



Tapping into the Minds of Elusive Tweens, Teens and Twenty-Somethings

By Bridget Ingebrigtsen

Northbrook, Ill.-based TRU is fully immersed in the teen/tween/twenty-something mind. A market-research firm, TRU provides “ongoing intelligence” on these hard-to-reach and therefore hard-to-understand audiences. As a result, organizations such as the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (PDFA) and Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) have turned to TRU for insight when planning marketing campaigns and programs.

“Today’s teens are a particularly savvy group,” says Peter Picard, vice president of TRU. “The media allow for exposure to a lot of things, but it’s not as if teens are all going downhill. We call them ‘Maturiteens.’ They are very good at making judgments and navigating through it all. Not all of them, of course, but in general, they are a very responsible group.”



Picard’s assessment comes from TRU’s thorough research of the teen market and its “shoulder markets” – tweens and twenty-somethings – for more than two decades. TRU (formerly known as Teenage Research Unlimited) was founded in 1982 by Peter Zollo. Zollo saw a need for a market-research firm that was dedicated exclusively to the teen market and over time, it expanded into the other two markets, says Picard.

TRU has two sides – a syndicated side that includes its annual TRU Study, and a custom-research side. Picard works on the

custom-research side of the business. “We do custom research projects for clients on an as-needed basis across a number of categories, from soft drinks to cell phones to social marketing issues like underage drinking, teen driving, drug use, dating abuse and unplanned pregnancy,” he explains.

Among TRU’s clients are international companies such as Abercrombie & Fitch, Kraft, PepsiCo, Dell, Motorola and MTV.

In the area of social marketing, its client list includes the American Legacy Foundation (sponsors of the Truth anti-tobacco campaign) and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. TRU is also a partner in the well-known Above the Influence campaign. “TRU keeps us tapped into the minds of teens and lets us know what the trends are,” says Caryn Pace, deputy director of creative development for PDFA. “They have an incredible understanding of our target market and know how to get into their ‘world’.”

Picard came to TRU in 2004 after working in the advertising industry for 20 years. Fresh out of college, Picard worked in a residential care center for teenage boys who had, for one reason or another, come into contact with the juvenile justice system. It was during that job that Picard learned some valuable lessons about dealing with teens. “I thought that most kids had a heart of gold and just needed a second chance. But what they really needed was consistency, firmness and structure,” he says. “It’s no different today.”

At TRU, Picard puts his extensive experience in consumer research, brand strategy and teenage developmental psychology to work. He has spearheaded several social marketing investigations on critical topics such as teen smoking, “smart” driving, underage drinking and teen pregnancy. He’s also excited about the company’s new global study, which is providing TRU-type insight about teens across the world. “We

expect there to be many similarities, based on this lifestage, but also incredibly important differences,” Picard says.

Whether the firm is talking with teens about their product use or their social behavior, there are many constants with teens in general, Picard says. “The one thing that hasn’t changed across generations and continues to be powerful is that teens need to develop their self-identity. They need to be independent. They need to stand out but also fit in.”

Today’s Teens

But, today’s teens are dealing with issues that teens in the 1970s never would have dreamed of, he says. Technology, such as computers and cell phones, is giving kids a constant link to a much bigger world – a world that in the past might have been available only to adults. “It used to be kids would be sent to their room as a way to insulate them. These days, kids are sent to their rooms, and they have cell phones and computers in their rooms.”

Alcohol remains a big temptation for teens, Picard says, although alcohol usage by boys has “slowed” while alcohol usage by girls has increased. “One thing we hear from teens is that alcohol is everywhere,” he says. “It’s a part of their lives, much more so than when I was a teenager. It’s something they have to come to terms with and make decisions about all the time. Luckily, many of them recognize that it’s dangerous and



are aware of the dangers.” Marijuana, on the other hand, is unfortunately not viewed by some teens as being dangerous or addictive, or a drug that can have a long-term effect, he says.

An increasing area of concern is the use of pharmaceutical drugs by teens for recreational purposes. “Teenagers think these drugs are safe because they come from the medicine cabinet,” he says. “We hear about drugs like Xanax and



Percocet being abused by teens. From our research, we have found that one-third of teenagers think pharmaceutical drugs are ‘in’ right now.”

The Good News

While today’s teens deal with many temptations and negative influences, they are very focused on their futures and building their “resume” of experience and education, according to Picard. He says they are also closer to their families than ever before. “They not only love their parents, but they also like their parents,” he points out.

This is good news, he says, because parents can have a powerful impact on their children – when using the proper strategy. To keep children away from the many temptations in the world, as well as to steer them on the right track, Picard suggests parents and other adults use the following approaches:

- **Be “real”.** Tell the truth, and they will listen. Use real experiences if you can.
- **Use an authentic voice.** Don’t try to talk teen if you’re not one. Talk like an adult. Also, when appropriate, ask teens to talk to other teens.
- **Be parental.** Make it very clear to teens what your values are and what your guidelines are. Parents would be surprised at how their children really look to them for direction.

For more information about TRU, visit the company’s Web site at teenresearch.com.

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