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Communicating with young people in the sport industry: Practitioners insight

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Communicating with "tweens" in the sport industry: Practitioners' insights

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine communication strategies utilized by marketing practitioners when targeting tweens (aged 9-14) in a sport context. The examination's main objective was to determine whether these strategies are similar to those depicted in the literature. Using Kotler et al.'s (2002) five-stage model for effective communication, practitioners' viewpoints of what constitutes an effective communication strategy were studied through the use of semi-structured interviews (N=5). Results revealed the benefit of using technology in a communication platform, and the need to be up-to-date with the technologies used by youth. Another key finding relates to language. The youth market has a well-developed method of communicating with each other, and in order to reach and penetrate this group, marketers need to be well versed in the use of this language.

Communicating with "tweens" in the sports industry: Practitioners' insights

The youth market has attracted the attention of an array of marketing professionals who have realized the lucrative nature of market involvement (Goldburg, Gorn, Peracchio, & Bamossy, 2003). Although the youth market is highly desirable, it is difficult to both reach and influence (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004). Research has identified different age groups that constitute the youth market and one of them is referred to as the "tween" group that is composed of youth between the ages of 9 to 14 years (Lindstrom, 2004; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; McNeal & Ji, 2003). This study focused on this market segment due to its size, spending power, and interest from marketers (McNeal, 1999; McNeal & Ji, 2003). The terms "youth" and "tween" will be used interchangeably within this study.

One of the major challenges is that the tween market is known as being a savvy group that is constantly searching for the newest products and has extremely poor attention spans (Newall & Steele, 2002). The tween market is also highly sought after due to the potential to develop brand loyalty from a young age (Moore, 2004; Pechuex & Derbaix, 1999). Thus, the products that youth associate with during these years are the ones that they continue to associate with throughout the rest of their lives.

When marketing to this market segment, having a well-developed communication strategy is extremely important in order to reach and influence youth. Kotler, Armstrong, and Cunningham (2002) identified five stages of effective communication that an organization should follow in the development of an effective communication plan. These stages are market selection, message design, choice of communication channel, selection of influencer, and collection of feedback. The framework represented in Figure 1 is based on the work of Kotler et al. and provides a visual representation of the steps necessary for successful communication.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In the past few years, academics have paid a significant amount of attention to the practice of marketing to youth (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). The studies that have been conducted have primarily focused on collecting information directly from youth in the form of interviews and observation (Geraci, 2004). However, Grant (2004) noted that less attention has been given to the developers of youth-centered marketing communications strategies. The practitioners' viewpoints have been described as important as they "play a significant role in interpreting the desires and wishes of, and then devising communication strategies targeting young people" (Grant, p.592).

Within sport marketing research, limited studies have specifically examined the youth market. Research that has been conducted is limited to participation in extreme sports and key influencers (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003) and has yet to examine the communication process as it relates to youth sport marketing. A successful method for effectively communicating with the youth market would be through the utilization of Kotler's model (2002). Therefore, this study seeks to identify successful strategies as perceived by practitioners for each stage of Kotler et al.'s five-stage communication process with a focus on the youth sport market.

Five-Stage Communication Process Applied to the Youth Market

Market Selection

The youth market is composed of a multitude of different age groups and individuals at varying stages of development. Following the seminal work of Smith (1956) surrounding the

benefits of market segmentation, more recent research (e.g., McNeal, 1999) has identified that when developing a strategy for communicating with youth, practitioners should develop a multidimensional segmentation strategy in order to reach them more effectively. Kraak and Pelletier (1998) identified that segmenting allows the marketer to identify groups based on attitudes, interests, and behaviours. The most common approach taken by marketers is to segment youth based on age; however, other methods include gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Kraak & Pelletier).

Message Design

The language that tweens utilize for communicating both verbally and in written format is referred to as 'tweenspeak' (Lindstrom, 2004; Lindstrom & Seybold 2003; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004). This language involves the use of a new lexicon by combining icons, illustrations, and phrases in a completely new manner and it is shared and comprehended by tweens around the world (Lindstrom; McDougall & Chantrey). Examples of this new lexicon include POS, which stands for 'parent over shoulder' and LOL, which stands for 'laugh out loud.' The development of this new language requires marketers to also become familiar with the intricacies that are associated with it. If a marketer attempts to utilize this language and does so incorrectly, it could be disastrous for the organization. Stone, Stanton, Kirkham, and Pyne (2001) identified that when creating messages for communicating with youth, marketers must ensure the message is emotionally engaging. Regardless of the channel utilized to convey the message, youth need to have the opportunity to connect with the brand emotionally as it enables them to trust it (Stone et al.). Youth also like to be entertained and the use of humor in messages targeting this group is an extremely effective method for reaching them (Kramer, 1999).

