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Soft-Selling to Teenagers

By Diana Swift

According to *Cosmetics* magazine, teenagers are the next big target group of cosmetics, toiletries and personal-care manufacturers.

It makes marketing sense. Undeniably, this age group has money--via part-time jobs, babysitting, allowances and birthday gifts. Consider the money teens spend on CDs, rock concerts, fast food, movies, etc. And both sexes are increasingly interested in fragrances and products for the hair and skin. In my era it was a dab of Clearasil on the chin, a dab of Brylcreem on the hair. But if my sons, 13 and 19, and their friends are anything to go by, teenagers of both sexes like cement-calibre gels, petrifying sprays, expensive hair conditioners and dayglo hair colorants. They also want skin toners, moisturizers and sun blocks. They use designer scents like cK One. They buy flavored lip balms. Even their deodorants are fancy scented preparations like Brut, English Leather and Old Spice.

But the trick to getting teens into stores and to developing brand and store loyalty is to make them feel comfortable. According to a recent informal canvas of high school shoppers by *Cosmetics*, teenagers feel more at ease in drugstores, where they can peruse--but, alas, not always try--products displayed on walls and stands, than at glitzy department-store counters guarded by aggressive clerks, armed with spray perfumes. As well, they prefer the price range of the personal-care products in drugstores.

But even in pharmacies, where the approach is far less aggressive than in department stores, they hate sales personnel who hand them too much bafflegab. And at their young age, they need time to experiment, test and try. They need to balance the claims of advertising against their youthful pocketbooks. Though their comfort level with drugstores is higher, the word from teens is that pharmacies could still go some distance to make them feel more at home and less like sneak-thieves.

As a preamble to that, consider these comments from some recently canvassed teenagers on how they feel treated in stores.

Steff, 17: "I hate how salespeople watch you. Adults steal but they're not watched like we are."

Cathy, 14: They don't respect us. They serve older people first; we're invisible."

Jamie, 17. "If you're just looking, they don't get the hint, they hound you till you have to leave."

Chris, 17: "They ask you if you want something. If you say no, they ignore you even when you're ready to buy."

Amber, 15: "I won't shop in places with aggressive salespeople unless there's a really good sale on."

Jamie: "I prefer to buy something on a wall, then I don't have to talk to a salesperson. I asked one once but she didn't listen, she told me what she thought."

Steff: "They pressure you until even if you want to buy it, you won't."

Jen, 14: "Once you get past a certain point in a store, you're no longer free. They attack you!"

Amber: "I just leave and come back another time."

Anna, 16: "I like to shop in pharmacies because they have good brands at reasonable prices. The department stores are too expensive and if you pay 99 cents in a dollar-discount store, the makeup kind of separates and you have to throw it away!"

If mature adults don't have the sales resistance to withstand such aggression, think of the poor kids. Becky Wong, cosmetics manager at a London Drugs outlet in Victoria, B.C., agrees that pharmacies could do more to make themselves teen-friendly and less intimidating.

"Don't pressure them. You have to give them their space but still you can't shoo them away. Acknowledge them and make them feel welcome. Ask them to let you know if they want any help. They are grateful for it when they are ready to be served," the former Bay beauty advisor says. While some teens are there for the freebies, others will spray and return another day to buy.

Wong has had letters of thanks from **teenagers** who appreciate the straightforward service she offers. "They are conscientious about skin care and want honest information," Wong adds. "They appreciate tips on making up, but let them approach you, not the other way around." Adds Anna Henry, 16: "Some of the drugstore cosmetics people have been really helpful and friendly. But other stores have such tight security, they watch you constantly to see if you are going to steal."

Wong recalls having a serious problem with acne as a teenager. Though intimidated, she worked up the courage to approach a beauty adviser in a large department store who let her try an expensive European acne cream. "It was good, and although \$7.50 was a lot of money in those days, as soon as I had it, I went back and bought the product. When I met

the woman years later, I thanked her for the helpful and respectful way she had treated me."

A few more suggestions for appealing to the teen buyer:

*Announce your teen-friendliness in your advertising flyer or at the cash register by offering a 5%-10% discount with school ID cards.

*Let young shoppers feel free to try things. They have not had the time to develop brand knowledgability and they can't afford to blow a week's lunch money on the wrong choice. Often they need time to get the money together--unlike adults they can't plonk down plastic on the spot.

*Why not leave out more tester perfumes and body lotions for trying instead of locking them behind glass doors, forcing teens to engage a (to them) formidable salesperson before they can try a product?

*Tell your cosmetics clerks to cool it with the wordy product spiels and especially avoid any exaggerated claims of product efficacy.

* Often **teenagers** like bolder colors and scents than are available in the usual brands. How about a special composite teenage display featuring, among other things, their beloved bright blue, green and orange hair dyes usually bought at specialized beautician outlets, dramatically dark lipsticks, eye makeup and nail polish, rigidifying hair gels and the funkier teen scents?

*Add a tip sheet or display board with hints on how to match things up or pull a whole look together.

*How about a special teen promotion? A lot of stores have seniors days with tea, cookies and discounts. How about a youth day with a little ambient music, high school card discounts and a special teen-oriented multiproduct display? Perhaps the pharmacist could be made available in a special session to answer questions on health care.

* Another option is periodic mini-lectures and demonstrations on make-up and skin care. Teens are hungry for good information and find it easier to assimilate in the neutral setting of a seminar than in a one-on-one sales pitch.

As Wong says, "The teenage customer you take the right approach with today is your loyal adult customer tomorrow."

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