

# Urban Trends

A quarterly newsletter published by



## Making Money Out the Box



MEE's research shows that "authenticity" is the key to creating one. It should be specifically developed with the sensibilities and edge of the urban community in mind. MEE has provided market research and executed entertainment marketing campaigns for some of the most popular films over the last decade. They include comedies such as *Friday* and its sequel *Next Friday*; action films like *Set It Off*, *Dead Presidents* and *Nothing To Lose*; and romantic stories such as *The Best Man*, *Jason's Lyric* and *Love Jones*. Resulting marketing campaigns have included print material (posters, palm cards/stickers), radio and television commercials, along with non-traditional marketing strategies.

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With an explosion of movie offerings, the competition for audiences is more intense than ever. More and more, even the urban market, once overlooked and underestimated, is bombarded by a multitude of competing films. That means advertisers and marketers must be more creative in their attempts to reach potential moviegoers and to influence pivotal peer-leaders. The greatest film in the world is no good without a campaign to put people in movie theater seats, so studios need to work harder to positively differentiate their films. Despite the fact that African Americans are high consumers of movies, it still takes a cultural sensitivity and financial commitment to develop a loyal audience base among them.

One of the most effective types of communication for promoting urban films is peer-to-peer networking, which generates word-of-mouth interest for a film.

Urban youth and young adults, trendsetters for popular culture in America and around the world, consume films in large numbers, going to an average of three to four movies a month. By capturing their attention, studios and distributors increase the chances of getting a strong start at the box office. We know that many entertainment trends begin with "hip-hoppers," with all other demographic, ethnic and cultural groups gradually following. Youth in America's inner cities, with their extraordinary peer-to-peer network, generate tremendous word-of-mouth, especially on that all-important first weekend at the box office (a phenomenon that often determines the success or failure of an urban-market film). Creating that "buzz" is critical to ensuring a sizable turnout and a long, profitable run for an urban-interest movie.

What's needed is an effective, culturally-relevant marketing/advertising campaign, and

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# From The Editor

*UrbanTrends* continues to evolve to meet the needs of our subscribers. We're always open to new ideas to make this publication the essential tool you turn to when you want information and insight about today's urban scene.

We're trying out some design changes in this issue. Now, all of our great content is summarized right on the front page, so you'll know right off what authentic and useful "insider's" information MEE has uncovered through researching the latest trends in urban communities. This issue, in particular, delves into real-life scenarios involving some of the most important relationships of our lives. Some of these trends may be personally disturbing to adults, but without knowing the reality of young people's thoughts and feelings, you cripple any efforts to meet them where they are and persuade them to make more informed and healthy choices about their lives. It's a challenge to hold on to that perspective in the face of bitterness, distrust and feigned disinterest, but one that is essential to making any real and lasting difference.

It's hard work, but it's also exciting and rewarding. At MEE, our entire staff has made the commitment to stay true to our socially-responsible foundation. We all contribute to the effort to share what we have learned—different perspectives, different styles, but all with a "window" on urban life across this country and around the world. Thanks to all of them for their input and to you for continuing to support *UrbanTrends*.



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## Making Money (continued)

### Developing the Buzz

To get those big box office numbers on the first weekend, the hip-hop community is often the key. First, you must take your campaign to where the audience is. Use creative marketing techniques that incorporate non-traditional marketing channels that allow messages to be crafted in a language and style which might otherwise be restricted. These strategies, such as local, grassroots promotion through street teams, merchandise giveaways, underground media and event marketing, expand the viewing audience. The goal is to generate awareness and exposure at critical contact points in urban communities, and to get the audience immediately involved in marketing efforts.

The most common and effective way of meeting those goals is through neighborhood-level marketing and distribution of available promotional materials: posters, stickers, videos, etc. Our focus group participants consistently identify free movie-related merchandise as being an important factor in generating word-of-mouth interest. The key is to successfully identify where the target audience hangs out (i.e., shopping malls, hair & nail salons, basketball courts, video arcades, etc.) and what community-based events should be blanketed with materials.

MEE has also found Black colleges and urban community colleges to be effective launching points for urban films. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are key points of intersection that not only serve a breadth of potential African American consumers, but also enable

great word-of-mouth. In addition to the students themselves, marketers who use this strategy have access to their instructors, college employees and the surrounding community, which often has historical and emotional ties to HBCUs.