Channel of Communication

The tween market does not wish to be informed via traditional channels such as print because they are interested in seeking information regarding brands from channels that are made available to them at all times of the day, such as the Internet (Lindstrom, 2004). This market expects their brands to operate the same hours as they do and requires their lives to be both interactive and instantaneous (McDougall & Chantrey, 2004). As a result, brands are becoming increasingly accessible through the use of electronic screens, pocket computers, mobile phones, and personal computers (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). The level of interaction available with the digital channel enables the development of an emotional connection with the brand that can aid in the development of future brand associations and brand loyalty (Stone et al., 2001).

Influencers

Wellner (2002) identified that for youth ten years and younger, the mother still remains a highly influential individual in their lives. Stevens et al. (2003) found that when asked to select a hero, youth – aged X to Y - identified their mother and father more than any other individual, celebrity, or athlete. Lindstrom and Seybold (2003), on the other hand, identified that tweens are more subject to pressure from peers than from adults or any other age group. One of their biggest concerns is standing out alone from others and being or appearing to be different (Lindstrom & Seybold). McDougall and Chantrey (2004) identified that eight in ten tweens need to feel that they are a part of a group and the group's decision often prevails over individual desires. Tweens as individual consumers are less likely to develop relationships with individual brands unless they are also of interest to their friends (Attwood & Elton, 2003; Lindstrom & Seybold). Peer pressure has the influence to determine how tweens behave and the brands with which they choose to be associated. It has been shown that successful tween brands have a well-developed peer-to-peer component in their communication strategies (Lindstrom & Seybold).

Kraak and Pelletier (1998) identified that heroes, heroines, and role models have the ability to motivate youth to purchase products and services. Stevens et al. (2003) found that sports figures are commonly identified as heroes among the youth market. Youth admire these influencers and look to them for their opinions regarding brands. The celebrities that youth admire have been found to be entertainers or athletes (Kraak & Pelletier). In fact, the use of athletes as endorsers has become a well-utilized marketing strategy in the sport market in the last ten years (Stevens et al.). Brands such as Nike have utilized 'cool' tween artists and athletes as vehicles for adding value to their product launches (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). This has enabled Nike to remain a strong competitor in the tween market as they have been able to identify individuals that have a strong influence over these consumers. Further, it is evident that youth respond positively to athletes as research has identified that the youth market segment has an elevated interest in athlete celebrities (Stotlar, Veltri, & Viswanthan, 1998). Thus, a variety of influencers are being identified, going from mothers, over peers, artists and athletes.

Feedback

Collecting feedback from youth provides the marketer with insights into the opinions and preferences of this market segment in order to allow the opportunity to change, alter, or enhance the product, event, or service offering. Newall and Steele (2002) identified that, "it is only by listening to youth that we can really understand their perspective and their real needs as consumers" (p.12). Further, Lindstrom and Seybold (2003) noted that tweens require respect from marketers. Successful marketers will create a dialogue with their market and listen to their needs (Lindstrom & Seybold).

Marketers utilize a multitude of different approaches when obtaining feedback and insights from youth. Some of these methods include focus groups, written or telephone surveys,

individual or group interviews, picture drawing, story telling, secret ballot, and observational

field studies (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998). Researchers caution that the use of focus groups with

youth can lead to "follow the leader" group dynamics (Kraak & Pelletier). A method for

preventing and reducing this influence of peer pressure is to form groups with youth who are

unfamiliar with one another (Kraak & Pelletier). This will improve the validity of the findings

and information obtained during the focus group and thus will improve its ability to be utilized

for the development of current or future communication strategies.   Lindstrom and Seybold

(2003) found that successful marketers frequently conduct in-depth brand audits and utilize

ongoing tracking studies. Through the use of focus groups, the brand audit reveals information

regarding the effectiveness of the marketing efforts thus far (Lindstrom & Seybold). Also,

tracking tweens' perceptions of the brand provides detailed timely information regarding their

preferences and future problems that could arise.

