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Students

The loan is already virtually spent

Advertisers don't see grubby students, they see wealthy young consumers

Harriet Swain
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You're sipping beer, on promotion, in the student bar from a beer glass branded with the logo of a bank. As you set the glass down on the branded beer mat on the branded table top, you receive a text message about a new cinema offer. An email flashes up on your laptop, advertising an insurance service. You pick up your branded pen and a library book, letting an advertisement for a noodle bar slip from the book to the floor. An attractive passing student picks it up and engages you in conversation. She's employed by a soft drinks company as a brand manager and wants you to try her product. Lucky you picked up that hair gel sample at the sponsored sports event yesterday.

If there's an aspect of student life not yet touched by a company trying to sell something, you can bet there's a marketing executive somewhere working on a way of tapping into it. Students become targets as soon as they send off their application forms to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Through its marketing arm, Ucas Media, it offers companies access to its comprehensive student contact details - at a price - and the opportunity to target particular subsets of students.

When students start looking for a place to live, the accommodation agency they use may be charging companies for use of its database. When they log on in the student library, paid-for advertisements for anything from financial services to Alton Towers will greet them, and the librarian will slip them a bookmark advertising Sky or Sainsbury's. As for student unions, once hotbeds of political activism, most have embraced raw capitalism without a murmur, charging companies thousands of pounds every year to put up posters for them, text students on their behalf, place advertisements in student media and run sponsored events.

It is only relatively recently that advertisers have woken up to the potential of the student market, according to Luke Mitchell,

managing consultant of Reach Students and chairman of a Haymarket conference last week which taught advertisers how to get students to notice their products. Expansion in student numbers mean they now represent more than 40% of 18- to 24-year-olds, a significant part of the sought-after youth market. The National Union of Students says they spent £15bn last year. Students are opinion formers. "If they do take on your brand, they can take it to great places for you," says Mitchell. And graduates are likely to be the high spenders of the future, since they earn a third more than non-graduates over their lifetimes.

Cash in pockets

The new fee regime appears to have created a more relaxed attitude towards debt and for some, in the short term, put more cash in their pockets. "Since fees started coming in and loans were made available, students have been able to access quite a lot of money to get them through," says Mitchell. "Their attitude is that these are the best years of their lives, they are going to have fun now and think about paying for it later." He predicts this attitude will only increase after next year's introduction of top-up fees. Although their debts will increase, students will no longer have to pay fees up front, so could feel relatively well-off at university.

A third of students own a car. Research carried out for the youth marketing agency Face, by Opinionpanel Research, shows that 80% of students own an MP3 player compared with 50% of non-students. In addition, 63% own a desktop computer and 50% a laptop, nearly double the figures for non-students.

William Berry, director of the online agency Accommodation for Students, says they request dishwashers, Sky and plasma screens when seeking accommodation.

SubTV started broadcasting in student unions across the country three years ago and has now signed exclusive, 10-year deals with unions in more than 90 universities, at a cost of millions of pounds. These allow it to place plasma screens in student bars and other busy areas, broadcasting specially made programming with advertising breaks. Sometimes they show terrestrial or satellite TV with an advertising panel, often locally targeted. In return, the unions get cash and the opportunity to use the screens at agreed times for their own programming or adverts.

Soon, students who glance down will see another screen. Zest Promotions, based at Loughborough University, is introducing table tops that screen moving advertisements, rolling news, and interactive services. Its developers claim students will eventually be able to see an ad for a pizza, click on the screen and order it without moving from their chairs.

Then there are product placements in computer games. Uniaid, a charity that helps students manage their finances, has developed a game in which students negotiate their way across a campus. The logo of its sponsor, HSBC, is clearly visible on the virtual bank, the virtual computers are Apples, and it is on the lookout for a sponsor for the virtual supermarket.

Low-tech methods of advertising are still going strong, from posters, stunts and freebies to brand managers. Red Bull pays its student reps £10 an hour, and gives them a mobile phone and use of a logo-ed car.

Student unions can earn £10,000 from a single company for a full multi-media campaign and, with bar takings falling as students socialise more off campus, few can afford to be too fussy about ethics.

There are exceptions, usually better-off unions. Gaston Dolle, president of the University of Bristol Union, which has a generous grant from the university, says: "We try to keep away as much as possible from it. We don't think it's fair for external companies to be using our contacts. Student unions are supposed to look after the welfare of students."

Many unions draw the line at advertising particular products - Nestlé and Coca-Cola are commonly vetoed - while some will not accept campaigns that encourage binge drinking or gambling.

But others are more relaxed. "We don't believe in taking an ideological stance," says David Tait, at Glasgow University Union. "If they opt not to buy it, they don't buy it."

Irfan Zaman, president of Liverpool University Guild of Students, encourages marketing. "If you step out of the union, you are bombarded by billboards, so it would be naïve to have the 60s mentality that the union is the last bastion of purity," he says. "You have to live in the real world."

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