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**Marketing to Children:  
Industry Insiders' Perspectives on Good Work**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper, I present qualitative research conducted among leaders of the children's marketing industry. The purpose of the study is to understand why they do not defend their industry and their work in the face of harsh criticism from the press and from anti-advertising activist groups. I provide evidence that children's marketers are committed to producing work that is highly creative and ethically beyond challenge, but that they are not committed to their industry. I show how their ability to engage in extremely satisfying work in an industry without a true mission has left them feeling ambivalent about their careers. I also model how children's marketers construct meaning for their industry and compare it to the way other professionals do. Based on this model, I discuss implications for the future of the industry.*

## INTRODUCTION

For three of my six years (1997 – 2003) working in the advertising industry, I worked exclusively on children’s products, both in the United States and in Europe. In my opinion, my colleagues were committed to understanding the lives of children and passionate about creating excellent advertising for their clients. But I was aware that many outsiders accused the children’s marketing industry of exploitation and opportunism. Activist group Commercial Alert, has charged the industry with “subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy” (Commercial Alert, 2002a). In its Parent’s Bill of Rights (Commercial Alert, 2002b), the organization blamed the children’s marketing industry for “contribut[ing] to an epidemic of marketing-related diseases in children such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, alcoholism, anorexia and bulimia” (p. 1). And since the birth of the industry, numerous critics have contended that advertisers attack children who “lack the cognitive skills to protect themselves against advertising messages” (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003, p. 484).

Rather than defending their industry, children’s marketers I knew remained uncharacteristically silent. While I never witnessed my co-workers deliberately deceiving children, and I often heard them discuss their responsibility to create fair, honest advertising, their unwillingness to address outsiders’ allegations publicly forced me to question how practitioners actually viewed their industry’s work. If they felt that the industry engaged in unethical practices, their silence would be explained, but their decision to remain in a compromised industry would not. If they disagreed with the critics and felt their work was ethical, why did they tolerate the critics’ attacks? The study described in this paper attempts to answer the question, ‘Why don’t children’s marketers defend their industry against criticism from outsiders?’

While extensive research has been conducted on the psychological and social effects of marketing on children (Goldberg and Baumgartner, 2001, Otnes and McGrath, 1994, and Peracchio, 1992, cited in Cross, 2002; McNeal and Chan, 2002), I found no studies that directly asked children's *marketers* how they feel about their work. Several industry leaders have written about the ethics of children's marketing (Del Vecchio, 1997, Acuff, 1998), but because these works often served as promotional materials for their companies, I did not presume they represented their uncensored opinions. In an attempt to discover their true feelings about their work and the critics' assessment of it, I conducted interviews among the children's marketing industry's "creator-leaders," people who "come up with new ideas or new ways of doing things" leading to "dramatic transformations in the[ir] realm" (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2000, p. 20). While the 'children's marketing industry' technically includes manufacturers, producers and media buyers, I limited my sample to those who create marketing concepts and advertising campaigns for children's products, as they tend to be the critics' primary target.

Based on my experience in the industry, I hypothesized that all respondents would be aware of criticism from outsiders. I considered two possible explanations for their lack of response to these critics: (1) they agreed with the critics, but the industry's rewards (financial security and professional prestige/status) prevented them from leaving, or (2) they disagreed with them, but felt that voicing their disagreement posed undesirable risks. I expected most of my respondents to fall into the latter category, and that their fear of losing clients and of being portrayed unfairly by the press (e.g., having a one-hour interview edited to thirty or even three misrepresentative minutes) prevented them from defending their industry publicly. In this paper, I provide evidence that creator-leaders strongly disagree with the critics, and are committed to creating work that is both highly creative and ethically unquestionable, but they are not committed to the children's marketing industry, *per se*.

Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon's (2000) Good Work™ study, which examined factors that promote “work of expert quality that benefits the broader society” (p. XI), provided a helpful framework for understanding creator-leaders' ambivalent attitude towards their industry. Their theory defines ‘Good Work’ as work that is both excellent in quality and ethical. At the time that this is being written, the authors are considering expanding this definition to include work that “feels good,” or “feels meaningful to the worker” (personal correspondence with Dr. Howard Gardner, 2004). Examining creator-leaders' relationship to their work reveals that they find it satisfying and engaging, but they do not believe their industry has a “mission,” or fulfills a “basic societal need which [they] feel committed to realizing” (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, p. 10). Because their work is challenging, interesting, and rewarding (both financially and psychologically), and because they do not believe that their work is unethical, they have remained in the field. But because they feel unable to argue that the industry has a valuable mission, they resist engaging their critics in debate.

In conclusion, I provide a model that describes how children's marketers find meaning in their work so that they can justify continuing their career in children's marketing despite ambivalent feelings towards it. I discuss implications both for the future of the children's marketing industry and for future research on it.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Over a three-week period in November 2003, I conducted one-on-one telephone interviews with nine creator-leaders of the children's marketing industry. Each of these creator-leaders founded a children's advertising agency or marketing consultancy, and each currently serves as CEO or founder of that company or organization. My sample was comprised of people

with whom I worked directly or indirectly in the children's marketing industry, and who I felt fit Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon's (2001) definition of a 'creator-leader.' I also asked each interviewee to nominate people who had significantly contributed to the field of children's marketing, and who were known as industry leaders.

The interviews were open-ended and designed to last approximately one hour. Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon's (2001) protocol for the Good Work™ project (pp. 259-268) served as a model for this study's interview protocol (see Appendix A). I probed the creator-leaders' goals, beliefs, work process, motivations, likes and dislikes, professional and personal influences, ethical standards, and attitudes about their work (p. 256). My personal knowledge of the work of the industry, along with Adrian Furnham's (2000) summary of the issues prevalent in the debate on children's marketing, helped me adapt the protocol specifically for this industry. Finally, the interviews were coded using an "inductive approach," (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 58). I identified the most salient themes and coded for them; Appendix B includes a complete list of codes and definitions.