Many of the marketing research methods that are employed by practitioners utilize verbal

feedback as the primary source of information collected (McNeal & Ji, 2003). However, in order

to have a well-rounded approach, marketers should also include research techniques that allow

for non-verbal expression (McNeal & Ji). The use of pictures is an example of an effective

method of obtaining non-verbal feedback from the youth market (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998).

Another visual method marketers employ for collecting feedback is the use of smile and star

scales (Kraak & Pelletier). This provides youth with the opportunity to identify the products and

brands of their liking with visual representations that they are able to easily understand.

A multifaceted approach will provide the opportunity for the identification of more in-depth

information that may otherwise not have been revealed. McNeal and Ji also identified that

providing youth with the opportunity to provide feedback in a non-verbal manner is important

because two thirds of all stimuli that reach the brain do so through the visual system, thus signifying its importance to obtaining concrete useable feedback.

In order for feedback to be useful, the company must be responsive to it or else the consumers will refrain from providing information in the future and associating with the company's brand. Stone et al. (2001) identified that marketers need to determine youth's interests, collect feedback, and then regularly engage in two-way communication with young people based on the preferences these consumers have provided. The companies that listen to their consumers learn from the information they provide and then react accordingly will ultimately be successful (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). What about ….

Therefore, it was deemed of interest to develop a greater understanding of the practices and strategies utilized by marketing practitioners when targeting youth in a sport context. An interpretive investigation into practitioners' viewpoints and experiences of what constitutes an effective communication strategy was considered useful. As Grant (2004) identified, there is a need to complete our understanding through the eyes of practitioners. Thus, this study aimed to address whether the strategies for effective communication depicted in the youth marketing literature (McDougall & Chantrey, 2004; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; Stone et al., 2001), and specifically the tween market, are utilized by practitioners in the development of their communication strategies. This involved utilizing the five-stages of effective communication developed by Kotler et al. (2002) as a framework for structuring the communication process. Such an approach is valuable as it addresses whether there are similarities between the approaches that research has identified as being important and the approaches that practitioners are utilizing. A secondary objective of the study was to identify potential strategies utilized by practitioners that have yet to be examined in the literature.

Method

Research Method

This research was exploratory in nature as limited empirical research exists within this area. An interpretative investigation into practitioners' perceptions of effective communication strategies was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The use of interviewing was an appropriate method for this study as it enabled the researcher to elicit information surrounding concepts and phenomena that cannot be observed directly (Patton, 2002). The interviews were conducted with the use of an interview guide that served as a framework from which additional questions could be posed to garner more in-depth and insightful information (Patton).

Interview Guide

The interview guide was created using Kotler et al.'s (2002) five-stage model for effective communication and contained 15 questions with two to four questions for each stage of the communication model. For example, for the first stage of communication (i.e., market selection), the practitioners were asked questions regarding how they defined their targeted tween market. For the second stage of the process (i.e., message design), questions addressed the development of successful marketing messages. The third stage of the communication process (i.e., channel of communication) involved the identification of effective channels for reaching the tween sport market. The fourth stage of the model (i.e., influencers) utilized questions surrounding successful influencers for the tween market. Finally, the last stage of the communication process (i.e., feedback) addressed questions pertaining to how one engages in collecting feedback when marketing sport to tweens.

Participants

A purposive sample (N=5) was selected from practitioners working in a consulting capacity known to be involved in marketing to youth. Specifically, the Presidents and Directors of Marketing from their respective companies were contacted to participate due to their expertise and knowledge of the youth sport market. Seven different companies were originally contacted, but five agreed to be interviewed. Of these five companies, two were youth marketing consulting firms and three were sport marketing consulting companies. The five participants had multiple years of experience within the field.

Procedure

The participants were invited to be involved in the study through a telephone conversation with the researcher. Following this initial contact, interview dates, times, and locations were arranged through the use of e-mail. Prior to the beginning of each interview, the researcher provided the participant with a letter of information and consent form. All of the interviews were completed in a face-to-face manner in order gain more interactive feedback (Grant, 2004). The interviews ranged in length from approximately 30 minutes to 45 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

When utilizing interviews as a means of collecting data, the actual data are the words spoken by the interviewees (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the researcher sought to make sense of this data by looking for patterns and themes. The interpretation of the text followed the principles of grounded theory that involves deriving analytic categories from the data rather than from previously developed concepts or hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a result, transcripts were broken down, examined, and compared, and the information

contained within the responses was coded based on emergent themes (Charmaz; Strauss & Corbin).