Promoting films to urban audiences can also continue after they leave the neighborhood theater. Those movies are quick to turn up on video home rentals and on cable television, where a significant portion of the profits on these films are made. Research shows that urban audiences rent a lot of movies for home viewing, with VCR penetration at more than 94% in Black homes (compared to the national average of 85%). These multiple viewing opportunities provide substantial opportunities for profit-making to film marketers who know how to effectively target an audience which generates nearly \$10 billion in ticket sales each year.



✿ A new magazine entitled "Girl," is aiming its attention at one of our nation's most underrepresented groups: young African American women. The magazine, which focuses on beauty tips, fashion and entertainment, stresses individuality, cultural awareness, and positive self-image for young teens. *Girl* magazine has been backed by the celebrity weight of such prominent African American and Latina contributors as Destiny's Child, Jennifer Lopez, Jada Pinkett, Erykah Badu, Lil' Kim, Da Brat, and Christina Aguilera.

✿ From the "we-could-have-told-them-that" file, four national health associations recently linked violent entertainment children see—on television, in movies and video games—with violent behavior. The American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association and American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry issued a joint statement saying that "prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life." The group based its conclusions on more than thirty years of research in the field, and asserted that children exposed to violent programming tend to see violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. Those children are also said to have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life.

*Associated Press*

# MEE's Ethnic Marketing Model

MEE was invited to share some of its research insights at an international ethnic marketing conference in Paris in July. The ESOMAR seminars bring together some of the top minds in opinion and marketing research from around the world. MEE's paper, "African-American and Latino Youth Consumer Study" was voted a "Best of Conference" Award. Here's a brief excerpt from our award-winning presentation. Look for more on the subject in an upcoming issue of *UrbanTrends*.

In today's urban market, it is not enough to have an outstanding product or service. If you don't market that product/service in a way that urban audiences can understand and appreciate, then all your efforts will have been in vain. Effective campaigns must be based on the Oral Communications Culture model, which most urban populations subscribe to. With a decade of organizing and marketing experience, MEE has determined five key stages to an effective marketing campaign for urban populations:

## Stage One:

### Introduction and Exposure

The first step is to introduce your message/s to the target audience. Since urban populations are overwhelming consumers of television and radio, these two media are highly effective in achieving this first step. Your initial effort should present your key message in an interesting, yet straightforward manner. You only have one chance to make an initial impression, and this first message will serve as the foundation for later messages to build upon.

## Stage Two:

### Repetition

The repetition of your message on television or radio means that your key points will be given time to sink in, and will garner greater name recognition once you advance into your campaign's later stages. Another good medium for message repetition is transit advertising/public transportation outlets. As with radio, transit ads give your message a chance to be seen in a public and social setting, thereby increasing the chance of awareness, interest, and word-of-mouth. Street teams or grassroots marketing are more proactive ways to generate word-of-mouth, and allow the marketer to target precisely the audiences they want.

# MEE's ETHNIC MARKETING MODEL



## Stage Three:

### Initiate Discussion

It is crucial to invite dialogue and discussion with your target audience around your product/service in order to begin the oral communications cultural process, which thrives upon debate (see *UrbanTrends* Vol. 5). Community-based organizations (CBOs) are a good tool for transmitting messages, because of their credibility within the community. Sponsored programs affiliated with CBOs almost guarantee that your message gets through to the local population.

## Stage Four:

### Enable Dialogue

For a message to be given genuine credence by an urban population, it is vital to allow that audience a dialogue with the message sender. This is done by allowing for repeated argument/counterargument interaction between the message sender and the community. In doing this, you build respect and positive sentiment for your company and campaign. This dialogue can be sustained through key centers in urban communities. Hair/nail salons and public housing areas are good locations, especially for reaching urban females.

## Stage Five:

### Mainstream Reinforcement

Once the community has had a chance to voice its thoughts and feelings about your product/service, it is best to reflect that feedback in a final effort which uses mainstream sources. Examples include the minority press, public service announcements (PSAs), churches, and other public forums. By incorporating community feedback, marketers make the target audience feel both legitimate and important, which is vital in building consumer loyalty. Such a strategy suggests to your audience that your organization actually is interested in its welfare, and will gain your company favor with a population not used to such sentiments from either the public or private sector.

These five stages are the best way to ensure that your marketing campaign resonates with the urban audience you are trying to reach. Significant opportunities exist for companies willing to take the extra steps necessary to communicate with urban populations on their own terms. Developing a relationship built on respect and trust promises to be a profitable one for astute enterprises.