## **FINDINGS**

As hypothesized, creator-leaders are aware that outsiders criticize children's marketing and that this criticism has influenced the public's opinion of them. While they disagree with the critics, arguing that they lack understanding of children's marketers and treat them unfairly, they do not simply dismiss their attacks. Although they believe that they do not engage in unethical work, they express concern that others do. They claim to care passionately about creating excellent work, but instead of refuting the critics, they allow them to slander their profession. For every private rebuttal, they provide an excuse for why they cannot argue publicly. But their excuses seem insignificant in comparison to the damaging claims made by their critics. As I

examined these children's marketers relationship with their work further, I felt that these minor impediments to speaking out in their defense may be masking a more significant deterrent to confronting their critics: their own ambivalence towards their profession.

### *Critiquing the Critics*

In the course of reviewing literature written by the critics of children's marketing, I found that few activists focused their work on reforming it.<sup>1</sup> The creator-leaders were not surprised. They felt they had more fans than critics, but that the critics spoke loudly and voluminously. But when I asked them to cite a recent book or article that denigrated the profession, most creator-leaders insisted "you can read it every day..." and "it's everywhere, just open up a paper." Some admitted that criticism might not have increased, but that their awareness of it had. For some, leading their own organization meant that they were asked to articulate a point of view about children's marketing and its ethics in a way that they previously had not. Several indicated that they felt, as one creator-leader stated, "attacked from all fronts." They implied that while the critics are few, the ubiquity of their criticism makes a counter-attack futile.

Overwhelmingly, creator-leaders agreed that the attacks on them were both unfounded and impractical. All discussed the public's misperception that research on children's marketing definitively showed its negative effects. While none could point to studies that supported advertising's positive effects, they felt that their critics had little evidence on which to base their claims. Psychologist Adrian Furnham (2000) agrees. Based on his review of over twenty studies on the effects of children's advertising, he concluded that "the notion that advertisers can create unnatural wants in children and consequent conflict with their parents" (p. 5) belongs in a list of ideas "which have an appeal which has little to do with any validity they might have" (p. 5).

Creator-leaders also bemoaned the critics' failure to engage them in a constructive dialogue or propose viable solutions to the problems they cite. One described this approach with disdain: "It's easier to mess up a room than to clean it." Five creator-leaders overtly referenced the academic community as a particularly potent and frustrating source of criticism, noting that many solutions that gain popularity in "the Ivory Tower" would not work in the "real world" (alluding to the business world). But when asked to identify these proposed solutions, creator-leaders could only name one: banning all children's advertising. They criticized their critics for failing to think through the significant consequences of banning children's marketing, which, in their minds, include less consumer choice (smaller brands would not survive without advertising support) and diminished product quality. Many passionately spoke about the most significant consequence to them: the demise of children's television. One creator-leader noted that preventing children's exposure to advertising in a capitalist society is like "buying a pool and telling kids to stay away instead of teaching them to swim."

The creator-leaders also felt the critics unfairly targeted them, demonizing their work while remaining neutral towards, or even praising other related industries. Two explicitly mentioned the double standard that critics apply to their work and the work of the children's entertainment industry. One creator-leader discussed the hypocrisy of society's celebrating Harry Potter while loathing children's marketing. He asks,

Why is what I do so different? I create stories that inspire kids and if they want the product that we're advertising, they buy it. In some ways, we're more up-front with what we do than someone like [author J.K.] Rowling. She writes stories and then, without explicitly telling the kid that she's selling them something, she allows her characters to appear all over licensed products.

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<sup>1</sup> Psychologist and children's advocate Susan Linn's recent work, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (New Press, 2004), may be the exception to this statement.



A few hypothesized that the critics target them because of their strong ties with “Corporate America” but expressed confusion over being held to a standard that they did not see applied to other professions. These attacks on their profession felt personal to them.

Finally, several felt that their profession had become a scapegoat for problems that are far beyond an advertiser’s control. Several creator–leaders noted that if they knew the formula for changing children’s behavior or influencing them to buy products they did not want, their own product launches or marketing campaigns would never fail (and all admitted to being part of many failed marketing ventures). Several felt that their critics were really fighting against the U.S. capitalist economic system, which, they asserted, they could not change. But several also felt that parents held more power than they did to influence the values and behavior of their children, and that children’s marketing was being blamed for parents’ decreasing involvement with, and knowledge of, their children. In a study on children’s values about consumerism, Caruana and Vassallo assert, “of all environmental socialization agents, parental influence is the most pervasive and important” (Caruana and Vassallo, 2003). But despite this evidence in their favor, they also note that parents are their partners in getting quality products into children’s homes. Therefore, publicly condemning or pointing to parents’ culpability would not only be bad for their reputation but also bad for their business.

In fact, all of the creator-leaders interviewed were also parents, and they agreed that commercialism could have negative impacts on children and that society should monitor the messages being broadcast to its children. Even while they expressed their frustration with the critics, a few admitted understanding them, especially in their desire to moderate the consumerism prevalent in children’s lives. One father in the interview described a moment of self-doubt about the effects of his work when his youngest daughter spoke her first word: “Barbie.” But all agreed that children’s marketers should not accept the blame for what one

called “the realities of life in a two-income family,” and another harshly labeled, “the total irresponsibility of today’s parents.”