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

Market Selection

For market selection, the first stage of the communication process, information surrounding effective practices and tactics were elicited from marketing practitioners. These experts identified two main approaches to segmenting the youth market - demographics and psychographics. When defining youth in terms of demographics, variables such as age, gender, and geographic area were commonly identified. In fact, all practitioners identified age as the most frequently used variable for segmenting youth. As noted by one practitioner:

> In general when we talk about youth we talk about four age cohorts. These cohorts are tweens, teens, young adults and then 21 and on. It's four, four-year equal cohorts. Companies target each cohort in different ways (Director of Marketing, youth consulting firm).

This is consistent with the literature, which has found that age is the most commonly used variable for segmenting youth because it provides marketers with the ability to easily determine different groups with similar interests, attitudes, and needs (Stone et al., 2001).

Almost all practitioners recognized the importance of utilizing psychographics as a means of defining the tween market. Specifically, lifestyle was identified as the most important variable. Practitioners also noted that when segmenting the youth market in terms of lifestyles, identifying the key indicators for tweens, which include both music and sports, provides an excellent opportunity for sport marketers to actively pursue this group. Further, one practitioner stated that marketers need to create a campaign that targets youth specifically as opposed to creating a general campaign that appeals to all market segments:

If youth is a target group in any way or form then we definitely recommend a platform of

communication and a marketing plan that is completely and absolutely specific to that

demographic (Director of Marketing, youth consulting firm).

Although another practitioner noted that creating separate promotional campaigns is

ideal, many companies may not be able to utilize this approach due to budgetary restrictions.

Previous research has also found that it is more economical to create a campaign that can be

utilized for all age groups (Wellner, 2002). However, a campaign that is economical does not

necessarily translate into a campaign that is able to successfully communicate with a target

market. Thus, marketers need to be aware of the need to develop separate promotional

campaigns and to utilize them whenever possible.

Finally, it was acknowledged that when targeting and segmenting the tween market, the

greatest challenges practitioners face are in execution and actually reaching this market. In fact,

a majority of the practitioners stated that successfully reaching this market is becoming a greater

challenge due to the increased number of communication campaigns that are targeted at them.

For example,

In terms of defining youth and targeting them for marketing programs, the amount and

variety of ways they can consume media is so diverse and constantly changing. It has

become very challenging to reach youth, get their attention, and have them hear your

message (President, sport consulting firm).

Further, a sport consultant recognized that although this market segment has been

identified as having a large amount of disposable income, they are typically described as being

extremely frugal. This is an important implication for marketers and is a finding that has not

been investigated within the literature. Although tweens are a desirable target market due to

their size and spending power (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; McNeal, 1999; Wellner, 2002), it is important to recognize that challenges may arise as a result of their prudent nature.

Message Design

In terms of message design, information surrounding what makes an effective message and the reasons for their effectiveness were requested from the marketing practitioners. Four different types of messages that are effective for communicating with tweens in the sport realm were revealed. These messages include those that relate to youth's psychographics in terms of their values and lifestyles, are inspirational, interactive, and have a sense of humour. Developing marketing messages based on tweens' psychographics is an approach that was recognized as being extremely effective. Previous research has also found the need to include humour in communication strategies targeted towards tweens. For example, Kramer (1999) found that this market segment wants to be entertained and the use of humour in messages targeting this group is an extremely effective method for reaching them.

The messages outlined above were reported as being successful because they are both credible and relevant:

> These types of messages are successful because they are credible and relevant. And credibility is extremely important. I don't think you can underplay credibility. Statistically, if you look at a lot of the market research today, youth are becoming less interested and less trustworthy of advertising. And so whether something is credible or not is extremely important (President, youth consulting firm).

Another reason cited for their effectiveness is that they use the same language as tweens. The practitioners identified the need to understand the language youth use, commonly referred to as "tweenspeak", in order to develop a successful campaign that reaches this market segment.

This suggestion is consistent with the literature (Lindstrom, 2004; Lindstrom & Seybold 2003; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004).

