

One size fits all - or does it?

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Marketers tend to make sweeping statements about entire generations. Is it dangerous to create a ‘one size fits all’ scenario when talking about any group in particular? Have marketers always taken advantage of the zeitgeist and played to the psyche of each pigeonholed generation? And is this type of marketing still effective...?

Are we tired of hearing about the Millennials yet? While they have been a whole lot braver than generations before in slating capitalism in exchange for happiness, they are also perceived as perpetual whingers (according to the New York Times, that is).

Not only do they challenge capitalist belief and practice; this generation has, and is, destroying companies and product categories that they do not deem useful or value-adding and they expect business, governments and the media to behave in a more socially conscious way.

According to an article in the New York Times, “Almost two-thirds (64%) of Millennials say they would rather make \$40 000 a year at a job they love than \$100 000 a year at a job they think is boring”.

So what do they want, and how should marketers be speaking to them in order to encourage them to spend their money? The automatic answer is “they want experiences”. They want good product and service experiences. That, and to have their own-start-up businesses and to replicate Silicon Valley-type entrepreneurship and innovation. Which is tricky, according to a World Economic Forum report titled This is What Millennials Want in 2018.

They do not feel confined to the norm of having one job. This may be the job that pays the rent, but they are also the generation of the ‘side hustle’ – the alternative ‘gig’ that feeds their passion and provides additional income. [Can you hear baby boomers across the globe sigh and exclaim “Why didn’t I think of that”?]

The coverline of Time Magazine article, The ME ME ME Generation claims that “Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents. And why they’ll save us all”.

Joel Stein, writer of the article, goes on to unpack his opinion: “Each country’s Millennials are different, but because of globalisation, social media, the exporting of Western culture and the speed of change, Millennials worldwide are more similar to one another than to older generations within their nations”.

He goes on to say that even in China, where family history is more important than any individual, the Internet, urbanisation and the former one-child policy have created a generation as overconfident and self-involved as the Western one. “And these aren’t just rich-kid problems: impoverished Millennials have even higher rates of narcissism, materialism and technology addiction in their ghetto-fabulous lives”.

The Next Big Thing

So why is there such an obsession with the next generation being The Next Big Thing? Well, because they might do a better job than the adults before them, and, well, because corporations like to lump them all together so they can sell them things and make more money.

The line from Fight Club rings as true today as it did when the movie came out and hit cult status: “We buy things we don’t need, with money we don’t have, to impress people we don’t like.”

The zeitgeist sets the tone for how generations are perceived or spoken to. And stereotypes abound in the different post-war generations:

The Traditionalists (born before 1946) were shaped by World War II and the Great Depression. Generally, they are conservative, rule orientated people (Eisner, 2005) who love the idea of long-term employment; self-sacrifice is part of their makeup. They are respectful of authority and their mantra is “do what is right”. In Western terms, their behaviours were informed by Calvinist ideology – loyalty and respect, righteousness in traditionalism and moderation. In marketing terms, this was played out in the portrayal of specific gender roles. Think of the 50s and 60s ads portraying happy mom in the kitchen with happy children and the stereotypical dad with his slippers and pipe waiting for him after a hard day’s work.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964): major influences included 60s youth culture, the Vietnam War (particularly if you grew up in America) and prosperity; they are idealists and optimists who value the power of the organisation and are pretty ruthless in their pursuit of materialistic success (Eisner). Baby Boomers often like to micro-manage others, and to them, loyalty to organisations and businesses is key.

From a social perspective, the Vietnam/Woodstock generation showed the first sign of rebellion against ‘the establishment’ and a ‘war culture’ which previous generations wouldn’t have questioned. This was the generation – youth in particular – who felt that their voices could and should be heard.

Marketers had to rethink their gender-based points of view with the advent of the Gloria Steinem and feminist movements. The previously myopic view of gender roles was being challenged by this generation, forcing brands and advertisers to be more relevant.

Generation Xers, born between 1965 and 1980, were affected by organisational change due to tech and globalisation. Many were raised in single-parent households or by parents with dual careers. According to researchers Strauss and Howe, this lot are depressed and cynical and have always felt rather alienated. Kupperschmidt, in *Generational Influences in the Workplace*, reckoned they are pessimistic and individualist.

Marketing and advertising was very much informed by the excesses of the 80s. They are the ‘have it all – money and brands and stuff’ generation. Big shoulder pads and even bigger hair heralded the arrival of the ‘power corporate woman’, – and raised the question of whether she could or should compete in the boardroom. Western advertising, films and culture reflected the zeitgeist of lavishness and that chasing money was the ultimate goal.

Generation Y, or Millennials, are those born after 1980. The flavour of the month of late, they are shaped by the computer age and economic expansion, and are viewed as self-centred and narcissistic with high expectations. Millennials find it difficult to handle criticism, have strong morals, are patriotic and are comfortable with change. They couldn’t give two hoots about job security (and many of them still live under Mom and Dad’s roof). In reality, economic crashes have threatened their very view of security – they don’t trust the concept and they no longer believe in it.

Is there more that we should be considering? Generation Z: born after 2000

While focusing on so much of the hype around the Millennials, marketers may have forgotten that this generation is now in their mid to late thirties. Shouldn’t we be more concerned with learning about Generation Z? And what Millennials are teaching their children? Generation Z are now teens who are extremely comfortable with the concept of the global online village and with how the Internet of Things integrates into their lifestyles.

We propose that the much-hyped Millennial generation is simply a 'bridging' generation for what we will see emerging as Generation Z with an entirely new and different set of values.

If Millennials have challenged the status quo and the way that businesses and governments behave, they have and are forging a path to a different value set which can only intensify in the next generation. Their cumulative ability to make brands defunct and force businesses to reinvent for survival is only the beginning.

Generation Z will ignore previously accepted norms informed by their parents' behaviour. Marketers will have to learn that they are now talking to 'the Internet Generation' ; the notion of target market segmentation from a psychographic and demographic point of view will be thoroughly debunked in a world of digital neighbourhoods with no defined geography.