

Understanding Generation Y

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Our research shows the biggest divide facing our society is not a gender divide, racial divide, income or technology divide but it is the generational divide. For those of us involved in engaging young people it must be remembered that the gap between us and them is constantly growing: school students are always aged 5-18 but we are getting older, so we must work harder to understand them and so remain relevant.

Let's begin by defining these generations:

<u>Description</u>	<u>Born</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Million</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Seniors	Before 1925	77+	0.94	5%
Builders	1926–1945	57 – 76	2.75	15%
Boomers	1946–1964	38 – 56	4.75	25%
Generation X	1965–1981	21 – 37	4.83	26%
Generation Y	1982–2000	2 – 20	5.15	28%
Generation Z	2001+	<2	0.25	1%

(Figures from the ABS Census)ⁱ

Generation X has been synonymous with young people since the name was first coined by Douglas Coupland in 1991ⁱⁱ. However many Xers are now in their 30's and when it comes to understanding school students we are talking about Generation Y.

Why are young people so different to the other generations?

Age:

Obviously the age or life-stage of this generation makes them unique to other cohorts. Being young they have different priorities to older generations. They generally have no financial commitments, thus over 70% of their income is spent arbitrarily, with the majority going on entertainment, travel, and food. They have different recreational pursuits to other generations with their top 3 spare time activities being: “go to a party” (74%); “listen to the radio” (74%); and “go to a movie” (72%)ⁱⁱⁱ. The point is that people operate in different ways because of their age. However age is not the sole reason for generational behaviours otherwise teenagers today would be indistinguishable from teenagers of a generation ago. Yet this is clearly not the case, and it is because life-stage is just one of three broad factors that differentiate the generations.

Conditions:

The current economic, social, and political conditions which we all live under actually further divide the generations. The same conditions act upon people of different ages in different ways^{iv}. Take text messaging on mobile phones as an example: the technology is available to all, however 74% of messages are sent by Generation Y's^v and so they are developing the new text language (eg "CU L8R" for "see you later").

Experiences:

Experiences that occur during the formative childhood and teenage years also create and define differences between the generations. These social markers create the paradigms through which the world is viewed and decisions are made. Baby Boomers were influenced by the advent of the TV, Rock and Roll, the Cold War, Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear war, and the decimal currency. Xers saw in the Personal Computer, AIDS, single parent families, the growth in multiculturalism, and the downsizing of companies. Generation Y's have lived through the age of the internet, cable television, globalisation, September 11, and environmentalism. Such shared experiences during one's youth unite and shape a generation. There is an ancient saying that bears much truth: "People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents".

What most influences Generation Y?

Peers:

While the Builders' Generation are most influenced by authority figures and Boomers make decisions based on data and facts, post-modern youth are more likely to make a decision based on the influence of their own peers. Our research has further confirmed that the biggest factor determining the choice a teenager will make is the experiences of their core group of 3 to 8 friends. Rather than making independent decisions based on core values, they live in a culture encouraging them to embrace community values, and to reach consensus.

Pragmatism:

It is understandable that young people today are less idealistic than generations past due in part to the media and pop culture that fills their life. The most popular song of the 1940's was Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" (1942), for the 50's it was "Rock around the Clock" (Bill Haley and his Comets, 1955), and the 60's it was the Beatles' "I want to hold your hand" (1963)^{vi}. A quick listen to the music of choice for Generation Y reveals what different times they live in. Much is made of the dark lyrics of Eminem and Marilyn Manson, but these are just public examples of the popular and pervasive genre. The influence of music is second only to the influence of TV and movies in Gen Y culture. George Barna has found that when teenagers were asked, "What/who has a lot of influence on your thinking and behaviour?" one quarter of the influence on their lives is from TV and movies^{vii}.

Australian teenagers are now spending more time watching TV today compared to four years ago, up from 2 hours 16 minutes per day to 2 hours and 20 minutes, a growth of 3.6%. In addition to the growing Internet and video games use, they are now approaching 4 hours screen time per day^{viii}.

At the same time Generation Y are increasingly worried by an array of factors from youth unemployment rates and increasing housing costs, to body image and crime rates. The result is that they have an increasingly short-term focus. Our research shows that their top life expectation is to complete their education (94%) with not too many plans after this.

Preference:

For previous generations, the modernism mindset ruled and so people grew up believing that technology was good and to be trusted, medicine could overcome any problems humanity faced, and together we could create a great future. However in these post-modern times, technology is often not trusted let alone held up as the answer. AIDS and other pandemics continue to defy the experts, and the scientific method has given way to virtual reality. The concept of absolute and inherent truth has been banished as truth is deemed to be relative to one's own background and understanding. The culture today asserts that any philosophy, religion, or practice is as valid as any other as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, and it is tolerant of the beliefs of others.

What are their values?

By understanding what today's youth most value, we can determine how to most effectively engage them. The core values of the Builders and Boomers generations included solid values such as a strong work ethic, respect for authority, loyalty and commitment, financial conservatism, long-term planning, and delayed gratification. Of course many chose to reject these values however they were still culturally dominant. The values in vogue today are drastically different:

Relational Connection:

Gen Y is seeking after more than just friendships. They want community: to be understood, accepted, respected, and included. Our research shows that while they spend most of their spare time with their peers, they often fail to experience real unconditional love, and connection when with them. Above all else, Australian teens wish for "a happy relationship" and "a loving family"^{ix}. A stereotype is that this generation has no loyalty however they do demonstrate strong loyalty to their friends. They work hard to live up to what their peers expect of them, and their self-esteem often rests on how well regarded they are in their group or sub-culture.

