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## Q&A: Redefining Teens, \$216 Billion Buyer Power

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Yes, marketers have long acknowledged that teens wield plenty of buying power. And, yes, they have given plenty of thought to their technological prowess. But Marian Salzman, president of Euro RSCG Worldwide PR North America, tells Marketing Daily that most executives are missing the bigger picture -- that these teens wield far more influence than they are given credit for.

“We always assumed that their power was the power of family budget, and we saw them as gatekeepers rather than the gate. They don’t even have the vote, and look at how effectively they can shape an election, and the effort they put forward in the Obama campaign, for example. Look at the amount of content they create. They have a much more empowered role.”

We asked the leading trendspotter to field a few more questions about this important demographic:

**Q:** What’s the key difference between teens today and previous generations?

**A:** It’s a digital divide. And sometimes people think that just means the Internet, but it’s so much more. It’s really important to understand that they spend much less time online than other searchers -- but they are masterful communicators. We’re chained to our desktops, but they are out there in constant contact, and they are constantly getting their points of view across.

**Q:** So it’s more than them being comfortable with technology -- it’s that the technology shapes their thinking?

**A:** Yes. If you strip out the technicalities of the semantic Web, teens are more literate than we are in the matrixed world. Whether it is a blog or a Web page, they understand how to merge action and publishing to get what they want. We talk about cross-platforms because we see them as separate sectors. Teens don’t.

**Q:** Are adults often suspicious of that?

**A:** We really make all this sound and fury about their language and their illiteracy. In some ways, the way they speak looks like gibberish to us. But they’ve stripped out the verbosity -- what they are really speaking is the language of implementation.

**Q:** Are boys different from girls in this?

**A:** In some ways. We see girls are more likely to broker advice, on everything from how to apply makeup to how to be a better friend, for example. But I don’t know that there is much more than that.

**Q:** Has the recession shaped these kids?

**A:** Very much. If you are 16, 17 or 18, you are painfully aware of the cost of college, so maybe it is a six-year proposition for you, not four. And since you know you will have loans to pay back, maybe you are more aware that your first job may not be your dream job. You

are terribly worried about earning a living, and paying back the costs of college.

Q: How else?

A: Big cities are not the same post-graduation draw they once were. (Well, Washington D.C. is, but that is because of Obama.) Both for quality of life and the high-tech factor, these kids are more drawn to places like Austin, Texas, and San Francisco -- they want to be part of that high-tech Google world. They are very aware that Mark Zuckerberg was still a teenager when he started Facebook and invented a business that changed the world.

Q: Much has been written about how close -- and connected -- teens are today to their parents. Is that overstated?

A: No, I think this is a great time in that way -- there is all this openness between teens and their parents. And so many of the really awkward conversations can happen other ways -- text messages, or ICQ, for example. Mothers and daughters, dads and sons are in constant communication.