

# Engage:Teens

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## It's Easier -- And Harder -- Than Ever To Know Teens

by [Gregg Lavin](#), Thursday, September 3, 2009, 12:53 PM

Marketers must be nostalgic for peer pressure.

Not the peer pressure they felt themselves, of course, but the pressure among teens on which they used to be able to rely to build their brands.

Gone are the days when marketers could count on group mentality to turn a product into a must-have for anyone in the throes of puberty who didn't want to be left out. Granted, it still required research and creativity (and sometimes luck) to introduce a product that made it to that level.

But today we can't count on so many following so few. The teen audience is more fragmented than ever, and knowing and understanding the nuances is critical.

Here's why it's worth it: As we all know, teens have significant buying power themselves. But even more than that, they influence the buying habits of their entire families. A 2006 study from Resource Interactive found that kids and teens influence as much as half of all spending in the economy - from fashion to the family car, and much more in between.

And that makes teens an important audience for every company -- not just those that sell video games and music.

The good news for marketers is that today there exists an amazing ability to engage with teens on their own turf. They're active users of just about every online technology, they're interested in voicing their opinions and they're more reachable today than ever before.

The market research that used to happen at the mall, in focus groups or via the telephone now happens online. This gives marketers the ability to tap a huge audience quickly, efficiently and effectively, with a research mechanism that is built into the world teens already inhabit. Whereas a focus group would take teens away for a few hours from activities they would prefer, online surveys are integrated into those very activities.



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Take, for example, a 13-year-old girl with a virtual pet who wants to buy virtual clothing for that pet. Now she can take a survey to earn points to conduct the transaction. A 15-year-old boy wants to advance to the next level of his game. He takes a survey to earn points to buy a better weapon.

Companies and publishers that already have an online audience of teens can use surveys as a way to keep them coming back and engaged, earning rewards that they value. Marketers seeking insight can tap those audiences with statistically valid research of teen habits and opinions.

The challenge for marketers, as always, is to know your audience. Here are some insights my company has gleaned from experience working with online teen survey panels:

- Creating a bond with a brand early on is paramount and gives you a consumer who will grow with you. Even if your products skew older, don't ignore the teen audience.
- Today's teens are different from the "me" generation of the baby boomers. The current teens value happiness over their career aspirations, are financially independent and complain about stress.
- When engaging teens online, you're on their turf; speak their language. Subtleties count. For example, while teens like cash, they often respond more to offers that specify items of interest -- like MP3 downloads, ringtones, online games or virtual currency.
- Understanding their tribes and sub-cultures is key. There are many -- Emo, Ghetto, Skate, Scene, to name a few -- don't try to fake it.

Teens can seem elusive, but we've never had the ability we have today to establish such a relevant, credible dialogue with them en masse.

Start engaging. It's worth it.