## Leadership: Do Urban Youth Follow a Different Drummer?



The state of Black leadership is one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of contemporary African-American life. While the mainstream media often paints African-Americans as a monolith under the guidance of a few, selected political or social "leaders," in reality this is far from the truth. Even the common assumption that professional athletes take on leadership roles (even against their will) for African-American youth is not truly accurate.

MEE conducted eight focus groups at six Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HCBUs) to talk to African American youth about their views on the current state of Black leadership. The students, from Hampton University (VA), Morehouse College (GA), Clark-Atlanta University (GA), Cheyney University (PA), Bowie State University (MD), and Howard University (DC), were between the ages of 18 and 25.

We found that these African-American youth were largely skeptical of high-profile African-American "leaders," although they did find some positive aspects in them. Most students did not feel that national figures spoke for them, or for others their age. They were quick to point out that heading a national Black organization does not make one representative of the Black community, an important point that the mainstream media rarely grasps. Because of the distrust of mainstream media, the "word on the street" within their own community often determines their views and leaders. Many of the youth looked to their parents or other neighborhood adults for guidance.

As for well-known, national African-American figures, these youth were pragmatic. They identified with and celebrated certain aspects of these individual's lives, but rejected any notions of them as representatives for all Black people. For instance, Jesse Jackson was lauded by some for his "intelligence and strength," yet youth were suspicious of the fact that he was one of the few figures ever called on by the media to explain "the Black condition." While the youth identified with Louis Farrakhan's calls for Black economic independence and empowerment, they also were dismayed at the media's insistence on portraying him as "the" national Black spokesman, because they disagreed with many of his other, more inflammatory statements.

Under recent leadership, more mainstream African American organizations such as the NAACP have made a more concerted effort to reach out to the hip-hop generation. Work remains to overcome youth's inherent mistrust of any individual or group which is perceived as being too close to the traditional power structure. Perhaps a clue about how to galvanize African-American youth can be found in our research. Rather than invoking national African-American "leaders," go to local community centers and places where youth hang out. Often, you will find that the most important and influential leaders are right in youth's back yards. Many parents and youth service providers are unaware of the full extent of the influence they have on their sons and daughters, and some of the most effective youth organizing engages parents and concerned adults as intermediary message senders.



## DidYouKnow?

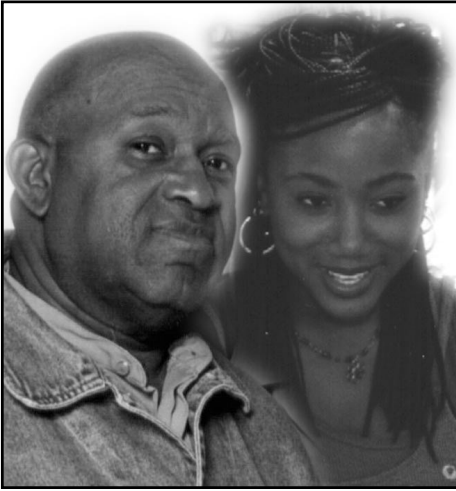
A nationally-syndicated comic strip is turning heads and raising eyebrows. "Boondocks," a strip created by 26-year old Aaron Magruder, chronicles the experiences of African American kids growing up in a white suburb. "I consider myself a commentator," says Magruder, rejecting the traditional role of comics as strictly humor or entertainment. While the strip has drawn some criticism from mainly older white (and some black) readers, Magruder insists, "The most liberating thing that black people can do is to stop worrying about what white people think about us. You must represent your own reality."

A national study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that overall poverty rates decreased from 1990 to 1997, but that the number of children living in extreme poverty has not changed. Around one in five American children is poor, and one in seven, approximately 9.2 million, is in "serious distress," according to the report. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a family of four earning less than \$16,530 is living in poverty.

A recent survey of 405 African American adults in Mobile (Alabama), Oakland, and Philadelphia by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) showed that two-thirds of those surveyed felt that domestic violence is one of the most important issues facing their community. 43% of respondents said they had strong reason to believe that someone they know was physically abused by a husband or boyfriend in the last year. 87% said that they would offer help to someone they knew was being abused, but 33% said they would tell a battered woman to stop doing whatever made the batterer so angry.

Sources: Philadelphia Inquirer, Associated Press

## Predator or Protector: The Older Man and Teen Female



In dating relationships, at what point does the age difference between partners become a matter of societal concern? Do we have one set of thoughts when a female is thirteen and her male partner is seventeen? Does it matter to us at all if a female is seventeen and her male partner is twenty-four? Is this a problem, or is it the way things are and always have been?

