THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Outside Voices: Marketing to Moms, Why Is The Bar Set So Low?

By Katherine Wintsch

Mothers are the most powerful target audience on the planet, controlling 85% of all household purchases and $3.2 trillion in spending power. Yet 75% of mothers say marketers have "no idea" what it's like to be a mother.

As a mother, I don't find that statistic particularly surprising, but as a marketing professional, I find it astonishing that the industry continues to produce work that's missing the mark with its intended audience.

It's a shame, really. Moms need help and marketers make products that can be helpful. This shouldn't be so hard.

Yet decades after moms were depicted cleaning floors in evening gowns, many ads today still feature:

A mom cleaning up a grape juice stain on a white carpet while smiling.

A mother leaning over her son's shoulder to help him scrub the dishes — with a paper towel.

A mother sitting on a park bench telling another mother about the confidence she gets from her feminine hygiene products.

Goodness.

While it would be easy to point a finger at marketers and say they don't get it, that's not actually accurate. Marketers spend millions of dollars researching moms each and every year. The truth is that the age-old tradition of idealizing motherhood actually starts with mothers themselves.

In my mind, the problem with marketing to moms isn't all the artificial marketing messages, it's all the artificial conversations that take place before any ads are ever made.

Take traditional research settings like focus groups, for example, where moms have a long-standing tendency of portraying themselves in a romanticized manner — raving about their obedient children, helpful husbands and spotless homes.

Why? Because moms want to look like good moms in front of other people — especially other moms. Marketers (sitting behind a one-way mirror in the focus group facility) hear these idealized stories, then top them off with some glamour and granite counter tops and put them on TV and all over the internet.

Garbage in. Garbage out.
Don't buy the garbage. It's not leading to good work.

And unfortunately, the formulaic advertising rut we're in isn't just a problem for mothers; it's a problem for the advertising industry. Creative teams duck when asked to work on mom-focused brands. Some agencies even remove any semblance of "mom-ness" from the creative brief so teams will go into the project thinking bigger and more creatively. That's terrible.

When it comes to the $3.2 trillion opportunity at hand – moms continue to say that marketers are missing the mark and creative teams are running for the door.

So how do we bridge this disconnect right now? Here are three things you can do tomorrow to put an end to mediocre mom marketing.

Take off the velvet gloves.
Marketing to moms is handled so delicately — without a lot of humor or ironic scenarios so there's no risk of offending moms or the sanctity of motherhood. Forget that. Moms' lives are messy. And frantic. And filled with uncertainty. Take a page from Old Spice's book and realize that owning a provocative insight (moms don't want their boys to become men) can help open the aperture to more provocative executions.

Don't let moms posture.
Stop putting moms in focus groups and start treating them like co-brand managers before advertising is ever developed. Inspire them to come up with new products and services that would make their complicated lives easier. And make sure their struggles and pain points make it into the creative brief.

Drop the formula.
Let's put an end to the "mom-talking-to-camera" structure plaguing so many digital and TV executions these days. It's not working. Let's have more OREO commercials that inspire us to sing and eat the filling first, more digital platforms that actually help create an easier life, not just depict it.

Let's make 2015 the year the world puts an end to mediocre mom marketing. There's tremendous upside, on every side. And it's time.

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