

Learning From Youth Marketers

Today's education leaders live in interesting times. As the parent-centric households of the Generation X era have given way to the child-centered households of the Millennial generation, increased pressure has been placed on educators from parents, communities and government. Boomer-aged educational leaders, who honed their careers as Gen-X was coming of age are challenged to understand the perspective of today's youth generation.

Today's youth marketers live in interesting times as well. Children and teenagers have gone from being an afterthought in most marketing plans to becoming a primary target, even in industries not selling products that are necessarily associated with youth.

Corporations spend millions annually to understand and reach children. Putting the controversies and ethical challenges of youth marketing aside, what have youth marketers learned that can help educators reach youth effectively? The notion that educators can learn from the experiences of marketers was initially dismissed out-of-hand, but as educators have applied business sector insights to education, they have sought to learn from the commonalities of the two worlds rather than dwell on the differences.

Adapting to the schoolhouse what business already knows about the Millennials

Youth Power

First and foremost, successful youth marketers respect and harness the power of today's youth. Businesses that target youth realize that the days of a supply side, production mentality are long over. We have raised the most intelligent consumer generation in history. Organizations that realize that it is young people who have the power in the business-consumer relationship have succeeded the most.

In 1966, Lou Harris calculated teen spending at \$12 billion per year. Harris Interactive estimates that today's teens spend \$172 billion annually. Without a doubt, young people today are spending a lot more money than their parents did in their day. Youth are simply a much more vital part of the consumer economy.

The influence young people have on other people's decisions is far greater than the effect they have with their own spending. This "kid-fluence" is huge. A Harris Interactive study once showed one in three consumer dollars being spent in the United States are either being spent by or influenced by someone under 18. That is a third of the U.S. economy!

This power translates directly to education. Millennials are accustomed to marketers fawning over them, parents placing them at center of their world and making their own consumer choices. They are not likely to adapt well to a traditional school environment where the classroom door is closed and the teacher becomes the center of attention. Millennials require an active, immersive role in their education. They want a say in it. As one respondent to our studies once said, "People have to realize that *we* will set the standards and *we* will raise the bar ourselves."

Older Younger

There is a prevailing belief in youth marketing that young people are getting older younger. Young consumers have become wise beyond their years. The kids getting older younger concept is so widely accepted it has an acronym.

KGOY is the bane of many youth marketers, as it is difficult to build a business for segments that are getting narrower over time. Children's media and toy companies have struggled with this issue for years. Where once there were two segments of youth—kids and teens—now there are at least five: infants, preschoolers, kids, tweens and teens.

What many marketers (and educators) miss when considering KGOY is that children develop along a number of dimensions. Compelling evidence suggests kids/tweens are developing cognitively and physically faster than they have historically. However, little evidence supports the belief they are progressing faster emotionally or socially.

KGOY has implications for educators. Tweens are where much of the marketing attention is, as this is the age (roughly the early middle school time period) when lifelong attitudes toward brands form. This is also the age when lifelong learners are truly born. Marketers place a disproportionate amount of attention on tweens because of the long-term benefit they accrue from doing so. Educators can help achieve their own goals by following this lead.

Media Deluge

Today's young people can choose from more than 200 cable networks, thousands of magazine titles and millions of websites. Millennials have been targets of advertisers literally from birth, and advertising now permeates what was considered the last protected area: the schoolhouse itself.

Marketers realize the core issue with media and advertising is not its ubiquity. We reached a saturation point a long time ago. Kids can only use so much media or only pay attention to so many ads. Kids tune out commercial content as a defense mechanism. Youth marketers have taken advantage of the new digital media to create immersive and entertaining experiences surrounding their brands and to give children reasons to interact with their products.

Lessons for educators? You are in serious competition for the attention of your students, particularly once they leave the school building for the day. Give students a reason to tune in to education. Create experiences that require collaboration with parents and friends or encourage the use of the Internet. You must compete for their attention and not assume that you have it.



