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GETTING STARTED

Advertisers' next target: Generation Y

By Carolyn Bigda

Your Money staff reporter

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Love those Apple commercials? Can't resist the organic aura of Whole Foods Market grocery stores?

There may be a reason why.

Today's twentysomethings are fast becoming the focus of advertisers. Baby Boomers are retiring. And in their stead, Generation Y, those born roughly between 1980 and 2000, promise to have just as much purchasing power.

Generation Y is the largest group since the Baby Boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1965. Within less than a decade, Gen Yers are expected by some to be the most influential consumers in the U.S. economy.

That fact is not lost on retailers.

A steady stream of industry advice tells how to drive a "brand into the brains" of teenagers and twentysomethings, or how to "get younger." Companies are restructuring their business to cater to what are considered Gen Y interests, such as social responsibility.

"Some of my clients have changed their marketing message to show, for example, that they care about the environment," said Anand Chhatpar, chief executive and chairman of BrainReactions, which helps companies create new products and advertising campaigns geared toward Generation Y.

While more environmentally conscious companies may be good for the planet, you still want to make sure you stay in control of when and where you spend your money.

Here are some tips:

-- Recognize marketing tactics.

First, learn to recognize when you are being marketed to. With advertising seemingly everywhere these days, experts say mass media have less influence on Gen Yers than previous generations.

"They trust their peers a lot more than traditional advertising," Chhatpar said. "And they are smart enough to see through when a recommendation is fake."

So more companies are turning to so-called viral marketing, in which a message is spread by word-of-mouth.

Marketing in the form of interactive games or giveaways is also becoming increasingly common. Take, for example, Burger King's campaign at www.subservientchicken.com, a video in which a human-size chicken does almost any command you typed.

"It was cool and unexpected," said Ben Popken, editor of the Consumerist, a blog that takes a skeptical look at consumerism. "It was not a page of coupons. ... It got people talking and crowding around the computer."

-- Stay skeptical.

Seeing a chicken dance on your computer screen can be entertaining, but keep in mind that no matter how creative the marketing, a business is still trying to sell you something.

And peer reviews cut both ways: Although the Internet has made it possible for consumers to share advice on products and services, there is often no way to check who is doing the writing.

Popken notes that companies will hire people to create profiles on Web forums, become trusted members and then "every so often, push the products that they've been hired to push."

-- Practice smart shopping.

Finally, if you're finding these marketing ploys irresistible, set up a system of shopping checks-and-balances.

Don't use credit cards, said April Benson, a psychologist who specializes in treating compulsive-buying disorder and the editor of "I Shop Therefore I Am: Compulsive Buying & the Search for Self."

Ask friends not to forward you mass e-mails.

And run through these six questions before you buy: Why am I at this store? How do I feel? Do I need this? What if I wait? How will I pay for it? And where will I put it?

"Try to see what it is that is drawing you to this item and subject that to a reality test," Benson said.

In other words, do you really like Burger King's chicken sandwich, or just the dancing chicken?

E-mail Carolyn Bigda at yourmoney@tribune.com.