

By Steven J. Steinberg

Steinberg On Creative



Out Of The Mouths Of Babes

Kid power can energize your creative efforts

Radio and TV pioneer Art Linkletter put this catchphrase into our lexicon over 50 years ago: Kids Say The Darndest Things. His early *House Party* television show featured a segment with that name. We learned that children — with their unique, honest, and innocent worldview — have a way of creating mirth, embarrassment, and pathos that we find entertaining and charming. So naturally, advertising people, who will jump on any bandwagon that abets their ability to connect with consumers, realized: *Hey, we can exploit that!*

Many successful advertising campaigns have engaged children as on-screen talent or voice-over actors. Baby Boomers will easily recall the Markie Maypo campaigns, the chugga-chugga choo-choo Good 'N Plenty commercials, and the classic Life Cereal spot with Mikey, who is now, I believe, collecting Social Security.

Using kids in commercials can be a gold mine — or a La Brea Tar Pit in which your desire to image, brand, and position your client can be mired and sunk. Here's how to fall into the former, rather than latter camp.

IF THEY READ FROM A SCRIPT, IT WILL GO RIGHT TO THE CRYPT.

As a rule, most kids are lousy actors and great mimics. Acting is an art that very few children (or adults for that matter) can master. But they're naturals when it comes to parroting what they hear. I have worked with kids — my own — for all their lives. They began before they learned to read.

Line by line, I'd have them repeat after me what I wanted them to say, including inflections. In today's digital environment, it's easy to string their lines together. Sometimes they'd add a little twist to it, improving on my own interpretation, and we'd go with that take. By all means, if they can read, let them pore over the script before the session; it makes that repeat-after-me process go more smoothly. Stand in front of them so they are actually talking to you when they're recording.

PRECOCIOUSNESS = SPONTANEITY, SO IF YOU TRY TO CREATE IT, YOU'RE DOOMED.

Even on agency-produced national spots, the kid commercials that make me want to gag are the ones in which too-clever writers have tried to make words that no real kid on earth has ever said come out of the youngster's mouth. It's jarring. It's annoying. And most of all, it's like putting a big banner on the effort: **YOU'RE LISTENING TO A COMMERCIAL!** Avoid cutesy-poo language and adult-sounding, smart-assed banter. Have the kids say things you've



heard them say in real life. The dialogue can include sarcasm, anger, joy, fear, or any of the many emotional tones children display in real life.


NEVER LET THEM WEAR HEADPHONES.

Even adults are thrown off when they hear their own voices through the microphone and processors. When the spot is played back for the first time, virtually everyone says, "That doesn't even sound like me." You want the children to sound natural on the commercial, so don't let technology ruin the moment. When it's all done, let them listen to the takes with the cans on as a reward for a job well done.

RADIO JR. PRODUCTION QUICK-TIPS:

- **Keep the parents out of the studio.** Kids, especially amateurs, will have enough butterflies, so don't let the pressure of Mom and Dad looking over their shoulders spoil your production — unless, of course, they tell you they want Mom or Dad present.
- **Don't overdo.** Kids get frustrated easily. Limit your expectations and don't be afraid to settle for less than gold. Silver will often suffice, so if you can't get it "perfect" in a few takes, move on.
- **One coach, only.** I learned this coaching softball: Nothing upsets a kid more than voices from many directions and directions from many voices. One person should be designated to interact with the child.
- **Reward them.** Whether it's a station tee shirt, a soft drink, or just a dollar bill, it makes a world of difference.
- **Patience is a virtue.** Be virtuous.

LET THEM DO WHAT THEY DO BEST — POINT OUT THE FOIBLES AND STUFFINESS OF ADULTS.

Not only do we not mind it when children do this, we seem to take delight in it. Even in radio, having kids get the best of adults in a way that echoes real life creates an emotional resonance that adults respond to in a positive way. Again, this isn't to say they should be rude, impertinent, or vulgar. Kids teach us life lessons all the time. If that lesson helps to promote a product or service, from the mouths of babes comes very effective copy. If you'd like to hear a sample, e-mail me, and I'll send an MP3 your way. 

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