monitoring toy ads since 1994 and making recommendations on withdrawing ones that breach the criteria established in the Code of Ethics. In 2003, the Communication Users' Association was added to the monitoring committee and the AEFJ joined the advertising self-regulatory association Autocontrol (4) to reach companies that did not form part of its association.

For many years, advertisers in the toy sector have been aware of the need to comply with the regulations that manufacturing regulations define. In a difficult market like the very competitive, seasonal toy market, with a very special target public, advertising is essential, but a campaign cannot be designed with the same communication features as campaigns aimed at adults. However, the advertising sector does not disapprove of systems for controlling children's advertising: throughout 2004 the Secretary of State for the Information Society at the Industry Ministry and Autocontrol reviewed 1,574 advertisements, recommended modifications to 375 and advised against 361 going to air. Half the ads were aimed at children (5). These recommendations are not perceived negatively by advertising agencies because they help design the campaigns properly. However, it is important to prevent regulations from limiting advertisers' ability to compete and to differentiate the values of market brands.

The toy sector is quite important in Spain, but it is in a

compromised situation. If we look at the business dynamics of toy makers, we see that in 2003 toy exports fell by 12.72% (429 million euros) while imports rose 8.10% (741 million euros). It is important to emphasise the importance of toys imported from China, which accounted for 61% of imports. Year after year, the presence of Chinese products grows while there is a slight fall in the volume of the Spanish sector (for example, the Jesmer company this year announced its closure), concentrated in Alicante (41.3%), Valencia (17.2%) and Catalonia (14.4%).

Sector companies depend on exports to a large extent, as the consumption of toys in Spain has been affected by falling birth rates, the appearance of low-cost competition from China and consumption trends in Spain, which still lag behind those of the biggest markets in Europe. In Spain, 155 euros was spent on toys per child in 2002, compared to 319 euros in Switzerland and 222 euros in the United Kingdom (6).

Paradoxically, Spanish toy makers, who use advertising as a sales instrument, have a visibility that promotes control over their business practices, while companies with low-cost goods often escape manufacturing controls. During last year's Christmas campaign, the Generalitat of Catalonia withdrew from the market 5,676 toys imported from China and not advertised (7), while no toy that was advertised on TV was withdrawn.

The seasonal nature of sales is directly proportional to investment in advertising. Unlike many European countries and the US, where toy sales are more regular, in Spain the Christmas campaign concentrates 70% of sales. This is down to traditions that cannot be easily changed and leads to a concentration of advertising investment in a very short time period (it also affects the sparkling wine, *turrón* and perfume sectors), which produces an effect of excess advertising. The limitations on toy makers to adapt to fluctuations in demand and the importance of ensuring the successful launch of new products to prevent against failure condition the way advertising campaigns are planned. The seasonal nature of toy campaigns only adds to the social perception of too many toy ads. During the month before Christmas, advertising blocks seemingly collapse under the weight of spots for toys, perfume and sparkling wine, and this obviously leads to consumers perceiving a saturation of advertisements for these products.

3. Toy Advertising in Catalonia

The CAC's Content Analysis Service and Research, Studies and Publications Service have been carrying out an annual study into toy advertising over the Christmas campaigns since 1998. The reports analyse the advertising that airs over two days (four days in the 2004/2005 campaign) on eight stations: TVE-1, La 2, TV3, K3/33, Tele-5, Antena 3 TV, BTV and Citytv. These reports constitute the most consistent and regular material for analysis and reflection we were able to find in Spain.

The reports aim to assess how toy advertisements adapt to the CAC's recommendations on toy advertising. The analysis indicators are based on these recommendations, which are stricter than the ones of the TWF Directive and Act 8/1995. For example, the CAC makes very precise recommendations on the way toys are advertised with regard to real features (e.g., the importance of establishing elements to scale and not mixing images of real characters or classic cartoons with those that belong to the toy itself), the identification of toys exclusively for girls or boys and violent or aggressive presentation. All in all, it establishes a set of very detailed indicators on the limits facing toy ads.

Although the main purpose of the reports is not to calculate the total amount spent at the stations on toy advertising, the percentage of the presence of spots on the stations studied suggests the evolution of planning trends over recent years. We charted the development of the appearance of toy ads over the analysis days of the past four Christmas campaigns, from 2001/2002 to 2004/2005.