While the creator-leaders passionately defended themselves during these interviews, almost all of them planned to maintain their public silence. They felt that the press would construe their arguments as “defensive,” and most admitted that they avoid television interviews for fear of being misrepresented. A few also felt that clients tend to avoid associating their products with controversial agencies, and therefore, defending their profession could cost them business. But most of the reasons they gave for failing to defend their profession do not seem incentive or disincentive enough for them to tolerate the attacks from outsiders, especially since “objective” evidence from scholars and psychologists can, in some cases, support their claims. Perhaps these reasons feel sufficient to them, but more likely, they feel they cannot argue against those who seek their profession’s demise with integrity. But if they do not feel obligated or committed to their profession, why do the critics affect them? This may be explained by their commitment to creating excellent, ethical work, as described below.

### ***A Commitment To Excellent And Ethical Work***

While all the creator-leaders interviewed explained that doing even their best work does not guarantee market success, they all claimed to be committed to creating work that was exceptionally creative and that “moved the work of the industry forward.” They discussed creating work that met a self-imposed standard that few could appreciate, including clients. For several, this desire significantly influenced their decisions to start their own company. Several spoke of a desire to provide clients with knowledge and creative insight that went above and beyond what they might request. They felt that to create excellent children’s advertising, one must focus on it almost solely (a specialization that most general advertising agencies would not

allow). One creator-leader discussed finding herself in children's marketing after receiving a master's degree in psychology, and being charged with communicating insights about children to a client. She described how she came to found a specialty research group dedicated to understanding children within a large advertising agency:

I thought, this is all right, and the client is satisfied, but this can't be it. If we're going to say we know about this stuff, we really have to know about it. So I took the initiative and conducted some inexpensive focus groups with kids. That's when I realized we could give clients something that they didn't even know they needed, and we could make their work better.

While every creator-leader recognized that consistently doing his or her best work provided a clear business advantage, these creator-leaders seemed to be motivated by more than just financial rewards. Throughout these interviews, creator-leaders discussed their passion to "be the best," to "know the most," and to "provide their clients with exceptional ideas." Almost all discussed their constant need to look for newer and better ways to work. And while as entrepreneurs this motivation is essential to their survival, it seems that as people it is the only way they know how to work.

Although I did not provide them with the definition of Good Work proposed by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon (2001), they rarely discussed creative excellence without discussing ethics. Most defined 'ethical' advertising as advertising that is age-appropriate, socially sensitive, and honest in its portrayal of the advertised product. Several argued that the critics do not understand that the same process that allows them to create effective advertising also ensures that the advertising is ethical, and that age-appropriate advertising is both clearer and more appealing to children. They also asserted that advertising that misrepresents products offends parents, an important market for their product. Therefore, they all agreed with the sentiments of one creator-leader that "good [meaning ethical] work and good business go hand in glove."

I asked the creator-leaders about the source of their moral codes. Answers were mixed. Most cited a combination of religious background, parental values and philosophy (although only one cited a specific philosopher that inspired and influenced her). Their morals were established, in all cases, before they entered the profession, and their codes did not change based on their experience within it. Related to this question, I asked about their role models and influences in the profession. Many named, once again, sources from outside the profession. For example, one noted that Judaism provided her with a blueprint for living that guided everything she did, including her work in children's marketing. But most creator-leaders that named influences from the profession described excellent managers or thoughtful leaders rather than moral exemplars. Role models were those who generated "breakthrough" advertising or created "highly imaginative stories."

To my subjects, ethics was more than a by-product of creating lucrative work; all of them understood the ethical responsibility associated with marketing to children. Several were glad that "a person like [them]" was in charge of such a powerful, and potentially dangerous tool. One opined that children's marketers must have a "highly sensitive moral compass," and everyone I spoke with claimed to have a blueprint for ethical work that guided him- or herself. One insisted, "We would never work on and have never worked on anything that was fraught with danger... We'll never work on [toys] with weapons or electronic games with violence. We just won't do it." While they admitted that "what society sees as right and wrong changes over time and often can't be predicted," their own ethics and sense of right and wrong were clear and unchanging.

But while many felt equipped to handle ethical dilemmas, they struggled to cite a project in which their ethics were compromised. More frequently, they seemed to encounter what they saw as allegations of unethical behavior from the critics or from activist groups with which they

did not agree. They felt that what was ethically acceptable today would not be deemed so tomorrow by outsiders. They felt that this meant that ‘ethics’ received even more attention in their work than it probably warranted. To ensure that they not only acted ethically, but also appeased their critics, they often looked to the rules and guidelines provided by the profession. But while most acknowledged that codes like the Children’s Advertising Review Unit’s self-regulatory guidelines (2003) provide direction, they felt that their personal code of ethics, influenced by religious beliefs, “upbringing,” and their philosophical view of the world truly helped them determine right from wrong. And while they often found network requirements extremely stringent, a few also discussed including or refusing to include statements or visuals that they felt misrepresented the advertised products, even if they could legally “get away with it.”

Creator-leaders assert their commitment to creating great ideas and to producing ethical advertising, but few discussed the importance of selling products to children, the real job which clients hire them to do. While they’re committed to improving the work of the profession, my interviewees struggled to answer the question, “Why is creating great advertising important to you?” The answer, described in the findings below, is “it’s not.” For most, children’s marketing provided the opportunity for these creator-leaders to become experts, and to create something new. It rewarded them for skills they had already mastered, like creativity and strategic thinking. For them, being less than fully dedicated to doing the best work in their field was not feasible, but the field in which they did it seemed almost arbitrary. One even claimed to feel guilty because she felt that she could have specialized in any other demographic segment and applied as much passion. For her, children’s marketing was merely a question of being in the right place at the right time.

