

Growing Up

My little Paula is growing up. My daughter, who turned 2 in January, received her first credit card solicitation in the mail last week. It seems Wal-Mart and Chase Manhattan have teamed up to offer a MasterCard with no annual fee. The interest rate is just 14.48 percent—only 9.9 percent on any balance she transfers over from an existing credit card. The application form says Paula can get a credit line up to \$10,000.

My feeling is they are getting to her too late. If they had sent this application to her the day or two after she was born, she could have used that credit card to buy the \$10,000 worth of diapers and formula that I am sure we have purchased at Wal-Mart over the last two years.

The solicitation only gives Paula three weeks to respond. An accompanying envelope promises "priority processing" of the application if she sends it in soon. Problem is, I don't think we'll be able to teach Paula to sign her name before the deadline. She's a bright kid but she still prefers writing with a Jello-stained index finger rather than a blue or black ballpoint pen, as the application specifies.

I understand the theory about getting to customers early. Banks frequently market to college kids knowing they are the future. A college-age person who opens an account with a particular bank may well stay with that bank his or her whole life. So I suppose getting to someone who still drinks from a tippy cup demonstrates a certain amount of marketing savvy. How much longer will it be before Chase Manhattan sends a letter to my 9-month-old son?

If Paula were to get a credit card now, I probably wouldn't have to worry about saving for her college education. By then, her credit limit surely would be upwards of \$1.5 million, which is what all the financial planners are telling me college for her is going

to cost. Sure, she'll graduate with some debt, but so what? She can revolve it until she dies and simply pass the debt on to her children, a lesson Uncle Sam is teaching all us Americans. Of course, Paula's children will probably qualify for their own credit cards long before they are born. Chase Manhattan and other conglomerate credit companies will probably use ultrasounds (likely to be on file at some national repository in the 21st Century) to identify prospective borrowers. Midwives and doctors everywhere will be notified so they can present the newborns with that essential piece of plastic as soon as they cut the umbilical cord.

For now, I'm saving the letter from Chase and Wal-Mart. My wife and I have placed it in Paula's scrap book, right next to her baptismal certificate. Getting a credit card always has been considered a rite of passage. All kidding aside, it's one that I hope Paula puts off for many years. ■



Although Paula Bengtson likes to look at the business news, Dad doesn't think she's ready for a credit card.