Marketing to Families

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British family life....but not as we know it

Latest research from MINTEL finds that as many as 35% of British parents* now live as a 'non-traditional' family unit, because they are single parents (19%) or because they have children from previous relationships (16%) living with them. This means that today around 5 million British parents have a 'non-traditional' family life. The remaining two-thirds (65%) of parents are 'traditional' married or cohabiting couples, living with children only from this current relationship.

The research from this report, MINTEL's first major study into the make-up of British families, finds that parents of 'non-traditional' families are more likely to suffer the financial strains of running a household. Today, almost three in ten (27%) parents in 'non-traditional' families worry about paying the bills, compared to just 16% of those in 'traditional' families. And again when it comes to outstanding debt, such as mortgages and loans, those in 'non-traditional' families (20%) are more likely than those in 'traditional' families (16%) to worry about the amount they owe.

Time too is cause for concern. While just 35% of parents in 'traditional' families 'do not have as much time as they would like to spend doing things for themselves', this rises to as many as 42% of parents in 'non-traditional' families, which may be a result of the varying demands of children from different relationships.

"Family life has changed dramatically in recent years, and many of the changes have led to extra stresses and strains for both parents and children. The rising divorce rate, coupled with the growing trend for serial monogamy can mean that family structures can be very complicated, with children from several relationships being involved in step-families. While these â€˜new extended familiesâ€™ can bring benefits, the problems of amalgamating two or more families into one can also be a source of tension and conflict," comments Angela Hughes, Consumer Research Manager at MINTEL.

When it comes to bringing up the children, it is those couples who have children from outside their present relationship who tend to struggle the most. Indeed, one in four (24%) adults in a 'traditional' family say that 'they do not always agree with their partner on how to bring up their children', but this rises to some three in ten (31%) amongst 'non-traditional' couples. And while some 17% of parents in a 'traditional' family say that 'their children cause frequent arguments at home', this rises to almost one in four (23%) amongst those in 'non-traditional' couples.

Singly responsible

Amongst British parents aged 16 - 24 years old, almost half (48%) live in a 'non-traditional' family, as two in five (38%) are single parents and a further 10%, although living with a partner, have children from previous relationships. What is more, a staggering 51% of British mothers in this age group are single mums, which is in stark contrast to the mere 1% of all fathers aged under 35 who are bringing up their children alone.

But age is not the greatest divider, socio-economic group is. Today, fewer than one in five (18%) parents** from the more affluent AB socio-economic group live in a 'non-traditional' family. But amongst those parents in the E socio-economic group, who are dependent on state benefits, as many as 70% live in a 'non-traditional' family, making them more than twice as likely to be in a 'non-traditional' family than a 'traditional' one.

"Levels of separation and divorce mean that the number of 'non-traditional' families will remain high. Organisations catering for families will increasingly need to ensure that any 'family' deal offerings are flexible in their definition and appropriate for the growing number of 'non-traditional' arrangements such as single parents, weekend fathers and children looked after by grandparents," explains Angela Hughes.

The great (parental) escape

The strains of family life are reflected in the fact that parents yearn for some time to themselves, with almost a quarter seeking leisure time or a holiday without the kids in tow.

Interestingly, despite the stereotype of the harassed father â€˜escapingâ€™ to the office, twice as many working mothers (30%) as working fathers (16%) admit that 'going out to work gives them valuable time away from family life'.

What is more, almost one in five (17%) working mothers 'would prefer to work more hours but can't because of family commitments' - twice the proportion of men who feel this way.

"The research indicates that there may be a big shift in the way fathers and mothers view their respective positions in terms of work and career, especially in the case of mothers who work full-time. Indeed the extent to which mothers now see themselves as breadwinners is indicated by the fact that men and women are equally likely to say they worry about not earning enough for the kind of lifestyle they would like to lead," comments Angela Hughes.

MINTELâ€™s research also confirms the fact that paid work can have a detrimental effect on family life, especially for working fathers, and full-time working mothers. These two groups are equally likely to say that their 'family life often suffers because of their paid work' - 26% in each case, compared with 13% of mothers who only work part-time.

* adults with own children under 18 in their households

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