

Commercialism in Irish Education, Report 2009 – 2010.

Commercial activity in Irish schools during the school year 2009 – 2010 demonstrates at once how deeply embedded into school life are commercial promotions and how even the highest profile marketing scheme may be derailed by educators who simply refuse to cooperate.

The growth of in-school marketing in Ireland has predominantly been of the embedded kind rather than the obvious, traditional kind of poster board or television ad campaign. By giving their promotion an educational gloss and linking it with a competition, lesson plan or the prospect of resources for the school, marketers have created many successful vehicles to reach their audience and harness the medium of the school to their ends. This cover allows far greater impact than a typical advertisement and portrays the sponsor as benevolently supporting and indeed enhancing a worthy cause. Materials and websites are meticulously prepared to emphasize the connection with specific curricular aims, with glittering prizes for the students and teachers, and with a well-resourced, modern school full of the latest apparatus. Frequently schemes will focus on the wider community in order to better ingratiate themselves with relatives, neighbours or local clubs who can be asked to row in with the students' efforts. Also notable is the timing at which these promotions are offered to schools. By organizing their ten week voucher collection period around the same dates each year and being careful not to clash with a rival chain who are also running an in-school promotion marketers can better weave their presence into the fabric of school life.

Among the material seeking inclusion in the educational experience of Irish children during the school year 2009 – 2010 were the following schemes.

Sponsored Educational Materials

For the second year running, every public school in the country received an invitation to “Doodle 4 Google” as the internet giant sought to again make its corporate logo the focus of art lessons. Teachers were offered sample lesson plans and “ideas for ways to integrate this activity into the curriculum.¹” The lesson involving a drawing on the theme of “My Future” claims to be strongly linked to the visual arts curriculum and to integrate harmoniously with the aims of the science, ICT and English programmes. Yet children’s artistic vision of the future cannot exclude “Google” as their logo must be “clearly visible and recognisable²” on all work. The first instruction / endorsement suggested to teachers of children in the youngest classes is as follows:

Introduce the competition by showing the Google logo on the IWB (interactive whiteboard) or on an enlarged colour printout and explaining that Google is a search engine that helps us to find the information we want from our computers using the internet.³

The gallery of winning entries posted on the “Doodle4Google” website starkly illustrates the way in which a corporation can literally embed themselves into the education of young people. Students from age 4 to 18 all positioning their imaginative creations around the brand logo, engaging with the image in a playful and sustained manner represents a powerful advertisement for the company. It is also extremely cost effective

¹ Doodle4Google, “Lesson Plans” available from <http://www.google.ie/doodle4google/resources.html>

² Doodle4Google, “Design Guidelines” available from <http://www.google.ie/doodle4google/resources.html>

³ Doodle4Google, “Looking into my crystal ball – Junior/Senior Infants, 1st Class, 2nd Class” available from http://static.googleusercontent.com/external_content/untrusted_dlcp/www.google.ie/en/ie/doodle4google/files/junior1to2-2009.pdf

as Google who made pre-tax profits of \$8.4 billion in 2009⁴ had only to offer a place on its home page for the winning entry as well as some laptops and a €10,000 technology grant to entice schools to bring their brand into the heart of the lesson for thousands of students. The unrelenting brand-focus shown by Google in offering children a logo-filled canvas on which to draw may be held up in contrast to the following statement on company's website

Since we believe you should know when someone has paid to put a message in front of you, we distinguish ads from search results or other content on a page by labeling them as "sponsored links" or "Ads by Google".⁵

No such courtesy is afforded the students when it is Google who is paying to put their message quite literally into the art lesson. A corporate presence, hiding in full view, is indistinguishable from the curriculum thanks to a cleverly embedded promotion.

National Irish Bank continued to promote their “fun and educational online universe” Moneyville, aimed at showing 4 – 8 year olds how to make and spend money. The gold-bedecked mayor informs children that this is a town in which to earn gold and silver coins and that they will have their own room which they can “buy lots of fun things for.”⁶ In 2009 a new section called “The Family Game” for older children was added to the website. Once again this is a realm in which all human interactions involve money and players receive points solely for having enough money to purchase whatever commodity they chose.

⁴ John Collins, “Google,” *The Irish Times Weekend Review*, 23 January 2010, 1.

⁵ Google “Corporate Information” available from <http://www.google.ie/intl/en/corporate/>

⁶ All information on Moneyville gleaned from www.moneyville.ie/

Fruit producer *Le Crunch* was determined that students of all ages should encounter their brand this year and, aided by Real Event Solutions who specialize in school based promotions, they launched schemes aimed at both first and second level schools. The *Le Crunch Health Heroes* promotion offered apple related activities in no less than 8 curricular areas including the following suggestion for a drama activity: “Get a group of friends and pretend you are all Le Crunch Health Heroes, which one would you be, make a play using all the characters.⁷” Children were also invited to design posters on the theme of health which could feature the marketing characters the *Le Crunch bunch* and which must include *Le Crunch* in the title of slogan. Essentially intended as advertisements for the brand, the winning posters would appear on a voting form in a supermarket chain and “be prominently displayed in all stores.⁸”