### ***Lack Of Commitment To The Profession***

Creator-leaders' failure to defend work that they felt committed to doing well provided a strong indication that they may not be committed to their profession. Answers to questions that seemed unrelated to my central question confirmed this. They showed their ambivalence toward their work in their description of their job title, the advice they would give to a young person who was interested in children's marketing and the way that they hoped to spend the years following the end of their career in children's marketing.

Although I knew that all the creator-leaders in my sample specialize in children's and teen marketing, I asked the respondents to describe their role or title. While I expected some variation in their responses, I expected most would describe themselves as "children's marketers." Only one of the nine people I spoke with accepted the definition without qualification. Several described elaborate hierarchies that pointed to their discomfort with this label. One said, "First I say I work at an advertising agency. Then I say I'm a partner in that company. Then I say I'm a researcher, and if it's relevant, I say that I specialize in kids and teen work. And I always mention that we work with moms." Another asserted that she doesn't feel comfortable calling herself a 'kid's marketer' without discussing specific projects and client for whom she works. If she didn't have time for an adequate discussion and explanation, she defaulted to a generic definition, "advertiser."

I did not specifically ask them how they would like to be known or remembered, but six of the nine people I interviewed offered insight into their feelings about their professional legacy. All of them claimed that they do not want to be remembered as a 'great kid's marketer.' One said, "I want people to think, 'she created a company where people came up with great ideas, and were able to feel good about their work and their lives.'" Another said, "I don't want children's marketing to be my legacy, per se. It's not that I'm ashamed of it, it's just that I want to do

something after this that's really memorable." Another noted, "I want to develop a really great cartoon or idea that makes kid's lives better. That's what I want to be remembered for." These comments are especially interesting when compared to the numerous statements in which creator-leaders claimed that being seen as an "expert" was satisfying and attracted them to children's marketing. It seems that being remembered as an expert in *something* matters more to these creator-leaders than being remembered as an expert in children's marketing.

When discussing advice they would give to a young person in their lives who was thinking about entering the field of children's marketing, my subjects gave mixed answers. A few said they would encourage them to enter the field "if that's what they wanted" and would push them to do, as one said, "something great and something new" within it. Three provided vague answers including, "I would say 'whatever you want to do, do it well and I'll support you,'" and "I want my child to have the opportunity to do anything he wants, that's why I work this hard." These responses also reflect their own point of view on work: "*whatever* you do, do it well." But when I asked a CEO in my study what she would say if her son decided to enter the profession, she revealed her angst and perhaps summarized her feelings about the profession in which she clearly excelled:

I would say, 'oh.' All right. But I would think, 'there are so many greater things you could be doing. It's not a bad living but I'm a little sad because you have some much potential to do other things for the world. You wouldn't be doing the world harm in any way but you wouldn't be making the kinds of really far reaching positive change that I think you have the potential to do.'

Finally, two discussed discouraging young people from entering the profession because they fear for its longevity. As one put it, "If I'm a CEO and I'm faced with marketing to kids or marketing to adults, I might put more money towards adults and just avoid the hassle."

Finally, several discussed what they'll do in their "next" profession. At this point, few of them could quit their jobs without jeopardizing their family's standard of living or their

children's tuition payments, and yet almost all of them spoke of something else they would do after their "retirement." Interestingly, almost all these second professions involved using their knowledge of children to create some form of children's entertainment. But they would eliminate the client service and the commercial aspects of their profession. One spoke of using her understanding of a teenager's life to write a "how to" book on Bar Mitzvah speeches. Another spoke of creating educational materials that engaged and entertained children. In these interviews, my subjects expressed their belief that they cannot transform their current profession into one that provides more long-term satisfaction. Instead, they look forward to leaving it behind.

