

Generation Z: The new generation consumer

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Marketers have often made use of generations as a demographic and psychographic delineator for specifying and describing their target markets. But what exactly is a generation? And why is this understanding useful to marketers?



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Human generations can be defined as groups of human beings that are born within a certain period and thus experience the same events. They define themselves by the kind of music they produce and listen to, the types of fashion they wear, the level of education they access and the type of technological advancement they witness, amongst others. Human generations and their characteristics are vital in the marketing and communication industries, as they assist in defining consumers within a certain group – for instance the “youth market”.

Over the years, we have witnessed the Baby Boomers, Generation X and the ever-youthful Generation Y, also known as “Millennials”. However, we need to remember that the millennials do not characterise the youth anymore; they are now working age adults.

Instead, the youth market is now Generation Z (often shorted simply to “Gen-Z”): the teens, tweens and young adults born between 1995 and 2010, making the oldest of this bunch 21 years old in 2016.

Against this backdrop, it is essential that strategists, brands and communication specialists recognise that any communication aimed at the youth speaks to this group and that the characteristics they embody are largely incomparable to those of the millennials. This article highlights and unpacks the seven key characteristics that every strategist, marketing and communication specialist should keep in mind in this regard.

1. They use emoticons, memes and slang

Gen-Z group is not prone to text heavy content and they do not usually make use of formal written English. They use symbols and images to replace words, but these images and symbols change over time. For instance, we have seen a shift from the use of traditional yellow emoticons to celebrity emoticons. MTN is an example of a brand latching on to trends a little too late in this regard, having used the yellow emoticons in their latest advertising, when the trend has moved on from that.

So what can strategists and advertising professionals do to tackle this issue? The industry needs to stay ahead of the visual language trend in order to design advertising material that is relevant and that Gen-Z can relate to. We also need to immerse ourselves in their language so as to understand it and be able to communicate in it.

2. They consume “snackable” content

Gen-Z was born in a world abundant with easily available information on almost every subject matter. They therefore feel as though, with information at their fingertips, they know everything about every subject, when they do not necessarily even feel the need to read on the full scope of the subject. They snack on content in a rush, so as to move on to another piece of content or reading about the latest trends and news.

The implication for strategists and content producers alike is that the use of lengthy content is unlikely to resonate with Gen-Z; we need to produce content that is short, precise and catchy, so as to stand out amongst the abundance of other content. We have seen the news channels and publications such as News24, Citizen and more leveraging social media like Twitter as a means to broadcast breaking news; therefore, people do not have to wait for the evening news or the morning

newspaper to know of current events and news. This type of snackable news content is appealing to Gen-Z.

3. They seek experiences and are attracted to trends

This generation takes notice of any brand communication that is full of experience in any type or form. This does not guarantee their brand loyalty though; they are merely looking to appreciate the creativity that brands utilise in their campaigns.



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Brands should look into investing more of their ad expenditure behind experiential marketing campaigns that will give consumers the full brand experience. For example, Joe Public recently created an experience with their Clover Future Life campaign that had people from major parts of South Africa participating in what they thought was a UFO mystery, when in fact it was a stunt for the launch of the brand's new "out of this world" nutritional beverage.

4. They are "Generation Us": The collaborative bunch

Gen-Z work as a collective. They like to collaborate and they want to engage in activities that not only benefit them, but other people as well. They prefer to open specialty businesses where they can optimise their skills and collaborate with other boutique enterprises to create a holistic service offering.

With this knowledge, marketing and communication specialists can look into collaborating with Gen-Z in their projects instead of simply executing them and presenting the final product to them. This will give them a sense of involvement, custodianship and achievement. KFC has been collaborating with local artists recently, promoting their music. For instance, they collaborated with unsigned artists in Bloemfontein and played their music at their local stores using cutting edge technology to entertain customers while they were enjoying their meals. This brought awareness of the artists and their music, whilst positioning the KFC brand as trendy and collaborative.

5. They are industrious

Entrepreneurship is a culture amongst this generation; they want to make products or help in making products. They witnessed the recession and the effect it had on their parents, which caused many job losses. Therefore, entrepreneurship is often seen as the only option for them.

In order to be effective, brands need to involve the youth in their production processes and decision-making, as well as look into empowering business ideas or innovations. South Africa has a teenage entrepreneur programme known as Teen Entrepreneur (www.teenentrepreneur.co.za), that looks for innovative ideas from future entrepreneurs and assists in finding

the necessary financing for those ideas, in addition to visiting schools to discover entrepreneurs.

6. They are tech innate

Gen-Z was born in the smartphone era, as such unlike the millennials who are generally able to navigate between two screens at the same time, they can navigate as many as five screens at the same time.

Furthermore, they are likely to join new social networks such as Whisper and Snapchat, rather than Facebook. This means that when targeting Gen-Z, brands need to integrate new social media platforms into their digital campaigns, or risk being seen as outdated and thus not in touch with the latest trends.

7. They are socially aware and active

Gen-Z is increasingly aware of social issues such as obesity, animal cruelty, climate change, woman and child abuse, amongst others. Therefore, they have seized the opportunity to find solutions in order to help eradicate these social issues in future. Brands targeting Gen-Z thus need to be more organic in their corporate social investment initiatives and strive to invest behind them because they believe in the cause – and not simply to polish their brand image.

In South Africa, we have seen the launch of an initiative called Repurpose Schoolbags. Started by two young women, this initiative is designed to recycle plastic in order to make children's schoolbags, fitted with a solar study light to assist children who live in communities without electricity to study at night. Initiatives such as these demonstrate not only the resourcefulness of Gen-Z, but also their desire to make a meaningful difference to society at large.

In closing, we need to remember that Gen-Z does not follow the established ways of life that previous generations have become accustomed to; they make their own rules and their own realities. They will change the way we look at the world, brands and ourselves. They will also change the strategic thinking of brands.

As such, brands will have to work with this new generation of consumers to stay relevant to the changing times in which they live. Lastly, brands will need to stay ahead of trends as well, so as to ensure ongoing understanding of this generation and its unique culture and values, in order to grow and evolve in the future.

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