Bigger Meaning:

This generation has observed their parents get the rewards of hard work: houses, cars, and material wealth. Gen Y has benefited from this being the most materially endowed, and entertained generation of teenagers ever. Yet they have seen the costs of their parents' success in terms of broken marriages, absentee parenting, and an epidemic of

stress related illnesses. For their part Gen Y have been left disillusioned with the materialism they have enjoyed and boredom remains a big problem for them (57% state that “never being bored” is of highest importance to them^x).

Therefore they are looking for more than just continuing the consumerism experiment. Indeed when deciding to accept a job, salary ranks sixth in order of importance after training, management style, work flexibility, staff activities, and non-financial rewards^{xi}. The young people of this generation do not live to work- but rather they work to live. A job merely provides the income to do what they want to do. They are on a search for fun, for quality friendships, for a fulfilling purpose, and for spiritual meaning (1 in 3 claim to regularly take part in a religious service of some sort). There are more voices than ever trying to win over a cause-seeking generation. Whether it is environmentalism, social issues, human rights, or volunteering, young people are getting increasingly involved.

Trusted Guidance:

Our research shows that the third strongest felt need Australian teenagers have is for guidance or direction in their life that is trustworthy^{xii}. There is much advice on offer but not much of it is believed by this sceptical generation, and rightly so. By the age of 18, the average young person has viewed over 500,000 TV commercials, in addition to countless Internet, radio, and outdoor ads, much of which is pure hype. Like the sign outside the Pharmacist reading “Ears pierced, while you wait”, or the supermarket aisle sign “Stock up and save. Limit of 1 per customer”, this generation is hammered with hype and has the hype radar up screening out most messages. However if our client has a message worth delivering, and they are authentic in their motives and style, it is possible to have a great impact. This generation wants guidance in the form of a navigator, not a street directory. Our society is full of proverbial street directories, which show the way to financial, relationship, or life success. However most Gen Y’s are unsure of where they are now, let alone where they are going, and so they are seeking specific direction from someone who knows them, their situation, and has even travelled that way themselves. They are looking for real life role models and mentors who not only know the way, but also go the way, and can show the way.

How can we better communicate with them?

The traditional talk and chalk won’t work with this generation. Our communication style is structured, yet they want freedom. We stress learning, they like experiencing. We react, they relate. We focus on the individual, while they are socially driven. Here are four essentials to consider when engaging with youth today:

Real:

Not only must our communication style be credible, but we must be also. They don’t expect us to know all about their lifestyle, nor do they want us to embrace their culture. They are simply seeking understanding, and respect. If our communication has a hidden agenda, or we are less than transparent, it will be seen. This generation can sniff a phoney from a long distance.

Raw:

Today's youth have access to the most advanced technology, movie special effects, and video games with which we can never compete. But the good news is that they are not impacted by slick presentations. They don't want a rehearsed talk, or a manufactured spiel. The more spontaneous and interactive we are in the classroom, the less intimidated, and more open they will be.

Relevant:

Obviously what we are communicating has to fall within their area of interest. But the style, as well as the content of our message must be relevant to a generation who are visually educated and entertained. There is no point in giving music to a friend on a cassette tape if they only have a CD player, or on CD if they only use MP3. Similarly we must research in the most appropriate format for those we are reaching. So in understanding the communication styles of our target cohort we will be better equipped to reach them.

Relational:

There is an old and true saying in education circles: "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care!" Communicating to this generation requires openness, vulnerability, and genuine interest in those we are trying to teach, and above all else, understanding. The more relaxed the environment, and the more socially conducive to discussions; the better will be the quality of the learning.

A Final Word:

Whether we are involved in educating youth, or in a leadership role, a quality outcome is dependent on our understanding of them. Once we have a foundational grasp of their characteristics, communication styles, and social attitudes, we will be well equipped to effectively impact this enormous and emerging generation.

ⁱ The Australian Bureau of Statistics, www.abs.gov.au

ⁱⁱ Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture*. St Martin's Press, 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Lifestyles Survey 2001, p2

^{iv} Walker-Smith, J. & Clurman, A. *Rocking the Ages*. Yankelovich Partners, 1997.

^v Australian Leadership Foundation, *SMS Research Study*, December 2001.

^{vi} Ash, R. *The Top 10 of Everything*. 1993, UK, Headline Books, p130.

^{vii} Barna Research Group *Teenage Attitude Study*, October 2001, www.barna.org

^{viii} Australian Lifestyles Survey 2001, p2

^{ix} Korn, N. *Understanding Australian Teenagers Study 2000*, p2.

^x Australian Lifestyles Survey 2001, channel [V] p4

^{xi} Manpower Inc Survey, *Sydney Morning Herald* 14 October 2000

^{xii} The Australian Leadership Foundation *Commissioned Research Project* January 2002

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