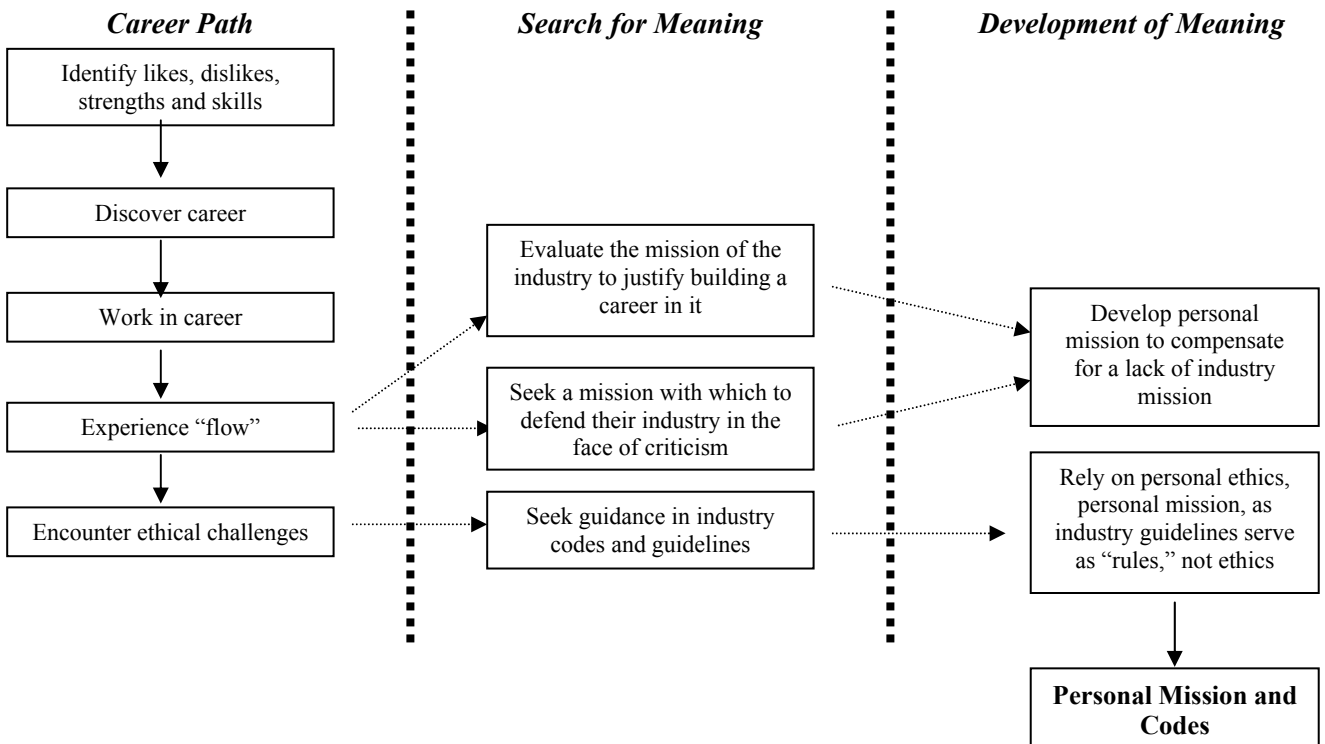
## **DISCUSSION**

My findings point to two unanswered questions: (1) why aren't creator-leaders committed to their profession and (2) why do they continue to work within it? The answers lie in the creator-leaders' experience of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), an "almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 110) and their understanding of children's marketing's purpose. Modeling the way in which creator-leaders make meaning of their work shows that, in the absence of an industry mission, they construct a personal mission to motivate them. Their work provides satisfaction, but they must reconcile its role in order to justify a career in the children's marketing profession. And when ethical dilemmas arise, they must react and apply a personal code of ethics to compensate for the lack of a professional code. But while this self-constructed mission might actually foster their commitment to ethical behavior and excellent work, it also prevents them from committing to their profession and thus, defending it against its critics.



I've developed a model of the process that children's marketers use to make meaning of their work (see below). It shows that children's marketers sought meaning for their industry after entering it and experiencing "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Rather than choosing a profession based on its mission, values and codes of ethics, they chose it based on their ability to succeed within it. The lack of prerequisite training allows them to contribute early in their careers, but does not provide them with the opportunity to consider the importance of the work in their domain, or to assess how one acts responsibly and ethically within it. Therefore, these creator-leaders construct personal missions that become more important to them than the real work of children's marketers: selling products to children.

**PERSONAL VALUES VS. PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION MODEL:  
CHILDREN’S MARKETERS**



**Figure 1.** Arrows in this model show the progression of individual creator-leaders as they evolve in their dedication to their profession and in their understanding of the meaning of the profession for themselves. Solid arrows show the progression of the individual through stages or events in their career. Dashed arrows show the movement towards meaning-making that individuals undergo.

All nine creator-leaders described the discovery of their careers as “serendipitous” or “accidental.” Instead of identifying a field whose work was meaningful to them and committing to the training and preparation necessary to receive a job within it, creator-leaders were attracted to the profession after being told that they already possessed the essential skills for success in it. They found that companies were looking for effective leaders, for people who enjoyed analytical thinking, and for people who valued creative ideas. It sounded like them. Rather than trying to make themselves fit an industry, they found an industry that was made to fit them. They found themselves able to contribute early in their careers, and soon learned that the profession valued

fresh thinking over training or experience (in fact, several of the creator-leaders noted that their companies did not recruit people from university advertising programs, but preferred “untainted” liberal arts majors). Often, what made them successful was something so natural that it was difficult to articulate. One said:

It was just a good fit, like what you feel when you take a tour of the right college. I thought, ‘I’m good at this and I’m good for this.’ We all like to feel that what we’re doing, we’re doing well. I think that’s where a lot of satisfaction comes from...

Children’s marketers admitted they were not attracted to children’s marketing because of its mission and several felt that their work rarely “made the world a better place.” While none felt they were engaged in unethical work, more than one said, “we’re no saints.” As I probed to understand why they thought their work was important, several asserted that their profession is not pro-social, but rather they had come to terms with a “do no harm; do good when possible” orientation towards their work. One defended her career choice by simply stating, “I really love my job...People are entitled to that.”

Undeniably, creator-leaders remained in the profession because the work offered opportunities to learn and the ability to excel. They discussed the invigorating challenge of “keeping up with kids’ culture,” and understanding the complexities of children’s development. They valued the opportunity to work with creative, interesting people, and they loved the variability in their jobs. Finally, they enjoyed seeing the tangible results of their work, on television and in new products. But for several, children’s marketing offered a unique opportunity at a time in their careers when they were looking for a new challenge. The industry had not matured, and the opportunity to contribute to the field’s knowledge was significant. Every creator-leader interviewed described the appeal of creating “something new,” something that was their own. In every case, the profession’s appeal rested in its ability to allow them to do excellent work, and to be recognized - not in the importance, per se, of the mission to them.

For these children's marketers, several of the benefits of their profession also serve as limitations. They can focus on one small aspect of their clients' business, but they also lack the power to direct the entire marketing effort. Several discussed seeing the failure of a product they designed because a client did not distribute it adequately. Or they created an engaging advertisement, only to find out that the budget for it was reallocated. While this permission to focus and this lack of responsibility could be freeing for them, it could also make them feel like a small piece in a much bigger picture which they were not permitted to view. And although they serve as experts, the final decisions about their work are made by clients or even by the legal staffs of television networks. Thus, while several creator-leaders described their work as extremely satisfying, they also acknowledged that their specialized role can make them feel "left out" of a larger process. This amalgam of feelings could explain their willingness to remain in the profession, but their lack of commitment to it.