The table shows a fall in the overall number of advertisements on the main stations during the last campaign, especially at TVC, where the rise in TV3's share did not make up for the fall in the number of ads on sister station K3/33 and where there was a progressive move in advertising leadership from Antena 3 TV to Tele-5. This corresponded to campaign planning policies made in line with the evolution of audiences and target publics. Tele-5 attracts a younger target public, with age segments that include young children and professional, urban youths, while TVE has an older public and Antena 3 seeks a more family-based positioning. TVC has a specific value because of its importance in the city of Barcelona, although Tele-5 is the most important in capturing the attention of the

metropolitan public in general. The multiplication of impacts depended on the main launches of new toys.

4. Toys Not Advertised in Catalan

The main problem with regards the use of Catalan in advertising lies in the fact that there are no general qualitative or quantitative studies that could give us an overall idea of the situation, types of media (particularly audiovisual ones) or all the product categories advertised. Only the media particularly interested in this issue were able to supply us with figures, such as TVC, where the presence of toy advertising in Catalan rose from 36.1% in the 2001/2002 campaign to 84% in 2003/2004, before falling back to 62.1% in 2004/2005. Even though these figures do not allow us to make a serious assessment of this aspect of toy advertising, we can see an oscillation in the percentages of the TVC stations for which there does not appear to be any logical explanation.

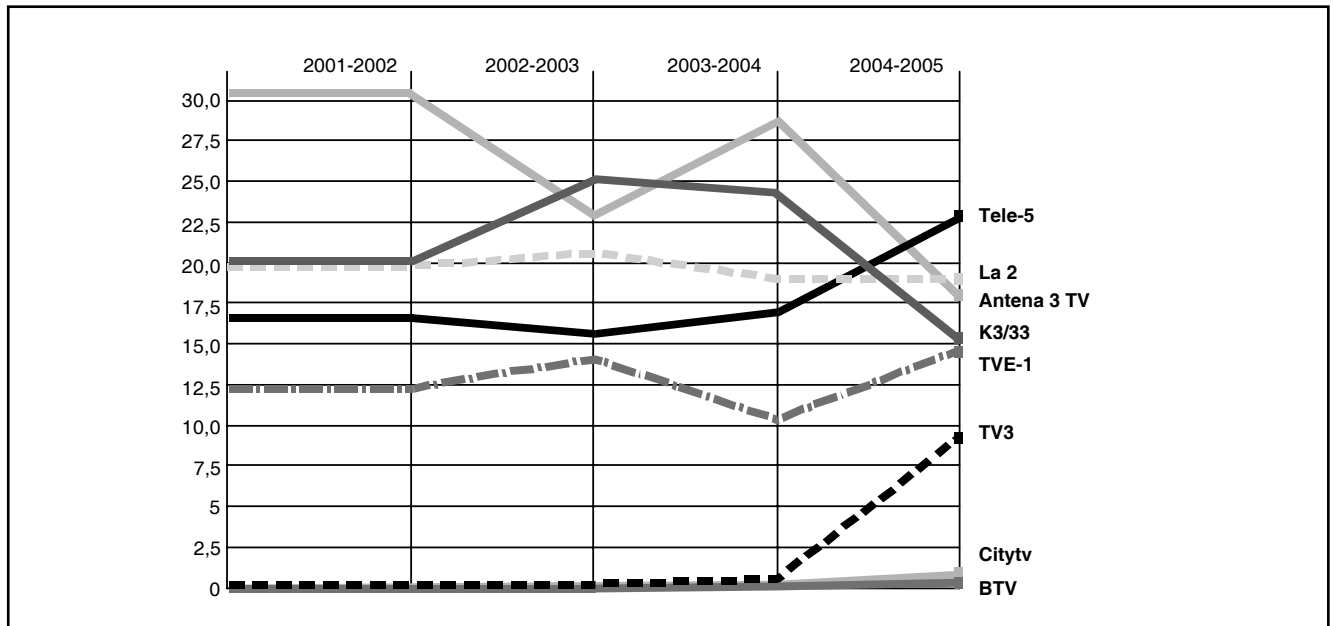
The only appreciation we believe should be contributed to this issue, given the lack of essential research that will one day have to be done, is that, given the impact that toy advertising has on children, who are still developing and learning, if toy advertising in Catalan is not hegemonic across all the media, it could have a negative impact on the social effort that public authorities and private initiatives are making to improve the levels of linguistic normalisation and may threaten the linguistic policies that have been implemented in Catalonia for a number of years, particularly linguistic immersion in schools.