Channel of Communication

For the fourth stage of the communication model, appropriate channels for reaching the tween market were discussed. When examining effective and successful channels of communication, all practitioners recognized the importance of having a multifaceted communication strategy. The practitioners revealed that having a layered approach and using multiple tactics will improve the success of a communication strategy. Cooke (2002) similarly found that relying on only one channel will result in limited reach. Further, Attwood and Elton (2003) recognized that the most successful marketing campaigns are those that employ an integration of channels that are regularly used by tweens.

The use of digital channels, such as the Internet, mobile phones, texting, television, and Ipods, were acknowledged as media that are frequently utilized to communicate with youth. All interviewees recognized these channels as an essential component to an effective communication strategy. The use of these forms has also been recognized in academic research. For example, Stone et al. (2001) found that the digital world should be one of the main channels that marketers utilize to communicate with the youth market.

Practitioners stated that buzz marketing is a medium that can be used to reach tweens in sport. Word of mouth was acknowledged as being a successful method for creating buzz and interest in a particular product or event:

Word of mouth is an effective channel. So we can talk all we want about the Internet, but if I don't get the person I'm targeting to send an e-mail with their own twist of it, or come to you and say, hey did you hear about this last night, or I was at this the other week.

You know, buzz has always been an informative way to do marketing, but the challenge

is how to get the word started (President, sport consulting firm).

Within the literature, Henry (2003) also stated the importance of this approach and found that

marketers are increasingly recognizing buzz as a new form of media within the marketing realm.

Further, Henry found that when using buzz as a channel, marketers must develop an interesting

"buzzable" message that is then delivered to consumers or potential consumers via word of

mouth.

The use of grassroots approaches as a part of a communication strategy is described by

all practitioners as a necessary and successful method for reaching youth. Effective types of

initiatives include street marketing, going into the schools and being involved with the athletic

council, and athletic associations. A Director of Marketing at a youth consulting firm recognized

this channel's importance:

Make sure that grassroots are a part of your campaign. These are below the line tactics,

which means anything that is not like print or television advertising. At this level you're

bringing in lots of street tactics and you're bringing in guerilla marketing. Make sure you

have this grassroots component that then ties into your other media channels as well

(Director of Marketing, youth consulting firm).

These channels outlined above were cited by practitioners as being effective because they

have the largest mass reach when being utilized to target youth, which is a market that is

extremely fragmented. Also, these channels are real time and thus available to tweens when they

need them. Practitioners recognized that this is extremely important for tweens because they

want their brands to be constantly available. As one practitioner identified, this is what youth are

familiar with and expect. Furthermore, these channels are effective in that they provide youth

with the opportunity to consume everything in real time:

> It's probably where sponsorship and sport and entertainment is [are] really going because
>
> of the advent of technology. Everything has to be real time and they're used to
>
> consuming everything real time. It goes back to you know I want it, and I want it now.
>
> It's part of their lifestyle and they want it now but it's got to be really current as well.
>
> And if it changes, five seconds later they can get it, they don't have to wait for it, it's like
>
> everything is immediate (President, sport consulting firm).

This viewpoint is consistent with past research as McDougall and Chantrey (2004) found

that tweens expect their brands to operate the same hours as they do and they require their lives

to be both interactive and instantaneous. Thus, as Lindstrom and Seybold (2003) recognized, in

order to be successful in the tween market, communicators need to develop brands that are

available to tweens during non-traditional business hours. Other reasons stated by practitioners

surrounding the effectiveness of these channels were that they are cost effective, they provide

youth with the opportunity to interact with the product (when they are at events), and they are

both credible and relevant.

Influencers

Practitioners' experiences with influencers of the tween market were discussed in order to

identify successful individuals for communicating with this market. Effective influencers

outlined included peers, athletes, coaches/trainers, parents, and celebrities. However, peers were

the most frequently identified influencers due to the high level of peer pressure that exists within

youth groups. Practitioners indicated that youth are being increasingly conscious of where and

how they consume products in order to ensure the acceptability and sociability they are seeking.

In fact, one practitioner remarked that peers are more influential now than ever before due to the expansion of technology:

> Peers are probably more influential now than they have ever been. We used to hang out at the McDonalds and there were 10 people around you and those 10 people were your influencers. Now you can hang out in your room with a million people on the Internet and chat with them and learn diverse views that you would never have been exposed to (President, sport consulting firm).