Parental Influence

During the Generation X youth era, marketers found that to sell products to kids, what was needed was to convince the mother to buy. Mom made most of the household decisions and the way to a child was through her.

In the 1980s and 1990s this strategy started to fail. Millennial kids were much different. Kids became the nucleus of the nuclear family. So marketers did an about-face and decided to go around parents entirely and market straight to children. In doing this, marketers made a painful mistake and learned an important lesson. While not immune from a natural yearning for independence and

self-identity, Millennial youth have consistently shown a respect for their parents.

The Harris Poll(r) has repeatedly shown that young people hold their parents in high regard. Parents are their role models. Kids and teen-agers tell us they can talk to their parents. And, believe it or not, young people tell us that they actually listen to their parents' advice. This is a generation that will take control of their own lives with their parents' help. The trend toward home schooling is strong evidence of this.

Middle and high schoolers have long represented a walking irony: They strive for independence from their parents at the same time they realize they are dependent on them. But at least among recent generations, there is a closeness between parents and children we haven't seen in a long time. Educators often wish for greater parental involvement, but if you look closely, parents are there, hovering over their children's lives, in roles that are welcomed by their children.

Expect It All

Our polls ask young people what they believe their life will be like at age 30. Consistently, Millennials tell us they will be working in a high-paying job, have time for the activities that interest them, remain close with their parents and friends, do community service, be married and in love, etc. In short, Millennials expect to do it all, with aplomb.

This optimism might not be unique to Millennials, but what is unique is how negative Millennials will react to any organization or individual that is seen to get in the way of their goals. Millennials are not used to being let down or taking no for an answer.

Marketers position their youth products as enablers and not barriers. Successful youth products are wrapped in messages of achievement or empowerment. A beverage is no longer a way to quench thirst; it is a way to signify and celebrate an achievement in sports. A microwave meal isn't only about an eating occasion, it represents empowering a young child to cook for herself.

Millennials view education as a pathway to their dreams. They want lifelong learning with a purpose. They expect feedback all along the way to know that they are on track to their goals. They crave approval and avoid criticism. The optimism and confidence of Millennials is a powerful force, and one that can be tapped into.

Rebels With Cause?

A shocking finding to many youth researchers is that Millennials are not particularly rebellious. They are respectful of authority and rules and have had structure around them from an early age. This doesn't imply they don't test boundaries or want independence.

Millennials place their own boundaries on their rebelliousness. They enjoy mastering the latest extreme sport trick but are sure to be wearing their helmets and pads while they do it. They enjoy hip-hop music and culture because they want to be able to temporarily escape to a reality tougher than their own.

This differs a lot from what we saw in Gen X. Generation X invented the school shooting spree, got in trouble with drugs and didn't do particularly well in school. They listened to depressing grunge music that reflected the world they lived in—one of recession and divorced parents. Media portrayals of Generation X were largely negative. Movies depicted them as disaffected.

An interesting thing happened during the transition from Xer to Millennial. Teen-agers started to make wise choices. School crime began to decline, and today violent acts in schools are at about a 25-year low.



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The teen-age birth rate and pregnancy rate have been on very steady declines. In the early '80s, if you asked a teen-age girl why she wasn't having sex, she was likely to say it was because she was fearful of disease. If you ask her today, she will say she has so much she wants to accomplish she can't afford the risk of getting pregnant. That is a very important shift in attitude.

Drug use is down as well, and we have

seen progress on test scores. When we review press clippings today we tend to see children portrayed as responsible, wise beyond their years and ready to take on the world.

Again, today's youth are not rebellious when compared to the youth of the past. In school, they will test boundaries but will welcome structure if they see how it contributes to their success. They will work together in groups better than previous youth generations.

Female Leadership

Recently, we have spotted an emerging trend: The Millennial generation is led by girls. Four-year college enrollments are currently 57 percent female, with women comprising an even a higher proportion of graduates. After lagging in test scores for years, girls now outscore boys in many reading tests and have caught up to them in math.