In that sense, it is necessary for the legislative powers to make an effort, as a great opportunity was already lost in 1998 with the enactment of the Law on Linguistic Normalisation, which had major shortfalls in this area.

5. The Challenges for Toy Advertising

In order to assess how the advertising industry took the recommendations about toy advertisements, it is worth evaluating the data from the CAC reports for the past few years. The following chart summarises the main information from these studies, from 2001/2002 through to 2004/2005.

Graph 1. Christmas Champains from 2001-2202 until 2004-2005



A look at the chart above shows we can trust in the high level of responsibility of toy advertisers and the efficacy of the reports. It shows the downward trend of the indicators, particularly with regard to aspects like the exploitation of the credulity or trust of children, teleshopping and television promotions and the presence of information printed on-screen.

With respect to gender discrimination and violence, the figures have not evolved in the same manner. In 2004/2005, 50.4% of the spots featured at least one stereotyped male or female role. These roles are usually most important in doll advertisements and ads for car games. The presence of gender stereotypes is one of the most conflictive aspects in any debate about the construction of the advertising discourse. Traditional children's stories are also based on stereotypes, but that does not mean they should be rewritten, despite the politically correct trend of redefining classic stereotypes, as exemplified in cartoon series like *Les tres bessones*. Advertising stereotypes are archetypes that change according to the evolution of social profiles; their function is economic, they make it easier to summarise narratives, decode a story in a few seconds, get the public to identify with it and define social and gender types. The evolution of stereotypes is very closely linked to public

segmentation studies. As new trends are consolidated, the stereotypes change, as can be seen from the presence of handicapped characters in some toy ads. However, it is hard to demand that advertisers include characters in an ad if they are not closely identifiable with the target public, e.g., if a toy is aimed at individual use, it does not make sense for a group of characters to advertise it and vice versa (8).

Research into violence in advertising has not been as common to date, which is why it is important to stress the value of the figures from the CAC studies. When it was determined in 1998 that around 10% of the ads analysed in the 1996/1997 Christmas campaign had a violent nature, the proportion took us by surprise, especially when Garrido had pointed out, in his study on violence and television advertising (9), that the figure did not exceed 4.79% of the total amount of television advertising in Spain. The figures from the CAC reports suggest a negative evolution of this index. Advertising is a socially conservative discipline that defines its imaginary world in line with established social norms. The advertising discourse tends to avoid the 'risk' of confronting consumer sensitivities, but that does not justify underestimating the social responsibility of advertisers. Just because there is a trend for entertainment products to exploit violent forms of expression, that is no reason for ads

to mirror the attitude. As Baladrón says, the attraction that violence holds for young people leads to a rise in violent content in order to attract more consumers (10).

6. The Persuasive Strategies of Children's Advertising

All advertisements are stories with informational, persuasive and entertainment functions; meticulously planned fictions that facilitate the consumer's identification with the brand. The trend among advertisers and advertising agencies to

adapt to the regulations could facilitate the demand from educational agents, teachers and associations to recommend ads of an informational genre. However, it is important to emphasise the dangers. As the regulation of advertisements grows, the rhetorical capacity of the message falls, creativity is diluted and all the products adopt the tone of a catalogue. But the catalogue is a genre that exhibits, classifies, regulates and standardises all the products in it. This means that the reduction of a brand's ability to persuade the public leads to a rise in the frequency of ads. When the efficacy of creativity falls, the impacts multiply. The 'visibility' strategy replaces that of the 'story'.