Creator-leaders developed personal missions that allowed them to find meaning in the work when they found that selling products to children was not a true professional mission. For some it involved protecting children from their own profession. While they do not believe their profession is unethical, they understand that speaking to children through mass media can be dangerous. One said, "I was glad that I was the person doing this because I felt like I could have a positive impact." Another spoke of a personal mission that actually countered the profession's objective: convincing children to request products.

I think we're providing information so kids can know, accept or reject products and services for good reasons. Advertising that doesn't provide enough information for kids to do this just isn't good.

For all of the creator-leaders who managed a staff, treating their employees well was as important to them as developing an effective advertisement. Several of them discussed a shift in their careers in which they create less and facilitate the creative thinking of others more. One

said, “Now I’m more concerned with creating an idea factory - and nurturing people who are miniature idea factories.” Of those who employ large amounts of people, almost all talked about this aspect of their job. “I want this to be a place where people find personal happiness.” Another added, “It was important for me to be able to take care of the people who work for me, and reward them when they work hard.” Finally, several spoke of creating advertisements that “sparked children’s imaginations” and provided them with “fantasies that allowed them to imagine other worlds.” One clearly defined her personal mission, which combined her desire to protect children with a desire to inspire them:

What we do is to help people be sensitive to kids and to do it right and help people make it fun and engaging and inspiring versus manipulating kids. And I’ve never believed that what we do and what we try to do is manipulate kids in any way. I feel like we bring a kind of honesty and integrity and empathy and understanding to our work that makes our work better and more inspiring for kids.

When faced with ethical dilemmas, creator-leaders looked to their own ethical codes for guidance. They knew and followed the rules and guidelines that regulated advertising content, but felt that the tougher decisions, the ones that really constituted ethical dilemmas, were not easily addressed by applying shared professional principles. Instead, they were committed to their own ethical codes.

While this study did not compare children’s marketers to other professionals, I speculate that the model for these professionals would differ, based in part, on the career paths of journalists and geneticists discussed in the Good Work study. In contrast to the personally constructed model of the children’s marketers, I speculate that the practitioner in other domains typically develops a commitment to his or her profession through a more standard socialization/education process. Throughout the course of their careers, professionals are forced to commit to their chosen domain by investing in training and preparation. This training allows them to assess not only their attitude towards their profession’s mission, but also provides them

with standards and codes of ethics that they can rely on when they encounter an ethical dilemma. Thus, they receive the necessary tools over time to allow them to commit to their career.

**PERSONAL VALUES VERSUS PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION MODEL:  
OTHER PROFESSIONALS**

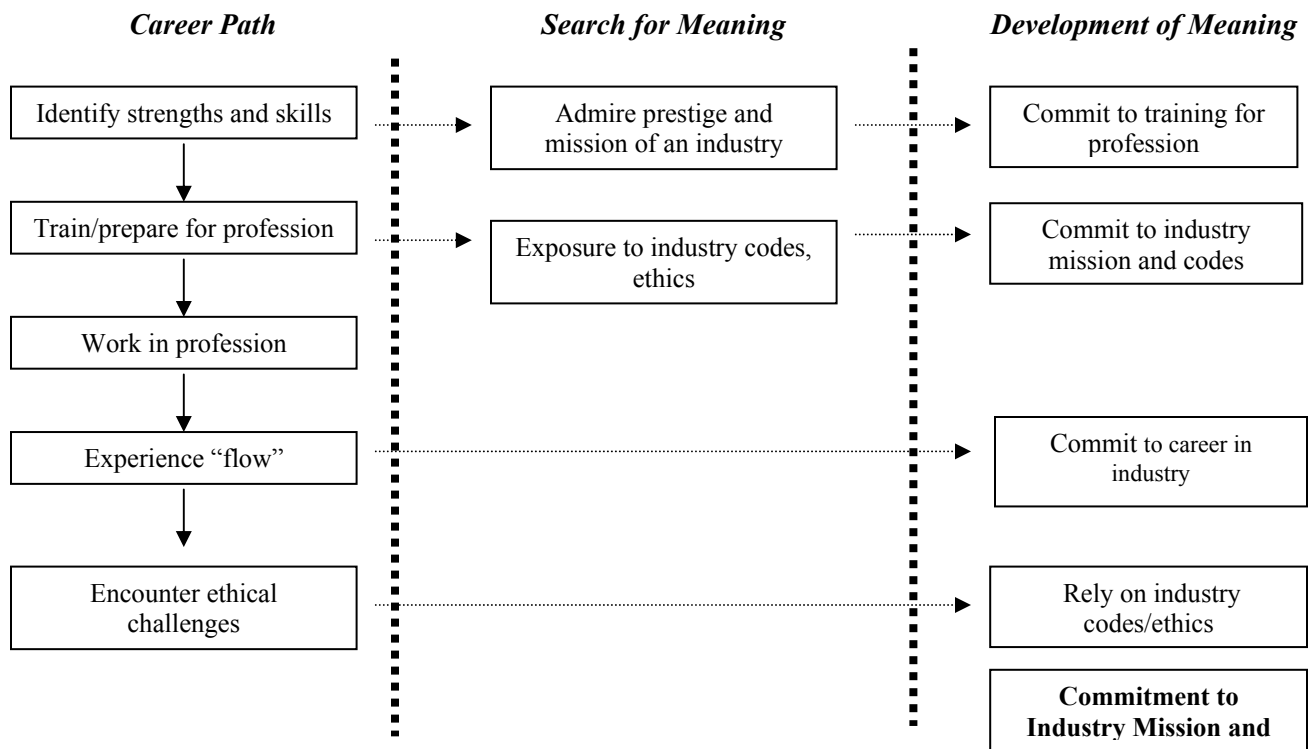


Figure 2. Arrows in this model show the progression of individuals they evolve in their dedication to their profession and in their understanding of the meaning of the profession for themselves. Solid arrows show the progression of the individual through stages or events in his/her career. Dashed arrows show the movement towards meaning-making that individuals undergo.

