



MARKETING STAR



Max Valiquette: President and CEO of Youthography

[By Anique Gonzalez]

In an age when youth is increasingly romanticized, envied, and promoted, it is becoming all the more vital that marketers determine how best to effectively approach this unique demographic. A group whose attitudes, personalities, and opportunities are unlike any generation that preceded it.

“Don’t fall into the trap of thinking ‘well, I was young once and they’re just like I was when I was that age,’” Max Valiquette explains. “The Internet and wireless specifically — those two developments in the past ten years — have meant that this young person is very different than previous generations. I would argue that a 40-year-old ten years ago and a 40-year-old now have a lot more in common than, say, a 15-year-old ten years ago and a 15-year-old now.”

One major difference between this and previous generations, a difference that has prompted an escalating interest in this group, is directly related to their power in the marketplace. Today, old and young alike are interested in brands that are geared toward the youth market. More importantly, younger consumers as a whole are now hugely influential. One of the causes of this is directly related to the fact that they are controlling more of their own spending. While allowance is at an all-time low across North America, income from young people working is at an all-time high, which means that they have disposable income that they can spend in any manner they choose.

Also, because more parents — and specifically women — work outside the home, they are trusting their children more and more to make their own purchasing decisions. For example, previously, mothers attended their children for back-to-school shopping and dictated much of what they could buy. Today, parents are much more

likely to *give* their children money to go back-to-school shopping unattended.

Q: Throughout your lifetime, what movie have you watched the most?

A: Probably...maybe *Bull Durham* or maybe *Chinatown*. It would probably be one of those two. Lately though, it was *Mean Girls*.

Q: What is your favorite TV show?

A: Ever? *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Clearly the greatest TV show in the history of all time. Specifically the last half of season two through the end of season three. Maybe the greatest 36 episode arc in the history of television.

Q: What’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?

A: I’m not a huge ice cream fan. So, instead can I just ask for a second helping of bacon?

Q: What was the last CD that you listened to?

A: Can we say what was the last piece of music that I listened to that wasn’t maybe in CD format? Like everybody else I’m listening to a mix of whatever it is I’ve recently got on iTunes so it’s a lot of different singles as opposed to a CD. But the last full album that I bought was Kanye West’s *Graduation*.

Q: If you had an extra hour in the day, what would you spend it doing?

A: Cooking. I love doing it, and I’m pretty good at it; I just never have enough time to do it.

“They’re also more vocal than previous generations. They speak the language of marketing very well and have no trouble asking for something by brand name if they want to. Even if they’re not doing the purchasing themselves, they’re having a much bigger influence on purchases made for them in the household,” Valiquette concludes.

Valiquette, President and CEO of Youthography — the largest youth-focused communications consultancy in North America — got his start in the field of marketing when an acquaintance recommended him for a position at an advertising agency. Responsible for introducing new culture into the organization, the job was directly linked to Valiquette’s love of current and pop culture. “I think if you’re not working in the culture industry and you’re interested in it, advertising and marketing is really the place to go,” he says. While there, he learned about strategic planning and how to integrate consumer knowledge on an as-needed basis into the larger agency process; lessons he utilizes in his current position with Youthography.

Now seven years old, Youthography began as a research company devoted exclusively to the youth market and has since evolved into a full service agency and marketing company. However, despite its growth, research is still a primary corporate function. “We have an unbelievably integrated focus here where



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there isn't much of a dividing line between research and marketing for us."

It is this research-oriented attitude that has allowed Youthography to become a driving force in the youth market; a difficult task to accomplish in the ever-changing world of tweens, teens, and young adults. "I think it's important for marketers to use research well. One of the reasons we think it is more important with the youth market than with any others is that marketers don't tend to be young."

As Valiquette explains, if marketers are targeting consumers in the 13- to 18-year-old demographic, they clearly would not fall into that category. So, most big brand decisions are made by people who aren't members of the demographic they are targeting. Consequently, research is all the more vital because it provides insight into the consumer base and makes the possibility for success much more likely.

"It's really important to have your finger on the pulse. It's very culturally focused, and that changes very quickly. And ongoing immersive research with this demographic is really important for that or else you don't know where you should be or you don't know the context of where your work is living in."

However, no matter how much research you have conducted or how well you may have prepared, marketers must be responsive and take advantage of opportunities when they are presented. "This group changes so quickly that often fantastic opportunities come up that you can't plan for four months in advance; you've got to be able to hit the ground running."

Accordingly, Valiquette believes that there are three rules that marketers must remember when targeting this group. First, as was previously mentioned, marketers must recognize that while some of the goals are the same (i.e., the quest for independence), younger demographics are now completely different than those that preceded it.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that youth respond best to brands they feel are meant for individuals their age. As a result, it is increasingly important to engage them in some capacity in the marketing and/or branding process; that way you'll know what is and isn't working.

Third, don't be afraid to change quickly. "Some of the significant pieces of youth culture didn't even exist 10 years ago — or five years ago." Case in point: MySpace and

FaceBook. In order to be successful then, marketers need to be agile enough to rapidly adapt to those changes.

In the end, Valiquette understands the market to such an extent that he recognizes that in this ever-changing and unpredictable environment, he can't accurately determine where the company is headed in the coming years. While he explains that Youthography will continue to promote the integration of research, strategy, and marketing execution, and do so in a much larger fashion, he reveals, "I can't totally tell you where we're going to be in five years — because we work with a market that changes completely."

So ultimately, to succeed, the company will emulate the demographic they are targeting, be as nimble, and change as quickly as the demographic does.

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