Table 1. The Challenges for Toy Advertising. Champaigns from 2001-2002 until 2004-2005

CAC Indicators	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Exploitation of the credulity and/or inexperience of minors	2 cases	2 cases	1 case	0
Exploitation of the trust children have in their parents, teachers or public figures	1.6%	1.4%	1.3%	0.8%
Presentation of children in danger	0%	0%	0.3%	0%
Real presentation of advertised toys				
Figurative animation of movement and mix of images	13.8%	13.3%	12%	8.9%
Figurative animation of sound	4.5%	2%	2.9%	3.1%
Reference to real toy size	2.5%	1.4%	2.1%	0.5%
Indication of amount of toys of initial purchase	1.6%	1.4%	1%	0.8%
Indication of need to assemble parts	1.3%	0.9%	0.8%	0.3%
Toy features that can be reproduced by children	0%	0%	0%	0%
On-screen printing of information	68.8%	71.6%	77.3%	84.7%
Toy teleshopping	1 case	0	0	0
Discrimination for different reasons. Violence and aggression				
Presence of gender stereotypes	41.6%	42.3%	44.8%	50.4%
Presence of elements of violence & aggression	4.1%	2.9%	3.1%	8.4%*
Bellicose & para-bellicose toys	1.9%	2.9%	3.1%	8.4%*
Television promotion of toys	4 cases	4 cases	0	0
Promos for programme products	4 cases	4 cases	4 cases	1 case

* Includes violence exercised through the toy.

To a reduction in the persuasive nature of a campaign, the response is a rise in ads and the appearance of the effect of excess that leads to rejection by viewers

On the other hand, advertising professionals know the argumentative limits on ads addressed to very young children. As Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp have shown, children under seven do not clearly distinguish appeals to purchase a product (11). It is clear that it is important to making advertising that is fully aware of the way children perceive things.

Bringué classifies the argumentative formats of toy spots (12) and emphasises the use of the testimonial style and the demonstrative style, i.e., testimonials with real characters, testimonials with actors who offer the product with or without an appeal to the viewer, the presentation of children who offer/share the product with other children, and demonstrations of how the product works. In the majority of ads, we can see a group of people interacting with a toy, while the voiceover adopts a persuasive attitude. The voiceover plays a testimonial function.

In general, the stylistic registers of toy ads are limited and repetitive: figuring heavily is the representation of the benefits of the toy (individual, collective, family), fun, the creation of imaginary worlds, the use of abilities (competitive, constructive, social, educational) and the acquisition of improved status and social recognition.

Toy advertising is a tale with the toy as the star. It is the typical product that stands out for fascination not with the advertisement but the product itself. Controlling creativity will not reduce fascination for the product, but increased frequency could lead it to rise. As such, the laws that control toy advertising could even become counterproductive if they were to shun the argumentative features inherent to the advertising language. This is a boomerang effect. Actions taken with a desire to reduce the persuasive impact of children's advertising could produce the opposite effect.

7. Conclusions

The debate about the regulation of advertising aimed at children speaks to the evolution of consumer and education organisations in Spain since the 1980s. The seasonal nature and media pressure of toy ads have facilitated the

visualisation of these advertisements and stimulated their analysis. In this context, the CAC studies are a particularly systematic contribution, addressed from a set of indicators that stimulate reflections on the evolution of advertising artefacts and which help us confirm the trend of advertisers and advertising agencies with respect to control systems, while not being standardising regulations on advertisements themselves. It is particularly significant that the Catalan Business Advertising Association has publicly supported the decision by the CCRTV to cut the volume of ads on the station (particularly in children's viewing times), even though TV3 currently airs half the advertising shown on the Spanish stations. Advertisers do not believe in saturation; a reduction of impacts could improve the efficacy of the ads.

With respect to the withdrawal of ads, the problem must be put into perspective, because it enters the parameters of normality for a large sector that features a volume of imported toys not advertised and which escape the control of the regulatory authorities.

Beyond the practices of controlling advertising in children's viewing hours, technological innovations could facilitate parental control over television programming, but a change in attitude is needed to monitor children's television viewing habits, and for now this does not seem likely. However, the best way of educating the public about consumption is to maintain the policies of analysis and reflection on the features of the ads and make adults aware of their role as educators.

We believe the professional advertising sector is weakest in the area of reflection. Beyond self-regulatory practices like the Autocontrol organisation, there is no awareness with respect to the active role of advertising as a responsible discipline in the configuration of the social imagination. It is paradoxical that such an economically important sector does not promote the development of independent research and analysis organisations on the communicative, social and business dimensions of advertising.