Unlike these professionals, children’s marketers are motivated by an intrinsic commitment to excellence and ethical integrity, not by their profession’s mission. And while selling products to children does not drive them, opportunities to act as a protector of children, a mentor, a manager and a creator of new ideas does strike them as work worth doing. Finally, when children’s marketers are faced with an ethical dilemma, doing the wrong thing would not

merely violate a professional code, but would involve going against their personal principles. For them, there is little difference between personal and professional integrity. While this could also be the case for practitioners who rely on professional codes, the personal identity of these children's marketers feels exceptionally connected to the quality of the work they produce, if not to the profession in which they produce it.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### *The Future of Children's Marketing*

Since these creator-leaders, who founded the industry and remain committed to doing excellent work within it, refuse to defend it, it seems unlikely that others will. Therefore, its future is questionable. While none of the respondents believed that children's advertising would be legally banned in the U.S., they acknowledged that the critics and activists could influence clients to limit their investment in it.

Right now, practitioners believe that children's marketers operate ethically. They describe even their closest competitors as "good people who generally make the best decisions for children." While the creator-leaders in this study continue to work in the profession, we can assume that they will lead organizations to make ethical decisions. But without a mission or code, new members of the field will continue to apply their personal missions and codes of ethics to the work of the field. Therefore, the ethics of the field will be subject to personal discretion.

### *Limitations/Implications for Future Research*

This study has two significant limitations. First, my relationship with the creator-leaders I interviewed, and my previous experience working in the profession, may have biased my interpretation of the interviews. I believe that my relationship with creator-leaders may have

increased their candor in our discussions, but I also feel that information may have unintentionally been positioned to me differently than it may have been to a true industry “outsider.”

Second, because this study does not compare creator-leaders to other practitioners in the field of children’s marketing or to creator-leaders in other professions, it’s unclear whether or not the characteristics described above are driven by the profession or by individual factors. These findings could characterize entrepreneurs across many fields, or business leaders rather than the typical children’s marketer. And because, as discussed above, this study did not include interviews among professionals from other fields, the “receptive/cumulative” model and path to professional commitment remains purely speculative. Comparison of these results with results from studies conducted among other professionals within or outside the children’s marketing profession may reveal a different picture.

## **CONCLUSION**

Children’s marketers exude passion for their work and spoke with ease and integrity about the ethical lens through which they see their work and their world. Despite allegations from critics that they are simultaneously calculating and careless, my interviews reveal a thoughtful, considerate group of people who seek meaning from their work and who strive for excellence in the face of criticism. However, my study also reveals a surprising lack of commitment to their profession from a group of people so passionate about their work. Their deep ambivalence allows them to tolerate the critics, but explains their frustration with the way they are perceived by outsiders. Still, every creator-leader speaks of the fun of working in his or her profession. For them, a career of creating and understanding children offers more rewards than regrets.





## EPILOGUE

Most of the participants in this study were eager to see how I would characterize them and their field. During our interviews, many wondered out loud whether or not I would be able to be “true” to what I heard from them, given potential pressures from the academic world to deem them “unethical.” A few told me that they had presented to academic communities in the past, and that at times, they had been accused of lying or of being naive because they denied that unethical behavior commonly occurred in the field of children’s marketing. They offered advice and luck as we finished our interviews.

I sent the completed paper to all nine subjects, but only four responded formally. These four offered their assessment of the paper, and in some cases, raised questions about the grounding theory (the Good Work theory), my methodology, and my findings. Their comments provide further insight into the way creator-leaders think about the profession, and provide challenges to the theories presented in this paper.

Two of the four respondents characterized the paper as “insightful,” with one noting that the paper “identified the central tension of the industry.” One subject provided the following comment in an e-mail:

It gets right to the heart of the issue - that we all believe in what we're doing but are fearful of standing up to the criticism. Honestly, I don't think anyone wants to be in the "hot seat." The idea that we don't want to be remembered as a kid marketer truly resonates with me. While I love the intellectual challenges of my work, I would ultimately want to do something that can truly enrich or enhance kids' lives - something that allows me to use my understanding of kids to make a real difference.

One creator-leader questioned my interpretations of his feelings and motives. He asserts that his own book was written without the self-censorship that I allude to in my paper (“because their books often served as marketing materials for their own company” I privileged the information about their ethics and professional experiences that they provided during our

interviews). He asks, perhaps rightfully so, “Why doesn’t that count?” He also poses another explanation for failing to defend the profession against specific charges of unethical behavior. He notes that the strategy that he uses, “letting it blow over” so as not to provide credence to claims that are unjustified or ludicrous, and “picking your moments carefully”, are strategies practiced by PR professionals across every profession.

He also critiques my central hypothesis, that creator-leaders are dissatisfied because the children’s marketing profession does not have a central mission, as an “odd issue.” He writes:

If you are curing cancer, [or are] an economics professor trying to better understand the economy so billions of people won't starve, or the journalist and geneticist you cite, you probably have a big industry/social mission. But the other 90% of the world are trying to do other things...like make enough money for a home, raise a family, send them to college, maybe create a business to feel independent. Can you really say that secretaries, garage mechanics, most people who work in package goods, the small business person who owns Dunkin’ Donuts, most lawyers, etc. have an industry MISSION with a capital "M"?

