

Top 10 Misconceptions That Sabotage Marketing to Mature Audiences: #2

Generation gaps are shrinking

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The generation gap: *does it still exist?*

The answer to that fundamental question is not as simple—or as unambiguous—as it once might have been. Certainly, different age groups flow seamlessly from one to the next, just as they always have. But today, because the proliferation of communications channels offers more opportunities for intergenerational conversation than ever before, one might wonder how a generation gap could exist at all.

In recent decades, the rate of social, technological, educational, and economic change has accelerated to the point where all age groups are compelled to adapt to some degree. While it's obvious to expect that a gap would exist between the very oldest and youngest adult groups, what about neighboring generations? Are there gaps there as well? If so, are they natural or have they been fabricated to suit our stereotypical perceptions? And are they, in fact, *gaps*—clearly separating one section from the next—or more like a lattice of fine cracks, resembling the chaotic pattern we see in a shattered mirror? Because if the latter is true, then it might conceal a greater truth lying just below the surface—one in which the reality is both more subtle and revealing from a marketing perspective.

The intention of this white paper is not to prove that the generation gap doesn't exist. In fact, we believe that it—or some transformation of it—does. Instead, it seeks to explore the value systems that define, connect, and divide the current generations, and to illustrate why it's important for marketers to understand generational value systems in order to create more effective communications across all generations.

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What defines the gap?

The term “generation gap” was popularized during the 1960s to describe the differences between people of a younger generation and their elders, especially between children and the generation of their parents.

Although generational differences have existed throughout history, differences between generations became more pronounced during that time. Due largely to the seismic cultural changes that were occurring, the differences were likely magnified by the sheer size of the young generation during the 1960s, which gave the group unprecedented power and the collective confidence to rebel against societal norms.

Indeed, birth years are only one factor to consider in distinguishing among generations, and a relatively minor one at that. Instead, most experts have long argued that generations are shaped much more by history than by chronological dates. According to Howe and Strauss¹, there are three attributes that more clearly identify the nature of a generation rather than age:

Perceived membership—

The self-perception of membership within a generation that begins during adolescence and coalesces during young adulthood

Common beliefs and behaviors—

The attitudes (toward family, career, personal life, politics, religion, etc.) and behaviors (choices made in regard to jobs, marriage, children, health, crime, sex, drugs, etc.) that characterize a generation

Common location in history—

The turning points in historical trends (e.g., government's role of maintaining basic security and public order to that of providing for its citizens) and significant events (e.g., the Vietnam War), which occur during a generation's formative years

According to these criteria, there are currently at least four main generations in U.S. society. Marketers and researchers alike have worked to classify each generation with sets of common values that are more prevalent in one generation compared to the others. Listed below are the common values associated with each generation. As you read them, stop and ask, "Is this generation really the only one that holds this value to be important, or do these traits appear in other generations, too?"

Silent Generation (1925-1945): Defined by respect for authority; conformity and adherence to the rules; law, order, and duty; and dedication, hard work, and sacrifice.²

Baby Boomers (1946-1964): Exemplify personal gratification; personal growth, health, and wellness; optimism and positive attitude; and teamwork and being involved.²

Generation X (1965-1981): Value diversity and global thinking; self-reliance and independence; life balance; fun and informal attitude; and technological literacy.²

Generation Y (1982-2000): Admire confidence and achievement; sociability and collective action; diversity and morality; and street smarts and optimism.²

When we examine these values in our society, we can find traces of each value within every generation. Just because Generation Y lists “street smart” as a value does not mean that members of the Silent Generation didn’t value that trait in their younger years. Here’s the point: none of

the value systems on the previous page are finite. The traits are merely the underpinnings of their respective generation’s members, and they will continue to add, shed, and redefine them throughout their lives. As we age, some things diminish in importance to us and other things take their place—but, ultimately, we are the sum of all our values and experiences.