Meanwhile the *Le Crunch Sound Bytes* was inviting teenage students to write and record a 30 second radio ad or jingle on healthy eating being sure mention *Le Crunch Apples*. The contradiction between advertising and education is plainly seen on the supporting website which lists among its teaching aims “To help enlarge students’ critical imagination and analytical skills⁹” only to then advise students to “Mention the brand name more than once....It is an advertisement for *Le Crunch* after all¹⁰”. Teachers not swayed by the value of the schemes teaching aims may be persuaded to deliver its

⁷ Le Crunch “Food for Growing Minds” available from <http://www.ouitolecrunch.com/oui-to-le-crunch/food-for-growing-minds/introduction.aspx#>

⁸ Sharon Murray, Le Crunch Health Heroes Competition, “Oui, Become a health hero” Letter sent to primary schools, November 2009.

⁹ Le Crunch, “For Teachers” available at <http://www.ouitolecrunch.com/sound-bites/for-teachers/resources.html>

¹⁰ Le Crunch, “Top Tips” available at <http://www.ouitolecrunch.com/sound-bites/top-tips/hints-and-tips.html>

message with the inducement of being entered into a draw for a trip to Paris. Unsurprisingly, the winning entries feature gushing endorsements of the brand's produce:

This is *Le Crunch* apples, healthy and delicious, tasty and nutritious, one of your 5 a day.

Unless it's *Le Crunch* you're a bunch.....of losers.¹¹

In each case one imagines that Real Event Solutions felt they had delivered on their promise to clients that campaigns would make "a strong connection through live and interactive experiences, striking an emotional chord with young consumers and developing a long lasting relationship."¹²

Incentive Schemes

The collection by school of vouchers and tokens has become a lamentable tradition particularly in Irish primary schools over the past 15 years. This year was notable for the fact that SuperValu withdrew their "Kids in Action" promotion and Tesco consolidated their two voucher schemes offering computer and sports equipment into "Tesco for Schools and Clubs". Once more issuing schools with target charts and collection boxes Tesco set schools the challenge of busily promoting the brand over 10 weeks in order to accumulate the €36,300 worth of receipts required to gain a digital camera or the €299,000 demanded of those seeking a laptop¹³. A clear distinction between the educational and commercial "bottom line" appears among the tips for boosting your

¹¹ Finalists from Le Crunch Sound Bites competitions, audio clips available on <http://www.ouitolecrunch.com/sound-bites/finalists/winners.html>

¹² "Communications campaigns through schools and colleges", Real Event Solutions, available at <http://www.realevents.ie/services/educational-sponsorships.htm>

¹³ Information on Tesco for School and Clubs available from <http://www.tesco.ie/schoolsandclubs/index.html>

collection. It is suggested that students design and circulate their own promotions posters among their local community but emphasized that collections are not allowed on Tesco premises. Clearly the supermarket has more regard for its customers and premises than to have children pestering and wasting peoples time collecting worthless vouchers.

The *Irish Daily Mail* was one company who sought to capitalize on any space in the “school market” for incentive schemes. In October 2009 it contacted schools about it “wonderful FREE offer” of a Dell computer in return for 400 tokens from its newspaper. With just two weeks to collect the tokens, schools were asked for proof of purchase of 29 copies per day. The company was again writing to principals in January 2010 boasting of “Free Kits for Kids”. This offer too was conditional on schools amassing 400 tokens from the newspaper (retail price €1) within 26 days to claim their kit which was, of course, branded with the *Irish Daily Mail*.¹⁴

Sponsored Programmes and Activities

This year the sponsored programmes aimed at Irish schools came from some surprising quarters and were met with some equally surprising reactions.

Fyffes solicited schools’ involvement in a competition which they assured was “not related to purchase of the product¹⁵”. Instead they presented children with Freddy Fyffes, a cartoon banana with a Fyffes sticker on his skin, and asked them to design a football strip, crest and flag for Freddy’s new football club. To win a training session with the

¹⁴ Information on Daily Mail Schemes taken from letters sent to schools. Computer scheme; October 2009. Kits for Kids scheme from Irish Daily Mail 13 January 2009.

¹⁵ Information on Fyffes scheme taken from letter and poster issued to primary schools, June 2009.

Republic of Ireland soccer manager, teachers would read a letter from Freddy Fyffes to the class and give each child a copy of the entry form which features the brand logo five times including on the jersey and crest children are to decorate.

The marketing manager from An Post, the Irish postal service, was also in correspondence with primary schools, promoting their *Cyril the Squirrel* saving scheme. Armed with yet another animated marketing device, the company offered to provide a post office savings card for every pupil to track the growth of their savings and to “send a ledger for the teacher or savings administrator to monitor the class’s progress.”¹⁶ Just who the “savings administrator” is in a primary school is something of a mystery but teachers are to purchase the €1 savings stamps at the local office and sell them to children on a designated “Stamp Day” each week. Those who partake and return an application form detailing the number of pupil involved, how often they save and how much they save may be one of the 12 schools chosen to receive a €2,500 prize each. In a year of recession and unprecedented unemployment, this initiative by a semi-state body places unfair pressure on children and economic strain on parents who may not have the funds to spare.