He goes on to say that my paper privileges a professional mission over a personal mission. This is accurate. Because I intended to explore the profession through the framework of a theory concerned with how industries support individuals’ ability to make ethical choices, I use the profession as a point of entry and a focus for my research. But I also attempted to reflect this tension between “excellent” individuals and industries that fail to support them in this paper. My interviews confirmed my hypothesis that individuals in this profession have a strong moral sense and a purpose in their lives that work fulfills, even if they don’t have a strong sense of purpose in their work.

I would like to thank Dr. Howard Gardner, Seana Moran and Geppetto Group CEO Julie Halpin for their contributions to this paper. All three provided helpful input on the first drafts of my discussion guide and paper, and also informed and challenged my own ideas about the children's marketing profession. I would also like to thank the participants in my study who not only offered frank and candid answers to my questions, but who also provided thoughtful insight into the nature of their work.

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

#### **Background**

- When you're telling someone what you do and what industry you work in, what do you say?
- If needed, follow-up with prompts: Are you a marketer, a consultant, a kid's marketer?
- Probe: Why would someone want to or not want to be identified as a kid marketer?
- Probe: Do you call yourself "[title they provided]" to everyone or does it change depending on your audience?
- Can you describe your job for me?
- And can you tell me how you came to work in the marketing industry and the kids marketing industry?

#### **Motivations/Drivers/Influences**

- What things about the industry that were initially attractive to you?
- Since you've been in the industry, has this changed at all? Are there other factors that have led to your job satisfaction?
- Are there factors that you knew initially or that you discovered after being in the industry that stand in the way of your job satisfaction?
- Are there people who have been influential in how you do your work?
- Probe: Does your peer group include other people in the children's marketing industry or in the marketing industry?
- Are their belief systems or religious beliefs/values that direct your work?

#### **Satisfying/Dissatisfying Work**

- Are there specific qualities that have contributed to your success in your field?
- Are there any specific traits or qualities of people who are successful in the children's marketing industry?
- Probe: Are they different from the people who are successful in the general advertising industry?
- Is there a particular goal that you're trying to achieve right now with your work?
- Probe: What makes that goal important to you?
- Now I'd like to talk about a project that you've worked on that has been particularly satisfying for you. What was it, and why was it satisfying?
- Have you ever worked on a project that was unsatisfying for you? Can you tell me about it?
- What standards or criteria do you use to define excellent work in your field?

#### **General Views on the Industry**

- Now I'd like to discuss a bit about the kids marketing industry. I'm particularly interested in how you see the industry as a whole. Do you have a sense that there is a distinct industry, or is kids marketing a part of another industry?
- What do you like about the industry? What do you dislike?

- How do you think people outside of your industry would describe it?

### **Ethical Concerns**

- Are there ethical standards that are shared by people in the industry?
- Probe: How do people come to know them?
- Probe: Who creates these standards?
- Probe: Who should create these standards?
- Do these ethical standards affect your work? How so?
- Do you have ethical concerns about your area of work?
- What do you think about critics who would say that kids marketing is unethical?
- Probe: What do you think about criticism that children's advertising is in part to blame for the childhood obesity epidemic?
- Probe: What do you think about criticism that children's advertising manipulates children?
- Probe: What do you think about Coca-Cola's recent decision to cease advertising directly to kids (or other examples that they mention)?
- What would you do if a law were banned on advertising or marketing directly to children (as it has been in Sweden)?

### **Advice to The Next Generation**

- What would you say to a young person in your life who was considering entering the children's marketing industry?

## **APPENDIX B: CODING DEFINITIONS**

### **Career Path**

SER: Serendipity

TRNG: Training or lack of training

DIS: Disappointment with another profession

ERLY: Early success

### **Attitudes Towards Industry**

AMBIV: Ambivalence

CONFLICT: Like it and see its downsides, for example

FRUSTRATION

LOYALTY: Willingness to defend

COMMITMENT: Commitment to continuing to work in industry

SYN: Synergy between personal values and industry values

### **Critics**

CR-AG: Agree with critics

CR-DG: Disagree with critics

CR-ARG: Arguments against the critics

CR-PRSNL: Feel personally attacked

### **Good Work\_**

GW-CR: Creativity

GW-IN: Insight

GW-EXP: Good Work example

### **Ethics**

ET-SRC: Sources of ethics

ET-INDCD: Description of industry ethics

ET-EXP: Ethical example

### **Industry Mission**

IND-IK: Inspiring kids

IND-UK: Understanding kids

IND-SK: Selling to kids

IND-NONE: No real industry mission

### **Sources of Satisfaction**

FLOW: Excitement about their work, discussion of ability to lose focus on all other things

SS-CR: Creativity

SS-ST: Strategic thinking

SS-MNT: Mentoring

SS-FIN: Monetary compensation

SS-STAT: Status or prestige

SS-LO: Learning opportunities

SS-NEW: Creating something new

SS-VAR: Variety – something new everyday



SS-KDS: Chance to work with kids  
SS-LTHRT: Lighthearted, fun industry

**Sources of Dissatisfaction**

DIS-CRT: Critics  
DIS-TIM: Time pressure  
DIS-STR: Stress  
DIS-PEO: Difficulty working with other people

**Influences**

REL: Religious beliefs  
FAM: Family members  
BOS: Previous bosses  
INDEXPERTS: Industry experts  
COWS: Co-workers/partners  
NONE: No one – I follow my own lead

**Advice to The Next Generation**

ADV-PURS: Pursue it if you're passionate  
ADV-REL: Reluctant approval