**Branded for life?**

**By the time they hit first grade, most US children are aware of some 200 logos – many dangled by firms out to secure their long-term loyalty.**

By Noel C. Paul | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

AT AN UPSCALE TOY STORE in Boston's Back Bay, two teenagers scan shelves laden with Barbies and designer dolls. Suddenly, one cluster of figurines attracts their attention. The dolls, each about a foot tall, are childlike, cute, and well-groomed. But their clothing bears a designer label with an adult cachet: Tommy Hilfiger.

"I didn't know they made toys," says Johanna Scully, a 17-year-old from Franklin, Mass. The plastic figures – priced at $65 – are decked out in "jet-set outerwear" and navy peacoats. All carry the Hilfiger brand. Johanna calls the label-bearing dolls "strange."

Even though Hilfiger makes kids' clothing, Johanna's friend, Katie Guilfoil, considers it an adult brand. "I don't like the idea of marketing adult names to kids," says Katie, age 16. "They should let kids be kids."

But consumers such as Johanna and Katie may find similar products becoming more common on retail shelves across the country. In toy stores, supermarkets, specialty boutiques, and on the Internet, companies that have historically served adults are attaching their insignia to items that were once the exclusive province of kid culture – and kid brands.

In addition to the Hilfiger dolls, products include toy tools from Home Depot; baby clothes, jackets, and toy motorbikes from Harley-Davidson; biographies for children from the Arts & Entertainment channel; and junior golf-club sets from Taylor Made.

Other companies, such as Heinz, have simply renovated their existing products to appeal to a younger audience. (Think green and purple ketchup.) In many cases, these companies just seek to rev up profits in the short term by distinguishing themselves in a crowded market.

But some experts cite an emerging, long-term strategy of putting adult brands into the hands of young children, even babies. Studies show that children begin to recognize product brands at about 18 months. As a result, companies have pushed up the starting line of product promotion in order to make their mark before competitors do.

"A growing number of companies are looking at children as potential adult customers," according to a 2000 edition of Youth Markets Alert, a marketing-industry newsletter. "Companies such as banks, car manufacturers, and hotels are hoping to build relationships with children that will continue throughout adulthood."

The realities of retail economics makes it difficult for marketers to hold back. Spending power among "tweens" (8- to 12-year-olds) has surged, as have the volume and variety of products
being offered. With dozens of brands of jeans to choose from, for example, the peddlers of teen
fashion are now directing their products to kids in middle school.

Many companies are aiming even younger. Several media groups publish kids' editions of their
mainline magazines, including National Geographic, Sports Illustrated, and Time. In 1998, The
Arts & Entertainment network launched a series of biographies for children about famous
Americans to make kids familiar with the network's program, "Biography".

"What we're trying to do with the books is to get kids more aware of what 'Biography' is, ... to let
them know the brand is out there," Jonathan Paisner, then-manager of consumer-product
development, told KidScreen magazine.

Some companies, such as McDonalds, have for decades sought to turn kids into life-long
customers. New studies about brand consciousness among preschoolers have prompted other
firms across the spectrum of businesses to follow suit.

Genesis of brand awareness

James McNeal, author of "The Kids Market," found that children first relate to brands in infancy.
They recognize characters, colors, and symbols. Around age 2, most toddlers might begin asking
for products by name.

One year later, children start to evaluate brands, deciding, for example, that one brand of peanut
butter is better than another. By the time children enter first grade, they are aware of more than
200 brands, according to Mr. McNeal.

Companies that can include their brands among these 200 are able to secure nearly unshakable
customer loyalty.

"To accomplish this covenant, brand marketing must start with children," McNeal says. "Even if
the child does not buy the product and will not for many years – AT&T services, IBM computers,
Sears appliances – the marketing must begin in childhood...."

Successful brand-building among children can carry over into adulthood. The Tonka name
resonates so powerfully with many adults, for example, that Ford this year rolled out a prototype
full-size truck co-branded with the toymaker's name.

