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Markets

REACHING THE HIP-HOP GENERATION

INNER-CITY BLACK TEENAGERS are a tough market to reach because they doubt any message that comes from a "mainstream" source, according to a study from Philadelphia-based Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions. But reaching them with a message they trust is a major goal for educators, public-health officials, and some marketers. And it is possible, says MEE. "The African-American urban teenager may well be the most difficult audience to reach with an anti-abuse or pro-social message," says MEE's report. "Mainstream society has virtually no credibility with these young people; they are alienated from their own heritage, and their subculture tolerates self-destructive behavior and encourages taking risks."

Black urban teens rarely read print media. They watch a lot of television, but they don't trust TV because of its mainstream image. They don't identify positively with black experience, and they don't even trust their own idols. "Inner-city teens would be delighted to meet their favorite NBA star if he came to their school to speak against drugs," the report

says. "But they would discount the appearance as 'playing the game'."

The report's grim conclusion is that "an effective strategy for reaching this audience with these messages simply doesn't exist yet." But there is hope. "We're more confident than ever that solutions can be found to reach the hip-hop generation. If

Of all influences on black urban teens, "the peer group leader has the most credibility."

we continue with our current approaches, we're pessimistic," says Ivan Juzang, president of MEE Productions.

One technique that Juzang believes is worth exploring is music. Fashion is another area inner-city teens trust. "Everyone talks about the rap part, but fashion is a key part," Juzang says. "It's amazing what males and females spend on their hair on a weekly basis. It's all part of expressing the culture."

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ibility," Juzang says. "Peer group dynamics and peer group acceptance are really the ultimate in terms of credibility." Television ads could show a group of teens discussing the stupidity of teenage pregnancy, for example, but the discussion would have to appear authentic.

Juzang says that social messages directed at this group must have a realistic tone. An ad campaign should offer positive alternatives, such as depictions of everyday success stories. This realism extends to celebrities: characters from "The Cosby Show" are "so 'de-ethnicized' that they can be difficult for urban youth to identify with," says the report, but Homey the Clown from "In Living Color" has earned an exalted role among hip-hop youth. Such a character could spread messages more effectively, says Juzang.

One Los Angeles firm is proof that realism can break through the mean streets. Cross Colours, based in Los Angeles, sold more than \$15 million worth of clothes in its first nine months by hawking fashion that makes a statement. The clothes carry messages such as "Stop D Violence."

One of the company's goals is to convince youths to abandon gang colors. Cross Colours achieved this by promoting "African" colors of green, yellow, and black instead of blue (worn by the Crips gang) and red (favored by rival Bloods).

Company founders T. J. Walker and Carl Jones are both Southerners who were drawn to Los Angeles by the fashion industry. They stress their African-American heritage in selling "clothing without prejudice." Walker and Jones also serve as ideal role models. Plenty of cultural trends that reach the mainstream started with hip-hop youth, Juzang says. "We tell them, 'You've got to make some money off of it, too.'"

The MEE Report: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation is available from MEE Productions, 4601 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19139; telephone (215) 748-2595.

—Dan Fost



M.E.E. Left to right: Thierry Fortune; Vice President, Ivan J. Juzang; Founder/President, Derwood "Snake" Selby; Videographer, Troy Carvey; productions.

Socially Responsible Entrepreneurship

by Junious R. Stanton

PHILADELPHIA - MEE Productions (Motivational Educational Entertainment) Inc. is a research, training/consulting and video production company that was founded in 1990 by Ivan Juzang, Walt Ballard and Tama Smith. Their goal was to form a company that would be the premier authority on developing communications strategies, promoting responsible social messages and creating for sale media products and programs that target, reach and positively influence inner city urban youth.

An M.B.A. graduate of the prestigious Wharton Business School of the University of Pennsylvania, Juzang first came upon the idea while doing a school project that put together a plan to create, produce, and distribute a series of research based videos aimed at "At Risk" inner city youth. Starting the business, the partners realized that they personally had lost touch with the current trends, values and lifestyles of the hard core urban youth culture. This realization triggered a great idea. "Why not go out and do some research to gather data and expertise on the needs and concerns of the market we want to serve." Also from a business perspective, in order to approach advertising and funding sources, we needed to provide the type of documented research that is the communication vehicle for mainstream America," reasoned Juzang. "If we were going to develop products that would influence the behavior of this population, we had to do the research."

The partners pooled their resources using personal savings to finance the initial research. When their funds ran low, Juzang approached a friend

who worked at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the largest health care philanthropy in the world to see if they would be interested in this unique kind of research project. The foundation reviewed their initial data and based upon their own health care prevention strategies, agreed to fund the remainder of the project. As the saying goes, the rest is history.

The published research document called the MEE Report: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation examined the hip-hop culture, the Rap music industry, the dynamics of media message assimilation and the socio-economic issues impacting urban youth. The report and the follow up video documentary which MEE Productions produced was well received and created quite a stir around the country. "The response blew us out of the water, but I guess it should not have because no one else had done this type of research before," acknowledged Juzang. "We developed primary research by going directly to the marketplace versus the traditional academic, ivory tower studies. We analyzed the way we communicate with kids, why public service announcements do or don't work and what we needed to develop in terms of policy and new communications strategies to influence this population," explained Juzang.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Federal Government sponsored a follow up symposium in New York City in March of 1993 and since that time MEE Productions has been off and running. In the past year they have expanded to include not only research but also the creation of critically acclaimed and award winning media products aimed at posi-

tively impacting inner city youth, conducting workshops and training seminars on how to reach and effectively communicate positive and responsible social values to an "At Risk" urban market and serve as consultants to a number of corporations, private and governmental agencies such as MTV, MGM Studios Research, Planned Parenthood, The Anti-Defamation League, Gramercy Pictures and the Arkansas State Department of Health.

Recently MEE Productions was approached by UNICEF, the United Nation's children's agency to replicate its technique of "understanding, reaching and positively influencing youth" in troubled South Africa. The assignment will begin following the upcoming elections. In addition to research, training and consulting they have expanded their television, video and documentary production capabilities. They are currently working on a television series tentatively called "Attitude", centering around issues pertinent to urban youth, and a music video and documentary on the Black Panther party.

Juzang, the founder and president of MEE Productions, strongly believes in socially responsible entrepreneurship. "Our focus is to combine being in business and being socially responsible at the same time. Our goal is to reach, communicate with and positively influence inner city youth . . . We want to be the number one think tank on issues affecting inner city youth, specifically black youth."

MEE Production Inc. is located at 4601 Market Street in Philadelphia. Their telephone number is (215) 748-2595, FAX (215) 748-3223.