8. Epilogue

Logical concern for children has opened another up another issue with regards children's advertising. Current concerns about the rise in child obesity in developed societies has

opened a new battleground. The report entitled "Television for Children 2004" by the Housewives', Consumers' and Users' Confederation (CEACCU) stresses that a five-hour-long Saturday morning programme aired 91 advertisements of high-calorie food products (13). The CEACCU has called for a ban on all advertising aimed at children under seven. This coincides with the idea of the Health Ministry, in its campaign against child obesity, to forge an agreement with advertisers to reduce food advertising in children's viewing hours. The aim is to develop a self-regulation code for advertising and marketing to regulate ads for food and drink addressed at children under 12.

This trend towards controlling food advertising is international. In the first quarter of 2005, Kraft Foods decided it would no longer advertise Oreo or Chips Ahoy biscuits on television in the US, and in the UK the number of food ads during children's viewing hours has fallen by 22%. Is this in response to pressure from institutions and consumer groups? Are we facing a change in marketing trends? Do new, lower-calorie products have to appear? Who is responsible for what people eat? Is it the responsibility of advertising to indicate what is right? The situation is complex. Consumers are calling for healthier foods, but many people choose unhealthy products. The last decade was witness to widespread debate about the responsibility of advertising in relation to anorexia and today public opinion is mobilising on the issue of food advertising and obesity. Advertising is an instrument of communication; it stimulates the consumption of healthy or less-healthy foods and administrations use it to recommend new forms of consumption or food habits. The advertising sector does not instigate a particular form of consumption; it is an intermediary party that adapts to demands from advertisers and consumers, but it often devotes little energy to analysing social trends and does not reflect enough on its role in social communication.

In February 2005, the companies Ketchum/SEIS, Fleishman Hillard, Interbrand, Tiempo BBDO, Adding Targis, Adelphi Targis, Delfín Group and Porter Novelli, part of the Omnicom Group, organised the First Seminar on Marketing and Communication in the Face of Child Obesity in Madrid and decided to promote "getting companies, through their marketing and communication campaigns, to transmit the importance of healthy food, the practice of daily

physical exercise and the establishment of parameters in the self-regulation system of advertising and communication in Spain" (14). We applaud this initiative, but beyond advertising companies' response to these social demands, it is necessary to boost the existence of independent organisations to research and reflect on the evolution of the advertising sector and the socialising role of advertisements.

Notes

- 1 TUR, V. *Comunicación publicitaria de juguetes en televisión*. Alicante: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante, 2004, p. 179.
- 2 TUR: 2004, p. 180.
- 3 See <<http://www.aefj.es>> [Consulted 21 March 2005].
- 4 Advertisers, ad agencies and companies that specialise in commercial communication created Autocontrol in 1995. The association is an out-of-court regulatory body that works with trade-law academics and experts in professional ethics on controversial advertising, and acts as a consultancy body when companies have legal or ethical doubts about a campaign they are working on.
- 5 <<http://www2.mityc.es/es-ES/Servicios/GabinetePrensa/NotasPrensa/anuncios>> [Consulted on 21 March 2005].
- 6 See <<http://www.aefj.es>> [Consulted on 21 March 2005].
- 7 <<http://www.gencat.net>> [Consulted on 25 March 2005].
- 8 Tur (2004, p. 209) says in her study that 67% of the spots studied were groups, 21% families, 9% individual characters and 3% had no characters.
- 9 GARRIDO, M. *Violencia, televisión y publicidad. Análisis narrativo de los spots publicitarios de contenido violento*. Seville: Alfar, 2004, p. 291.
- 10 BALADRÓN, A. J. *Violencia y publicidad televisiva. De la*

violencia como recurso creativo a la publicidad como violencia. Murcia: Fundación Universitaria San Antonio, 2004, p. 103.

- 11 See BANDYOPADHYAY, S.; KINDRA, G.; SHARP, L. "Is Television Advertising Good for Children? Areas of Concern and Policy Implications". In: *International Journal of Advertising*. Henley-on-Thames (UK): World Advertising Research Center Publications, 2001, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 89-116.
- 12 See BRINGUÉ, X. "Publicidad infantil y estrategia persuasiva: un análisis de contenido". In: *Zer*. Bilbao: University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), May 2000, no. 10, pp. 107-129.
- 13 "Los programas infantiles de TV pasan en una mañana hasta 94 anuncios de comida basura". In: *La Vanguardia*. Barcelona: La Vanguardia Ediciones SL, 15 March 2005, p. 39.
- 14 <<http://www.marketingdirecto.com/noticias>> [Consulted on 16 March 2005].

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