According to many practitioners this market takes cues from their friends and in order to be influential it is imperative that organizations involve tweens in the communication process. This has also been acknowledged within the literature as Lindstrom and Seybold (2003) found peers to be key influencers in the lives of youth. Further, they found that successful tween brands have a well-developed peer-to-peer component in their communication strategies (Lindstrom & Seybold).

Athletes were also recognized as being successful influencers to utilize when communicating with tweens in the sport market. Companies will target athletes with credibility amongst youth, such as Sidney Crosby, and have him use their product or brand. The aim of this approach is that the tween market will be interested in utilizing the same products and brands as the athletes. Similarly, Stevens et al. (2003) found that the use of athletes as endorsers has become a well-utilized marketing strategy in the sport market in the last ten years due to its effectiveness.

Coaches and trainers were recognized as key influencers due to their regular contact with youth in sport. In fact, almost all practitioners acknowledged these individuals as effective influencers for tweens. Further, parents were identified as important influencers in the lives of

tweens. Practitioners stated that parents have become more of an influence in the last few decades and can be effective for influencing product decisions made by youth:

> I think what we're finding is parents are a lot more influential than they were 15 to 20 years ago. There is more of a real bond between parents and kids. I think that parents are influential and that's why when you're communicating an event for example to youth, you need to communicate in a way that maybe their parents will encourage them to attend the event (President, sport consulting firm).

This is consistent with work that found parents to be highly influential individuals in the lives of youth (Wellner, 2002).

Most practitioners also recognized celebrities, such as movie stars, as being effective influencers in the communication process. These individuals are highly recognized and idolized by youth causing them to be appropriate figures to communicate messages to this market segment. This is not inline with what has been found in the literature to date. This is evident as current research in this area has found that tweens now have less respect for celebrities who are the promoters of products (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). The differences between the findings in this study and those of Lindstrom and Seybold are likely the result of their research being focused on the youth market in general, and the practitioners' insights in the current investigation being associated with the sport environment.

The above individuals were cited as effective influencers predominantly due to their credibility. Peers, coaches, and parents all have a high level of credibility with tweens and therefore were recognized as effective influencers when communicating with them in the sport realm. These influencers also have a mass audience, as identified by practitioners, thus, increasing their effectiveness as influencers. Finally, the consultants stated that parents and

coaches fulfill a supportive guidance role that enables them to effectively communicate with youth as they look to them for advice.

Feedback

For the final stage of the communication process, information pertaining to methods for obtaining feedback and the identification of its uses was elicited from the experts. The practitioners recognized a multitude of methods for collecting feedback from the tween market – focus groups, surveys, face to face, observation, product sampling, and tracking studies. Previous research has similarly found that marketers most often utilize a multitude of different approaches when obtaining feedback, such as focus groups, surveys, individual or group interviews, picture drawing, tracking studies, secret ballot, and observational field studies (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998). Focus groups were acknowledged by all practitioners in this investigation as a primary method for collecting information from tweens:

> One way we collect feedback is through focus groups. So we talk to kids and just ask them outright, "what do you think of this brand?" We encourage marketers to develop their brands with youth panels. So whether it be a panel of just six kids, or an online panel of over 1000 consumers, youth panels can help to drive your brand (Director of Marketing, youth consulting firm).

When discussing the use of focus groups as a strategy for obtaining feedback, one practitioner recognized the difficulty that can arise when utilizing this method. That is, this approach can sometimes result in a "groupthink" mentality. This involves individuals providing similar answers and avoiding opinions that are different from others. This is done in an attempt to minimize conflict, however, results in a lack of critical thought and the generation and discussion of potentially more insightful views. Having an understanding that groupthink can

occur is extremely important in order to be able to reduce its effect. This has also been investigated in academic research, which has cautioned that the use of focus groups with youth can lead to follow-the-leader group dynamics (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998). The method researchers identify for preventing and reducing this influence of peer pressure is to form groups with youth who are unfamiliar with one another (Kraak & Pelletier). This was not mentioned by the practitioners in this study and is an approach that may be beneficial for them to utilize when conducting focus groups in the future.

Surveys were also recognized as an important method for gathering feedback from this market segment. These surveys are conducted at events, promotions, or are completed in an online manner. Research supports the use of surveys, and has further identified the need to ensure these surveys are engaging and user friendly (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004).