Females dominate extracurricular activities in schools. Girls are more likely to be the leaders in student government. More than 75 percent of high school valedictorians are female. We surmise that in the Gen-X era, valedictorians were likely 75 percent males. While boys continue to dominate in sports, girls, via Title IX, have made great gains there.

What does this mean to educators? For one, we need to be sure the rise of Millennial girls is not at the expense of boys. We need to continue to provide girls with role models and a learning environment that is safe for them. Positive attitudes toward learning will be led by girls, and boys and girls will look to female leaders for inspiration.

The Cool Factor

Many youth marketers focus on a diffusion model when they work with teens. Get to the hip, cool, influencer teens first and they will sell your product for you. This model has met with some success for trendy products, but in reality, few ideas and products actually become successful with this approach.

A review of the biggest, most monstrous hits in kid and teen marketing indicates that few of them hit it big by first appealing to the "hipsters." Really giant hits go right to the mainstream. Think Harry Potter, American Idol, Go-Gurt, Britney Spears and the boy bands. These are all blockbuster successes in youth marketing that did not first make their mark with the coolest kids.

Most kids and teens are normal and are happy to be that way. Millennials express their individuality, but seek to fit

Millennials: High Grades of Chief Concern

Harris Interactive regularly tracks the hopes, dreams and fears of the Millennial generation. Consistently, educational achievement is a top-level concern of young people, as the chart below points out.

Top Concerns of Millennials

	8-12 year olds	13-21 year olds
Getting good grades in school	58%	55%
How I look	38%	52%
Other people thinking I am cool	35%	21%
Doing well in sports	30%	17%
Getting along with my parents	27%	28%
My weight	27%	47%
College will be too expensive	26%	44%
Finding a boyfriend or girlfriend	20%	37%
Pressure to have sex	11%	18%
Drugs/alcohol	10%	13%
Not being able to have kids	9%	27%

Source: Harris Interactive YouthPulse, SM, July 2004.

into a group. An excellent saying in youth marketing is that young people “want to be different, just like everybody else.”

Millennials have an expansive view of normalcy and are accepting of a wide variety of friends and influences. Gen-X kids could be separated into cliques based on the music genres they listened to. Millennial kids are likely to have hip-hop, rock, alternative, pop and heavy metal all mixed together on their iPod. Diversity is the new norm.

Believe it or not, education is cool. Children and teens tell us it is cool to be considered smart. Geek is chic to this generation. Just as we find that young consumers buy more on function than form, they are all about education—they just want to see the relevance of what they are learning. Millennials will favor practice over theory and are willing to work hard at school.

Far From Fickle

The school-age population represents the first generation that has been targeted by marketers virtually from birth. For better or worse, this has created a generation of young people who are accus-

tomed to being the center of attention with marketers clamoring for their favor.

Youth often are mischaracterized as fickle. In reality, young people are often more brand loyal than adults. Brands play a different role for them. In addition to being an assurance of quality, a brand serves as a badge for a young consumer. It makes a statement about them to their friends.

Consider youth to be intelligent consumers, not fickle. Studies show that if youth have a positive experience with a product, they are more likely than adults to recommend the product to others. The same is true with negative experiences. In short, they hold companies to the promises they make. They consider their choices wisely.

This mindset flows to their educational experiences. Millennials will convey their excitement about a course or a teacher to their fellow students. They also will convey their dismay. They will expect that if they do the work their teachers require they then will see results. In short, students are the next wave of stakeholders who will demand accountability from schools.

Special Challenges

It is convenient for educators to classify education as unique and to ignore private-sector learnings about children. In reality, educational leaders face some of the very same issues as youth marketers. Both types of organizations vie for kids' and teens' attention in a cluttered world.

Education is special, important, consequential, but not entirely unique. Look for the commonalities you have with youth marketers and don't dwell on differences. It's the common areas where true insight on the generation can be found.

Millennials are poised to become the next great generation in America. History will one day look back and view Millennials as being a group that took the baton from the baby boomers and became a positive force for change in society. History also will show that Millennials fully embraced the substantial educational opportunities that have been presented to them. ■

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