

Teens Scene: The Myth of the Monolith
By Paul Kurnit
President, Griffin Bacal and Kid Think Inc.

Once upon a not so long ago, we looked at teens as a monolithic group of older kids. Teen years were times of discovery and rebellion. Teen lives were reflected in fashion, music, language and behavior that helped define them and their friends in contrast to kids and in opposition to parents. Teens were kids passing through, moving from youth -- in a mind and body shift -- on a path to adulthood.

From Teens Ignored to Teen Power

Marketers have always known that teens consume increasingly large quantities of food and culture. But, there was little focus on this group from a dollars and cents standpoint. Kids were targeted for fun stuff -- toys and breakfast cereal. Adults were the audience for household products and responsible things. The idea was that teens would take their kiddy lives with them until they stepped up to and into adult rites of passage and purchase.

That's all changed. Today's teens are powerful. They are a bigger, more diverse group than ever before. They are defined by more purchasing and influence power than we've ever seen. They are brand aware and brand demanding. They spend in excess of \$155 billion. They are culture creatures and culture shapers. But, more than that, they are no mere single audience.

Three Markets

Teens think of themselves in literal terms. They are 13-19. If the age has teen as the second suffix, you qualify. But, today's teen story is much bigger than an age range that otherwise defines this group. Today's teens fall into at least three distinct market segments. Little attention has been paid to the myth of the monolith as most marketers still talk about and target teens as one overall market. It just ain't so.

In the past ten years, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in youth behavior. The dynamic of KGOY, Kids Getting Older Younger is about girls maturing as early as eight and nine. It is about kids graduating from traditional toys by the time they are eight. It is about tweens as a new marketing term, state of mind and way of being.

Aspiration and emulation are fundamental to youth life. All kids want to be older. Tweens now emulate teen lifestyle. Young teens consistently say they want to be sixteen. Why? Because sixteen is the magic age when kids can drive. And, to drive is to be independent – or to perceive that they are independent. With car keys comes freedom. With freedom comes the gateway to adulthood. Older teens revel in the empowerment and freedom of wheels.

So, teen life today spans at least three distinct markets, each of which reflects different issues and opportunities

<u>Market</u>	<u>Age Range</u>
Tweens	10-12
Young teens	13-15
Older teens	16-18

The Myth of Monolithic Marketing

Monolithic Marketing is imprecise marketing. It doesn't recognize that teens go through three passages that are characterized by numerous life changes and choices.

Tweens (10-12) are in transition. They are beginning to define themselves as a group and in opposition to parents. They move from elementary school to middle school. They are pre pubescent and entering puberty. They talk about boy/girl relationships far more than they experience them. Their lives are all about aspiration and emulation. They have graduated from toys and are into music. They still watch cartoons, but their public behavior is a lot more mature than the kiddy behavior that comforts them in their private time.

Younger teens (13-15) are trapped with mom. They desperately want freedom – to drive – but they get more and more responsibility. They are in middle school and entering high school. They are post puberty, living in their new adult bodies. The group scene defines their sense of self and they are beginning to experiment in boy/girl relationships. Their quest for freedom is fulfilled in part by technology, their gear for entertainment and communication. If they can't drive, they can play video games, listen to music, surf the web and most importantly be connected with one another by phone, chat or e-mail.

Older teens (16-18) are seeking respect. They can drive, so they are free of mom. They are in high school and are thinking a lot about what comes next – college and their future. They are developing a real sense of self and identity, who am I and what do I care about. They are getting involved in real boy/girl relationships that feel momentous. Their freedom to drive takes them to one another and away from traditional media. The other vehicle of freedom for them is money which enables access to the things they want and the activities they enjoy doing.

Distinguishing Three Audiences

The distinguishing factors of these three audiences are fascinating. They have many similar ideas, issues, product preferences and aspirations. But, they differ in ways that reflect how they see themselves in their access to freedom versus the chores of responsibility. To understand them is to target them. The more effectively we connect with the three life stages of today's teens, the more successful will be the communication appeals that will build enduring brand relationships with them.