

BRANDWEEK

Teen Talk Is, Like, Totally Branded



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By Kenneth Hein

NEW YORK -- Many a parent has tried to penetrate the teen argot to understand what they're talking about. It turns out they're talking about brands. A lot.

Members of Generation Y have 145 conversations a week about brands, which is twice the rate of adults, according to a new study.

Nintendo's Wii game rated high in a survey of what teens are talking about.

"They are extremely engaged in conversations about brands," said Brad Fay, COO of The Keller Fay Group, a New Brunswick, N.J., word-of-mouth consultancy whose TalkTrack survey canvassed 2,046 teens ages 13-17 during the first five months of the year.

Teens aren't just conversing about brands; they're talking about advertising as well. More than half (57%) said they cite marketing and media in their conversations compared to 48% of adults.

"Teens are highly plugged into pop culture and brands are a big part of that culture," said Fay. Products and their ads "are conversation currency."

So which brands are leading the conversation? Few will be surprised that Apple's perennial favorite, the iPod, led the pack, followed by American Eagle, Dr Pepper, Chevrolet and Nintendo, respectively.

What prompts the conversations? George Harrison, svp-marketing and corporate communications at top-scorer Nintendo of America, Redmond, Wash., credits social currency. Teens often talk about Nintendo Wii, for instance, because it's hard to get, Harrison said. "Teens are texting around to see who got one or that they heard Target will be getting more on Sunday," he said.

Harrison also said the Mii avatars are conversation starters and noted that numerous YouTube videos have been dedicated to players' Miis.

"They enjoy creating an alter ego or a personification of their life," said Harrison.

Cyber-savvy teens scored higher than adults in online brand mentions as well. GenYers are three times more likely to talk about a brand online (via text, instant messaging, e-mail, chats or blogs) than adults. Some 19% of teen word-of-mouth happens online versus 7% for adults.

Still, 61% of brand word-of-mouth mentions still happen offline, even if it's happening the same time as an online or text conversation.

"[Teens] are more socially enabled than someone working in an office 9 to 5," said Doug Akin, managing partner at Mr. Youth, a Gen Y marketing agency in New York. "They have more multichannel conversations. [Aside from just hanging out], they are texting. They are online. They are on Facebook. On these social networking sites, they are likely to stumble across a marketing message and act on it."

Which category gets the most shout-outs? Media and entertainment. Seventy-five percent of teens are talking about the category, be it the latest Adam Sandler flick or The Used download. Sports, recreation and hobbies were second (68%), followed by technology (67%), telecom (65%), and

food and dining (62%).

"They're at a younger age where things are fresh and new to them," said Akin. "They are at an earlier development stage as consumers and [are] more inclined to think things are cooler and respond to them and talk about them."

Though teens are often stereotyped as negative and sarcastic, 58% of teen conversations about brands are positive (versus 64% of adults).

"The assumption you might have is they would only talk about brands they don't like," said Fay. But the reality is once again based on social currency: Teens are often looking to be seen as a person in the know who can recommend the new hot product, he said.

Not to mention, "Brands are badges for teens," said Fay. "You are at a period in your life when you are trying to discover your true identity. Brands can be a short-cut in defining yourself."