Conducting research face to face is a strategy also utilized in the sport realm. This method is similar to the focus group; however, it does not involve obtaining feedback from an organized group. Instead, youth are consulted at places where they frequent:

Primarily we collect our information face to face. So we go and seek out the destinations where young people like to hang out and speak to them on their level. When we do this we don't hire adults to go and talk to young people, we try to hire people who are on their level (President, youth consulting firm).

Finally, one practitioner recognized the use of observation as an effective method for obtaining feedback from tweens. This strategy is important as it provides information regarding youth's preferences and reactions to products and brands.

An approach that was not suggested by the practitioners, however that has been acknowledged in the literature, is the use of non-verbal feedback. McNeal and Ji (2003) identified that in order to have a well-rounded approach, marketers should also include research techniques that allow for non-verbal expression. Two examples of non-verbal techniques include the use of picture drawing and the use of smile and star scales (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998). For example, when using star scales, marketers ask youth to assign a number of stars to a product. A higher number of stars indicates a greater liking of the product. Marketers may benefit from learning more about these techniques and utilizing them in the future as a part of their research strategy.

The practitioners then utilize the information obtained from youth in many different ways. One of the main uses is to provide clients with documentation regarding youth's insights. This feedback provides marketers with the knowledge to subsequently alter their marketing tactics in order to develop a successful communication campaign. Thus, it seems understandable that practitioners also use the feedback to change their strategy in terms of programming as well as their clients' programs. This information provides the foundation for the high level business and programming decisions:

> We use the information to tailor programs. Everything we do is tailored around our latest research. So whether it's what TV we're buying, what sports properties we're selecting, if they're participation sports which ones are we supporting, who's playing, does it fit with the company. So all of our programs are tailored around research (Director of Marketing, sport consulting firm).

Many practitioners also identified that they utilize the information obtained from youth in order to determine the individuals who influence this market. This was described as being an important component in the development of a successful communication strategy.

Implications and Recommendations

This research was conducted in order to identify and explore the perceptions of the marketing practitioners who develop and implement communication strategies aimed at tweens. The results of this study have important implications for practitioners within sport striving to successfully communicate with youth. The identification of successful tactics utilized at each stage of Kotler et al.'s (2002) model of effective communication provides marketers with the key insights into methods for communicating with this market. The practitioners' descriptions of successful strategies for each of the five-stages are distinctly similar to the approaches depicted in the literature.

This investigation has provided some extremely valuable suggestions for other marketing practitioners and has identified some areas within academia warranting further research. For practitioners, some of the key findings include the use of technology in a communication platform. This medium is an extremely effective channel for reaching youth; however, the technology industry is rapidly changing. Thus, marketers need to be aware of the current technologies utilized by tweens and remain well informed of the changes that occur.

Another key implication relates to the use of language in a communication campaign targeted toward youth. This market has a well-developed method of communicating with each other, and in order to effectively reach and penetrate this group, marketers need to be well versed in the use of this new lexicon. This language is extremely important to tweens, and marketers

not willing to understand how to use it correctly will not be regarded highly by youth. This may even result in the eventual boycotting of certain brands by this group.

Finally, this market segment is extremely difficult to reach. Marketers need to develop creative and relevant approaches for communicating with youth in order to effectively reach them. Further, youth respect companies that are honest in their communications and that provide them with brands that are available when they want them. Using these findings when developing a communication platform will improve the marketer's ability to reach this group. Involving tweens in the communication process is also a highly recommended approach and should be carefully considered by practitioners striving to successfully target this market segment.

Overall, the results of this study identify that there is not a large disconnect between practitioners and academics. That is, the viewpoints of the practitioners are similar to the findings of previous research. In terms of message design, there is a need for academics to investigate the use and effectiveness of messages being developed according to youth's psychographics as well as the use of an interactive component in the message. Academics also need to investigate the use of grassroots initiatives and events as channels of communicating with the youth market. Further, future research in the sports realm should examine the use of athletic coaches and trainers as effective influencers for communicating with this segment. Finally, in terms of feedback, methods were identified by both practitioners and academics that warrant more attention by both of these groups. Practitioners should investigate the use of non-verbal feedback tools such as picture drawing and star scales, and academics should examine the use of product sampling in order to obtain information from the target market.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1: Kotler, Armstrong, and Cunningham's (2002) five-stage model for effective

communication.

Market Selection	→	Message Design	→	Channel of Communication	→	Influencer	→	Feedback