

Buy Me! Buy Me!

News from the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University

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YEARS OF MARKETING TURNS STUDENTS INTO WALKING BILLBOARDS

TEMPE, Ariz. – Marketers determined to woo lifelong customers have been targeting schools for so long and so effectively that many students, administrators, and parents are beginning to accept the commercial invasion of classrooms as normal and are scrambling to find ways to cash in, according to researchers at Arizona State University.

“Many of today's students, and far too many educational professionals, see nothing wrong with turning themselves and their schools into billboards for corporations,” said Alex Molnar, director of the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU). “Although the idea that schools should be sanctuaries protecting students from Madison Avenue appears to be losing credence among many – others have mobilized to attempt to stem the tide of commercialism in schools. At this point it is too early to predict an outcome in the battle over marketing in schools - the evidence suggests either side may win.”

In the Fourth Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, CERU researchers studied media coverage to gauge the prevalence and impact of eight categories of commercializing activity in schools. This year's report, released Wednesday (Sept. 26, 2001), shows media coverage of all eight categories increased nearly 500 percent since 1990.

While the overall commercializing activities continued to trend upward, the study found that this year, for the first time, coverage of several categories was down. The researchers concluded that it was too early to tell whether the decline meant that advertising, marketing and other commercializing activities are becoming more widely accepted and, thus, less newsworthy; or that anti-commercializing activists are beginning to have a noticeable impact.

Of particular note again this year is the continuing lack of interest about commercialism on the part of the education press and its professional audience. Only 381 of more than 35,000 stories dealing with commercializing activity in the past 12 years were generated by the education press.

This year's report chronicles a wide range of commercializing activities, their impact, and consequences, including:

- Two high school students from New Jersey who auctioned themselves to the highest bidder and promised to spend their college years doing promotions for a financial corporation. The financial institution, First USA, is a subsidiary of the largest issuer of Visa credit cards at a time when studies show student credit card debt is soaring to alarming levels.

- A principal at a California high school who jumped into a tub of noodle soup and belted out an alternative pop tune as part of a radio promotion so her students might become eligible for an all-expenses paid outing to Six Flags Magic Mountain.
 - Citizens' movements that brought an end to corporate solicitation of personal information from students in return for free computers.
 - A program by Philip Morris to give away textbook covers, which students claimed contained subliminal advertising to promote smoking.
 - How fundraising efforts in schools further the divide among the haves and the have-nots in our school systems. In California this year, an upscale high school reaped \$200,000 in one night with a black-tie gala, while students in a neighboring urban school district raised only \$60,000 through a year's worth of activities.
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The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at ASU offers high quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), which examines public school reform issues and proposals, and the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), which examines the prevalence and impact of commercialism in schools. The EPSL and its two research units are directed by ASU Professor Alex Molnar.

Visit the EPSL on the Web at: <http://www.schoolcommercialism.org>

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