Cybercitizen Challenge
A backgrounder for Guiders

Online Marketing to Kids and Privacy Issues

The Internet is a marketer's dream – especially when it comes to reaching young people. Kids today have tremendous buying power. With the Internet fast becoming an integral part of kid-culture, it's not surprising that marketers are looking for ways to capitalize on this engaging and powerful medium.

The Internet's interactive nature permits companies to create online environments where advertising is seamlessly integrated with graphics, games and activities. These virtual playgrounds—think Club Penguin, Disney, Barbie and Seventeen—aim to foster brand recognition and brand loyalty.

Marketers also use the Internet to collect personal data from young people, through online registration forms which kids must complete to become members of websites, play games, collect prizes or participate in activities. The collection of personal information through online quizzes and surveys is also quite common.

In the United States, legislation restricts the gathering of information from children under the age of thirteen. Problems arise when kids under the age of thirteen visit websites aimed at older teens – sites that don't have to follow these regulations. Collected information may be sold to other companies, used for market research or to create extensive customer profiles. All collected information is intended to improve a website's ability to reach its target audience.

It's important for young people to understand that although commercial sites are fun, they are really just online commercials. Kids should recognize when, and how, they are being sold to. Educators and parents can help kids understand online marketing by teaching them to deconstruct the techniques they encounter on their favorite sites.

Privacy issues: kids are their own worst enemies

It's a challenge to persuade kids to value their own personal information. Studies suggest that young people have little concern about their privacy on commercial websites – especially if there's a chance they might win a prize!

> 28% of students agree with the statement, "I like it when companies use the information I post to decide what products to advertise to me", even though 83% say that social media companies should not be allowed to read what they post.
>
> Source: MediaSmarts, *Young Canadians in a Wired World,* 2014

Should we be concerned?

In her article *Capturing the "Eyeballs" and "E-wallets" of Captive Kids in School,* Internet ethics expert Nancy Willard observes:

"Dot.com companies are asking children to disclose personal information and then using that information to develop a close relationship with the child for the purpose of influencing consumer behavior. Such companies are working with child psychologists to gain better insight into the thinking of children to improve their ability to manipulate the child for commercial purposes. This is commercial exploitation.

But the potential of injury to children from this kind of exploitation may be greater than simply damage to the pocketbook of the child or parent. Children raised in such an environment will likely fail to develop an understanding of the appropriate boundaries of personal privacy. They will be extremely vulnerable to all manner of manipulation and exploitation, not only from corporate marketers, but also from scam artists, cults, and sexual predators."

http://netizen.uoregon.edu/documents/eyeballs.html , page 10.

Helping kids to understand the importance of valuing and protecting their personal information – is an important first step in creating informed consumers and smart online citizens.

Ethical and Responsible Internet Use

Conveying the concept of online responsibility to youth is one of the biggest challenges for adults. Anonymity can embolden kids, who often see cyberspace as a place where they can vent, act out and participate in risk-taking activities with no consequences.

37% of students report that someone has said or done something mean or cruel to them online that made them feel badly.

Source: MediaSmarts, *Young Canadians in a Wired World,* 2014

Irresponsible online behaviour ranges from actions that are unkind, inappropriate or dishonest. Examples include:

- creating Web pages or sending messages that insult or threaten others
- observing someone being cyberbullied and not taking action to stop it or joining in the activity
- stealing passwords and accessing Web pages, email or social networking accounts belonging to others
- assuming someone else's online identity
- plagiarizing materials
- downloading music or movies or using images or graphics from websites without permission (not respecting copyright)

It's important that young people understand the concept of online ethics and the importance of being good "Netizens." Today's students *are* the Internet generation; as such, they need to play an active role in determining the kind of virtual world they want to participate in.

Adults need to encourage young people to discuss "real world" citizenship and then apply it to the virtual world. For example in the "real world" we are expected to:

- treat all people with courtesy and respect
- be active participants in society
- respect the privacy of others
- respect the property of others
- obey the law

When these codes of conduct are applied to the Internet we call it "Netiquette*"*. Online young people should:

- treat all people with courtesy and respect in chat, email or on social media
- don't "flame" or personally insult individuals or groups
- don't post rude or insulting material
- don't be a passive bystander — speak out when you see someone being bullied online
- respect the privacy of others: don't read their e-mail without permission and don't use someone else's password
- do not disable filtering software that has been installed on school or home computers
- don't hack into anyone else's websites, directories, e-mail accounts or instant messaging accounts
- don't use anyone else's materials, images or graphics without asking permission and crediting the source (even if it is photos of your own friends)
- Understand what online activities are illegal in Canada, such as:
  - websites that promote hate, obscenity, hacking, weapons or drugs
  - online stalking
  - online threats
  - defamatory statements
  - harassment
  - copyright infringement

It's important for young people to understand the possible consequences of breaking the law in cyberspace. Many believe there are no consequences for illegal or inappropriate online activities. They consider computer mischief harmless, and use the excuse "I was only joking" to justify insulting or threatening peers in chat, instant messaging or e-mail.

Adults can support young people in challenging such attitudes by engaging them in dialogue and helping them to think through – and 'own' – ways in which we can promote accountability online.

Authenticating Online Information

The popularity of the Internet as a homework resource has created a whole new challenge for young people: how can they know what online information to trust? Librarians note that young people, who are perfectly adept at using technology to **find** information, are often lost when it comes to **evaluating** it.

> One half (51%) of students check to see if opinions on a Web site are backed up with facts that can be checked.
>
> Source: MediaSmarts, *Young Canadians in a Wired World,* 2014

As we move into an age in which more and more information is accessed through the Internet, it's crucial that young people develop the critical thinking skills they need to evaluate the quality – and just plain truth – of what they find online. Unlike the publishing world, creating a website is relatively simple and inexpensive. Because there are seldom editors or fact-checkers confirming the accuracy of the information, it's important to know how to check the credibility of a source before accepting information as fact.

Youth also need to learn to recognize bias – to understand the relationship between the purpose of a site and the slant of its content. Is the purpose of a website to inform? To sell? To entertain? Or, to persuade? What information is missing? Are other viewpoints offered? Websites should clearly state their purpose and goals – but this is rare. Even when they do, it's important that students question the information in terms of bias and accuracy.

> 68% of students incorrectly think that the presence of a privacy policy on a web site means that the site will not share their personal information with others.
>
> Source: MediaSmarts, *Young Canadians in a Wired World*, 2014

Young people need to appreciate that the Internet is only one resource of the many available to them. They also need to understand this medium's strengths and weaknesses. For example, some websites that look quite substantial provide only superficial information. And although the Web is an excellent source of fast-breaking information, currency does not guarantee accuracy. Young people should use *both* computer and text-based resources for research.

Traditionally, kids have been taught how to find resources in their school libraries. Now they need to develop effective online search strategies as well.

MediaSmarts' 5 Ws of Cyberspace encourages kids to measure the quality of Web resources by asking:

⇒ **Who** is the source?
⇒ **What** am I getting?
⇒ **When** was it created?

⇒ **Where** are you?
⇒ **Why** am I here?
⇒ **How** can I tell this is a quality website?

We can all be fooled in our online explorations. But, if girls are taught to approach Internet information with a healthy scepticism, they can develop a critical eye and mind.