The level of insight that these assigned value systems provide is basic, so to reach conclusions based solely on these value systems would be a mistake. This brings up an important point about Baby Boomers, who are actually two generations that have been lumped into one demographic behemoth that has guided marketing decisions, transformed history and politics, and reshaped

entertainment sensibilities for more than six decades. We believe that most marketers would agree that the 19-year gap is too wide to accurately group the 79 million who were born during this time into one category. This was the subject of a recent *USA Today* article that also concluded that younger Boomers don’t identify with the same issues that older Boomers do. In the article, Boomers of all ages shared their perspectives, including one woman who was born during the last year of the boom (1964). Her parents are also Baby Boomers.

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“I don’t really relate myself to the Boomer generation. I am a Venti, half-caff Boomer,” she joked, using popular coffee house terms. “I can call myself a flower child and still navigate successfully through this new culture of hip-hop madness.”³

Complicating any absolute generational definitions is the fact that biases and perceptions based on age die hard. For instance, despite the nearly universal acceptance and adoption of social networking, many still think of older adults as technophobes, while the data clearly proves otherwise. Consider this: 60 percent of mature adults use at least one form of online social media.² Nineteen percent of younger Baby Boomers (ages 45-54), 10 percent of older Baby Boomers (ages 55-64), and 7 percent of those age 65 and older have a social network profile.⁴ These segments are the fastest-growing demographics in terms of becoming connected and socially active online. Though the concept of online social networking is relatively new to mature adults, they are actively consuming the content on these sites. So much for stereotypes.

THE MESSAGE TO MARKETERS: THE MORE WE AGE, THE MORE WE STAY THE SAME.

What are the implications? It's clear that if we continue to use traditional wisdom when marketing to the different generations as homogeneous groups, we do so at our own peril. Only by conducting primary research can we gain insights on a more individual level, uncovering the all-important *uncommon denominators* as well as the shared attributes of each group. Therefore, it is critical to move beyond "assigned" value sets and view targeted marketing in a more contextual sense. This effort will pay off by quantifiably improving our ability to communicate more effectively, regardless of the segment.

Self-perception of membership, the feeling that you belong to a particular generation, is the first criterion that determines whether you actually are part of a generation. What would be the most persuasive way to reach an individual in a marketing or advertising campaign? By far, the best and most effective approach would be to dig deep to thoroughly understand if and how our messaging complements his or her *complete* value system and self-image—which, in this case, may span several generations. If the individual was placed in the Boomer generation bucket, he or she would likely be addressed as a "senior." Does such a communications strategy have the ability to make this prospect *feel* connected?

No matter what "generation" we belong to, our lives now have more commonality than ever before. Advertisers must consider how this can actually expand potential messaging. And while we're at it, let's also abandon the "retirement" stereotype. The vast majority (approximately 90 percent) of people over the age of 50 say that they plan to work after the age of 65. Not only are people living longer and have the ability to work longer, but they also have the need to do so, largely due to diminished retirement resources such as Social Security and pensions.

Of course, the upside to remaining in the workforce longer is that the limitations of living on a fixed income will be less dramatic, as older adults continue to spend money in a variety of categories. In short, people who continue to work well into their sixties and beyond will continue to share many of the same buying behaviors as younger people.

Whether we consider this to be a merging of generations or a slowing down of the aging process, *it demonstrates the importance of not making assumptions about attitudes and abilities based on previous generations.* Today, adults over the age of 50 are clearly more "forward-thinking" than their parents were. In some ways—and this is key—they may think more like their kids than like their parents.

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So while reaching an audience as dynamic and diverse as older adults is certainly a challenge, the fact that they no longer follow the conventional aging model offers genuine opportunity for marketers and advertisers. Those seeking an instructive (and inspirational) example need to look no further than the recent release of The Beatles edition of “Rock Band”. The game’s dramatic success serves as a powerful reminder that the real trick is to develop programs with broad appeal that cut across *all* age groups, including Baby Boomers.

For marketers to succeed in this environment, a new way of looking at the problem is absolutely essential. Now, our challenge is to accept the premise that unless we’ve experienced something for ourselves, we can’t truly relate. Indeed, we must always remind ourselves that the behaviors of the targeted segment will be based on the deeply held value systems of *individuals*, each with a lifetime of rich experiences that may very well be in stark contrast to generational stereotypes. So, in fact, the differences among each group may be even more revealing than the commonalities. As intelligent practitioners of marketing, we would all be wise to plan and act accordingly.

REFERENCES

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