But for the most part, the trend has been marketing adult brands to children. Apparel companies
such as The Gap, Old Navy, and Polo have extended their customer bases by creating clothing for
infants and children. Now, they compete with kid-clothing stalwarts such as OshKosh B'gosh and
Carter's. The effort is partly to make children comfortable with the brand.

"Infants will never recognize [the brand]," says Marianne Szymanski, president of Toy Tips Inc.,
a toy-industry consulting firm. "But mothers will continue to buy those brands. Once [the kids]
are in school, and brand-conscious, they will still want mom to purchase them."

Other firms are adjusting their marketing to establish a bridge between parent and child.
Customer devotion to motorcycle-maker Harley-Davidson is legendary. Over the past 10 years,
the company has attempted to extend parents' affection for the brand to their offspring. New
products include rattles and baby blankets, a toy Harley motorbike for kids (made by Fisher
Price), as well as clothing and helmets.
"We're looking to build a positive memory, and imprint the younger generation with the positive aspects of the brand," says Harley-Davidson's vice president of marketing, Joanne Bichman.

Children's loyalty to a particular brand often depends on the product's day-to-day visibility inside the home. The effect is strongest among products that are typically used out in the open, such as boxes of cereal. Compared with Cheerios, instant oatmeal is far less likely to win the affection of a child, according to Richard Lutz, a marketing professor at the University of Florida.

Companies such as Kraft, Mr. Lutz says, even recruit homemakers and watch them prepare lunch to observe the dynamic of product placement.

In a study of mothers and their college-age daughters, Lutz found that future generations often inherit the loyalties of their parents. That's true among some products – such as tuna, mayonnaise, and toothpaste – more than others.

Pitching directly to kids

Competition for consumer loyalty has led many marketers to bypass parents altogether. "Two years ago, the industry was talking about marketing to the youngest children, the zero-to-3 demographic," says Enola Aird, director of the Motherhood Project at The Institute for American Values. "They decided that they would go after this demographic directly, instead of going through mothers and fathers."

Consumer-advocacy and parent groups point to the growing presence of advertising in schools, from textbooks to field trips, as evidence that retailers are intensifying their efforts to market directly to children.

"The desire to brand consumers has unleashed tremendous fervor to get these kids early, often, and for life – and it's causing serious harm to kids," says Ms. Aird.

Still, Aird cites growing awareness of advertising among parents. One example: CNN recently scuttled plans to include logos of commercial sponsors in its "Student News" broadcast after organized protests by parents.

"There was a lot of discussion back and forth, and we wanted to maintain that trust and credibility that we have with teachers and parents," says CNN Student News spokesperson Mitch Leff. Kindergarten shoppers meet 'retail field trips'

PEABODY, MASS.– Katherine Gasper's students are among the first to experience what could become a staple of public education: field-trip retail.

The kindergartners and first-graders recently spent much of their morning with their fingertips pressed against fish tanks. They squealed at the scuttling feet of lizards and poked the taut bellies of sleeping ferrets.

Unlike previous outings, the children were not within the grounds of a zoo, but adjacent to a strip mall. And the animals – their crates and tanks, toys and treats – were all for sale.

The more than 50 children from the Saltonstall School in Salem, Mass., were in nearby Peabody, visiting the local Petco, a national pet-product retailer.
As part of the store's educational mission, the children are taught about animal life, pet care, and the natural world. They cycle through the store's stock of animals, looking at colorful fish, lizards, hamsters, ferrets, and squawking birds.

The children's delight is obvious. Clear, too, is the benefit for Petco: The opportunity to recruit a new generation of customers who, according to many experts, are just beginning to forge product loyalties.

"Our ultimate goal is to give them a good taste of the place so they'll want to come back," says the store's merchandise manager, Michelle Broughton.

