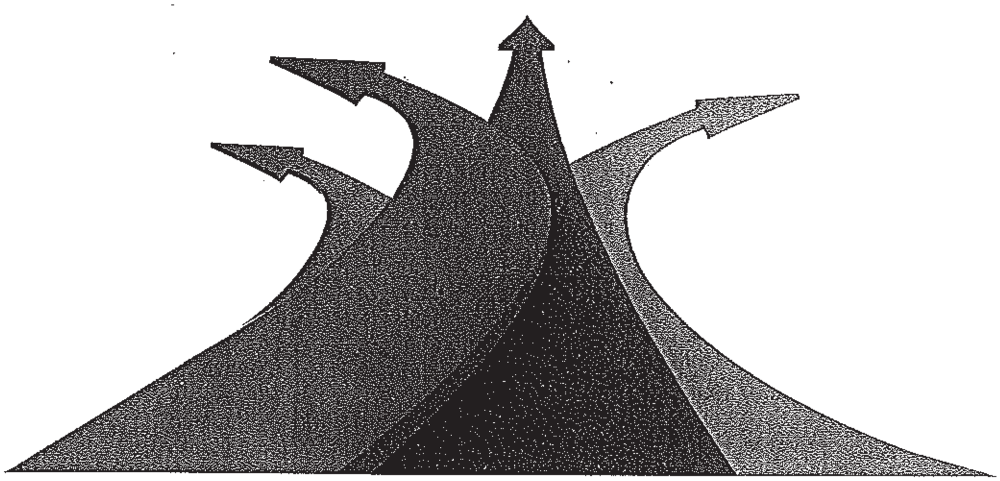
Consumer Behavior

Buying, Having, and Being



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Printer/Binder: R.R. Donnelley / Willard
Cover Printer: Lehigh-Phoenix Color/Hagerstown
Text Font: 9.5/12 Utopia

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Solomon, Michael R.
Consumer behavior / Michael R. Solomon. — 10th ed.
p. cm.
1. Consumer behavior. I. Title.

HF5415.32.S6 2012
658.8'342—dc23

2011034097

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PEARSON

ISBN-13: 978-0-13-267184-2
ISBN-10: 0-13-267184-0

Case Study

CHILDREN: THE FINAL FRONTIER . . . FOR CELL PHONES

With the adult and even teen markets for cell phones quickly becoming saturated (more than 65 percent of U.S. teens have them now), the industry looks to other segments. The growth market for the cell phone industry in the near future is children aged 8 to 12—or even younger. Many in the industry see grade-school children as the final frontier if phone manufacturers are to continue to grow. Already, parents give children as young as 5 years old their own cell phones.

A host of companies make phones for the younger market. Disney, Hasbro, Mattel, and Firefly Mobile offer models in bright colors that feature graphics of favorite characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants and Barbie. They designed these phones for smaller hands, and many lack traditional keypads. Parents can program what the phones do, control incoming and outgoing calls, and prepay minutes.

But does such a young child really need a cell phone? There are many child advocates, including Ralph Nader, Canadian kids' entertainer Raffi, and various politicians, who say that they do not. Some critics claim that cell phone makers have declared "open season" on children with their aggressive marketing tactics. In addition, there is some evidence (mixed, so far) that cell phone usage can be carcinogenic and may be especially risky for young children.

The cell phone companies defend their actions. Many have released statements saying that they don't market their products (even the kid-friendly ones) to children, but rather to their parents. Disney said it developed Disney Mobile as a service to address the needs of a family audience, and that its products and services are available to all members of the family, including adults. Marketers claim that they simply answer the demands of consumers for services such as the five-key, parent-programmable Firefly.

Of course, children want the phones because they're cool, because their friends have them, and because they want to be more grown-up. In fact, many tweens reject the kiddie versions and demand real adult-style cell phones. According to a spokesman for Verizon Wireless, kids "don't want what we call 'Fisher Price' phones. They want the real deal, with the camera and the QWERTY keyboard for text messaging." Coolness and prestige alone are usually not good enough for parents to give in and buy one of the gadgets for their kids. However, marketers position the phones to Mom and Dad on a different basis: The phones provide an extra layer of security to anxious parents who want to be able to locate their kids at all times. Many of the children's phones offer GPS tracking as well as all the parental control features. When parents are convinced that the increased ability to stay connected with their children enhances safety, the purchase decision is simple. Whether due to safety concerns or simply because parents give in to their kids' demands, the efforts of cell phone marketers appear to be paying off. Already, 55 percent of children ages 9 to 11 and 35 percent of children ages 7 years and younger carry their own mobiles. If companies can get younger children in the habit of using phones, the kids will probably be consumers for life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 When it comes to cell phones for kids, who is the customer? Discuss the dynamics of the decision to buy a cell phone for a young child.
2 How do current trends in the family life cycle affect the marketing of cell phones to children?

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