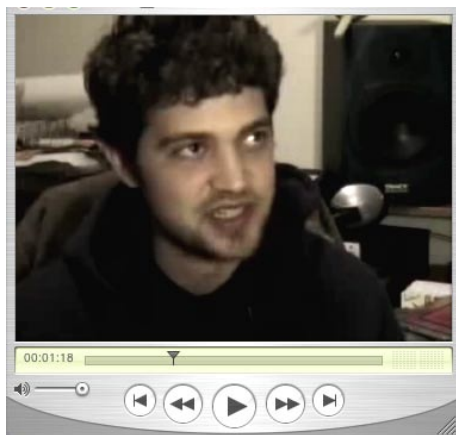


# Have Insights, Will Party



“College Drop-In” parties take aim at understanding a student market that spent more than \$230 billion in 2004.

by **Steve Gold**

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It's 10:30 on a Friday night and their little college get-together has now ballooned to about 45 people. Like most in attendance, the party's hosts, Jack Kearney and Adam Kushner, are students at New York University. They are throwing your average weekend campus bash—complete with music, food, and cigarette smoke.

Take a closer look, however, and you'll see there's a lot more than meets the eye because this party is also a focus group.

It's all part of a new wave in consumer research called “College Drop-Ins,” where marketers bring the research to the students, versus making this hard-to-reach group agonize for hours at a focus group facility.

With College Drop-Ins, a pair of students agree to host (or crash) a party at their campus in exchange for receiving all the food needed for the get-together, plus a salary. During the party, the pair's objective is to chat privately with other students about a range of marketing questions. While one Drop-In host asks the questions, the second is responsible for videotaping the brief, 10-minute encounter.

Although some marketers might be concerned that this process would be perceived as invasive, most students tend to be quite cooperative once it's explained to them. Says Adam Kushner: “Everybody knows it costs a lot to throw a party and if all they have to do is give up 10 minutes of time to offer their opinions, it's a no-brainer!”

Tonight's party served up heroes, pizza and California rolls while students ranked names for a new brand of chewing gum. At night's end, the videotapes were downloaded, quickly edited and securely placed online for review—virtually before the last empty cup was cleared away.

Of course, because moderators and one-way mirrors are not part of the picture, many marketers may have trouble

adjusting to this new approach of obtaining insight. Additionally, Drop-Ins only provide quick directional feedback, and possible signs of an idea gone wrong. Standard practices are still required for probing into areas such as product usage and category interest-level.

Yet in general, College Drop-Ins are the latest sign that marketers understand that talking to this target isn't the issue at hand. It all comes down to who is asking the questions and how. The unplanned, no-staging approach elicits a sense of trust among the partygoers that yields unvarnished insights.

As one partygoer said after being interviewed: “Hey, if they really wanted to know if their idea really sucked, they just found out. Feel free to ask me anytime.”

Any way you look at it, students are being asked for their opinions at a more frequent rate, primarily because today more than 16.5 million kids make up the largest college student body ever. It is estimated that more than 10,000 kids are currently on college campuses trying to influence peers about one product or another.

College Drop-Ins simply take this trend one step further—not by leveraging these campus relationships to share opinions with other students, but rather for the purposes of capturing those opinions for marketers. ■



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