The field trip is organized by the Field Trip Factory, a Chicago-based company paid to bring schoolchildren, 4H members, and Boys and Girls Club groups into stores. In addition to Petco, clients include Dominick's and Giant Eagle grocery stores, LaSalle Bank, Pearle Vision, and the Sports Authority athletic-supply store.

The company's service is unique. And many educators see it as a positive one, pointing to money-strapped school districts that cannot afford quality field trips. But others look askance at commercial messages becoming part of their children's school day. They contend that school should be free of the marketing messages that pervade nearly all other aspects of childhood culture.

"Perhaps there is something educationally appropriate about learning to care for a pet, but this is essentially an organized way to create brand loyalty to a captive audience of kids," says Andrew Hagelshaw, executive director of the Center for Commercial Free Public Education in Oakland, Calif.

The trip begins with reptiles. One group of 12 converges around Dustin, an imperturbable Petco employee, as he plucks lizards from their tanks and turns them every which way. The children scream as an African skink evades Dustin's grip and scampers across the floor. Dustin manages to communicate a few essential facts: "They like a humid tropical environment," he says, bending to pick up the lizard. The children absorb the information, and even ask detailed questions.

But the commercial environment clearly influences them. "That one just ran like a dinosaur. I want to buy one of those," says Austin, a first-grader who stands five inches taller than the others. On their way to the next station, the children pick up Ping Pong balls on display, embossed with the Petco insignia.

Employees make no overt efforts to "recruit" customers. In the bird room, though, manager Dennis Trimpop asks one girl: "Are you going to have one someday?"

"It's up to her," says 6-year-old Caitlin, pointing to her mother, Kara, who is along for the trip.

Animals are an important focus of Ms. Gasper's class. She and the children care for five mice and one leopard gecko, a type of lizard. These and other animals are subjects for writing exercises, storytelling, and science projects. Recent field trips have included Boston's aquarium and Museum of Science.

The school notified each parent about the trip to Petco and received no complaints. "Most field trips, you have to exit through the gift shop anyway," says Kelly, a mother of three first-graders at the Saltonstall School.
Principal Kevin Fahey says the school chooses field trips based on content, not affordability, because most of the trips are subsidized. Yet many school districts are unable to find funding for more than a few rudimentary trips, according to The Field Trip Factory's president Susan Singer.

Some schools defer to another company, The Mad Science Group, to sponsor and teach science-related lessons both in class and after school. The company uses commercial products in its demonstrations. Cosmetics-maker L'Oreal, for example, sponsored a lesson on the science of skin care, which included the use of its Ombrelle sunscreen for kids.

Other partners include Oral-B, Toys "R" Us, and branded Harry Potter toys. The Montreal-based company reaches 5 million children each year, according to account manager Neil Berger.

Some critics say the presence of such commercialism in education dwarfs schools' budgetary woes.

Mr. Hagelshaw likens The Field Trip Factory and The Mad Science Group to marketing firms that promote soda contracts among schools. "In both cases, there's an implied endorsement of this company by the school in the minds of the children."

According to some family advocates, parents are becoming increasingly aware of marketers' efforts to reach their children wherever they go. Consumption, they realize, is defining the context of childhood.

"No matter their intentions, the underlying message of this program has to be: Be a good shopper," says Enola Aird, director of The Motherhood Project at The Institute for American Values, a New York-based group.

On the way to the store, Gasper explained to the children that Petco was different from their past trips. Part of their reason for coming is to use money from a fundraiser to pay for pet supplies. Each child is given a plastic bag with $10 and a short shopping list. With a parent's supervision, they hunt for food and toys.

After checking out, each child is given a Petco bag to take home. It includes stickers, a coloring book, a "tattoo," and some educational material, all displaying the Petco insignia.

"There are lots of pet owners of the future here," says Joyce Levenson, mother of one of the 7-year-olds on the trip.

Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links

------------------------------------------------------------------------