In last years trends report we saw how Allied Irish Bank’s *Build a Bank Challenge* continued to see teenage students promoting the brand and taking lessons in money management skills while the sponsors themselves were convulsed by plummeting share prices and massive toxic debts, only surviving through a state guarantee and a multi

¹⁶ Information on “Saving with Cyril” from letter sent to schools October 2009 – but it’s all available on http://www.savingwithcyril.ie/cyril_parents_sss.html

billion euro government rescue plan. One might have imagined that such financial delinquency would have resulted in the invitation to “be involved in all aspects of banking from sourcing new customers to opening AIB accounts and encouraging regular savings¹⁷” being met with polite refusal in 2009.

However, the fact that over €6 billion of AIB’s loans have had to be transferred to the state run “bad bank”¹⁸, has not stopped schools reaching out to the bank for support and guidance on skills such as “implementing a marketing plan” and “balancing the books”. Again this year students were interviewed for the positions of branch manager, auditor and sales and marketing executive, to begin work promoting AIB’s products and services within the school. In order to compete against other school branches in the regional heats, teams must produce a marketing plan focused on “account recruitment and sustainment”, using all their ingenuity to convince other students to bank with AIB. One such team used the website *Bebo* to publicise the grand opening of their branch and the accompanying fancy dress competition. Students were reminded of the benefits of opening an AIB account and offered an extra €20 mobile phone credit if they sign up for internet banking¹⁹. Such viral marketing among teenagers is a tremendous asset to banks at a time when they face public opprobrium and rank among the least reputable corporations in a

¹⁷ Allied Irish Bank, “What is the AIB Build a Bank Challenge?”, available at <http://www.aib.ie/personal/offers/build-a-bank-home>

¹⁸ BFN News, “AIB transfers loans totalling €2.73bn to NAMA” 19 July 2010, available from <http://www.investegate.co.uk/InvArticle.aspx?id=100888>

¹⁹ Bebo, “AIB Build a Bank Challenge” available on <http://skin.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=10172122901>

2010 Rep-Trak survey²⁰. The use of students time and educational space to promote a commercial bank found to be reckless in its own lending looks set to continue as the *Build a Bank Challenge* is due to recommence in September 2010.

One company who were not as fortunate as AIB in deriving tremendous advertising from schools this year were *Independent Newspapers* who were forced into a major climb-down over their *Building for the Future* scheme. The primary school competition, which had previously been endorsed by the prime minister, claimed to be “by far the largest promotion to run in school in Ireland²¹” and was co-sponsored by another of the state guaranteed banks *Bank of Ireland*. Amid much fanfare and media coverage schools were invited to submit a project on the theme of “Our Local Business”. Participating schools would receive a television and music systems as well as the chance to win thousands of euro in cash prizes in return for collecting a quota of 20 tokens per pupil from *Independent Newspapers* to accompany their project. Immediately the scheme drew stringent criticism from the primary teachers union the Irish National Teachers Organisation who described it as a “new low in trying to target school children for commercial gain.”²² Pointing out that the sponsorship from the bank was effectively taxpayers money being used to promote the companies through school children, the INTO threatened public protest if the companies involved did not scrap the scheme.

²⁰ Catherine O Mahony “Putting a value on companies reputations” Sunday Business Post, 25 April 2010, p23.

²¹ John Walshe, Education Editor, Irish Independent, letter to primary school principals, January 2010-07-2

²² Irish National Teachers Organisation, “Commercial Exploitation of School Children”, 12 January 2010 available at

<http://www.into.ie/ROI/NewsEvents/PressReleases/PressReleases2010/CommercialExploitationofSchoolChildren12110/Title.14547.en.php>

Fifty primary school principals signed a statement criticizing *Independent Newspapers* for posturing as benefactors while, in reality, “seeking to exploit schools, boost sales and make life uncomfortable for children whose parents do not buy the sponsors newspapers.”²³ They pointed out that an average single stream school of 8 classes was required to show evidence of €7,776 in sales by asking “everyone you know to start collecting tokens straight away”. Faced with sustained opposition and negative media coverage²⁴ *Independent Newspapers* decided to remove the commercial stipulation altogether from the scheme, a first in the history of commercialism in Irish schools. This climb down in the case of a costly and high profile school promotion illustrates how the same advertising which appears so embedded in our school system may be swiftly eradicated when confronted by the educational community. It gives hope to those seeking a learning environment free from the anti-educational commercial bias so prevalent in the above initiatives and challenges schools to justify the other marketing promotions they allow to remain unchecked.

²³ Quoted by Colin Coyle, “Independent News and Media withdraws token scheme”, Sunday Times, 31 January 2010, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/ireland/article7009721.ece>

²⁴ RTÉ News, “Bank of Ireland’s School Promotion Criticised”, 12 January 2010, available at <http://www.rte.ie/news/2010/0112/education.html>