The troubled state of male-female relationships in the African American community (and across the board, for that matter) is well-documented. Black men and women have even more challenges in maintaining relationships, especially as they are forced to deal with numerous socioeconomic forces that make day-to-day existence a struggle. Numbers in the Census data reflect the increasing number of infants being born to underage, single young women, who often are unable to care for themselves and their child. Many social service agencies have reported a trend in which those mothers list an adult male as the father of her child.

The experts share two varied opinions on this issue. Some believe the problem is very clear and evident, that young girls who have sexual relations with adult men are being exploited at a young age. On the other hand, some experts share an opposing view. They argue that this is not in fact, a problem, but an acceptable cultural reality which is "as old as the hills."

In our society, we have always had cases of older men and teenagers forming relationships and marrying. Fifty years ago it was commonly accepted across ethnic

communities. How much attention is paid to it now often depends on the social status of the participants. When popular comedian and actor Jerry Seinfeld dated an ex-girlfriend who was teenager at the time the relationship started, there was little sanctioning from his adoring public or society at large. He was not labeled a predator, exploiter or sexual abuser. However, when a low-income, nineteen year-old African American male dates a fourteen year old, it is highly unlikely that he will receive the same laissez-faire treatment. In both situations, the participants themselves may have perceived their relationships as strong and healthy. Yet outsiders' responses often diverge, especially when society is asked to pick up the cost.

Young women may seek out these relationships out of a need for security. MEE's research uncovered instances where young females are pushed by their mothers to find a "man" that will be better able take care of them than a "boy" who might be her age. In other cases, young women seek out responsible, financially-secure men on their own, without being pushed by their mothers. Many of these men have finished school or have dropped out to get a job and their earning power is more attractive to a teen female. Those males seem particularly attractive in situations where there is no father or older male in the household to act as protector.

Why would an adult male become involved with a teen female? The allure and beauty of youth cannot be overlooked. In addition, many men seek out younger teens who they feel are less "used up" sexually, believing that they have been less exposed to promiscuity and diseases. For others, a younger female is seen as less threatening

than a woman their own age. Though providing financial support may be necessary, the male perceives that he will not have to provide as much time or money to satisfy a teen female. Instead, they can have a "low maintenance" relationship, where there may not ever have to make any kind of "formalized" commitment. Unfortunately, a number of these men do enjoy exerting power and control over younger girls by being manipulative and working to "train" the females to meet their expectations. Depending upon the female's age, she may be too inexperienced to hold her own and exert her independence.

MEE's research shows that, within the minority community, there is a silence about these cross-age relationships, both inside the family and among peers. Many believe that no one is getting hurt and that many of these men are no worse than the teen males young girls could be involved with. In other cases, parents are facing too many other daily challenges to cope with taking on the age-appropriateness of their daughter's boyfriend.

While it is possible for relationships to be mutually healthy regardless of age difference, there are, at the least, legal and emotional consequences for both parties when adult males engage in relationships with females who are minors. The possibilities for exploitation are increased in such scenarios. Empowering teen girls to, in spite of the socioeconomic challenges, take control of their lives and make the healthiest choices for themselves and their future means that they will be less dependent on a male partner to achieve their goals. Such independence and self-determination can only be a boon to strengthening the fabric of families and communities in the inner city.



∞ African American directors are breaking box office records this summer, even as the movie industry as a whole is facing a ticket sales slump. Films from Keenan Ivory Wayans (*Scary Movie*) and John Singleton (*Shaft*) are reaping revenue far beyond the pre-release expectations of most Hollywood pundits. The slasher film parody *Scary Movie*, which opened at #1 its first weekend, has already earned more than \$116 million, and is now the highest-grossing box office film by a Black director. The record was previously held by Sidney Poitier's *Stir Crazy*, made two decades ago. *Scary Movie*'s diverse casting is likely to have contributed to its crossover success.

*DiversityInc.com*

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## What's Next...

Coming to you in the next issue of **UrbanTrends**...

We will explore such topics as:

**KEEPIN' UP WITH THE JONESES:  
THE FINANCIAL AND DIGITAL DIVIDE**

**INCREASING BLACK MALE  
ENROLLMENT IN GRADUATE  
SCHOOLS**

**TEEN DATING RELATIONSHIPS:  
BANISHING VIOLENCE, EMBRACING  
RESPECT**

**NUTRITION AND ACTIVITY  
PATTERNS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS**

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