

ANALYSIS

MARKETING FOR THE AGES: THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHICS IN CONSUMER PREFERENCES

JUNE 2022





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Introduction

Marketing to consumers based on known demographics like age is not a new concept, but it's certainly not getting any easier. The members of each generation have their own unique preferences about how they like to shop, how they spend their money, and how they want to be marketed to. To further complicate matters, these preferences are often a moving target—subject to change based on personal experiences, major life milestones, and even the lingering uncertainty associated with a global pandemic.

Today's marketers must work harder than ever to establish that all-important connection with their customers so they can foster loyalty and build trust. The same marketing campaign that works quite well for older consumers might prove ineffective and off-putting for younger individuals, or vice versa. In addition, targeted campaigns that were successful just a few short years ago might fall flat today thanks to consumers' constantly evolving preferences. Communicating with customers based on their age is a sound strategy, but it must be done correctly. This article explores how age-based marketing can provide a much higher return on investment than grouping all consumers into a single audience.

Defining the Generations

For the purposes of this analysis, we will categorize the major adult generations into four basic categories, which are defined in the Table below.

Table 1: The Major Adult Generations

	Born Between	Age Range in 2022
Generation Z	1997 and 2012	10 – 25 Years Old
Millennials (Generation Y)	1981 and 1996	26 – 41 Years Old
Generation X	1965 and 1980	42 – 57 Years Old
Boomers	1946 and 1964	58 – 76 Years Old



Just in case you were seeking proof that time is fleeting, consider the following about Generation Z consumers:

- At 25 years old, the eldest members of Generation Z aren't kids anymore.
- The Internet itself (which was established in January 1983 when TCP/IP enabled different kinds of computers on different networks to communicate with one another) is considerably older than all members of Generation Z.
- When the first iPhone debuted, the oldest Gen Zers were just 10 years old. This means that a great many members of Gen Z have never used (or even seen) a phone that isn't "smart."

On the other hand, today's seniors aren't what they used to be either. For example:

- According to the [Pew Research Center](#), the majority of Baby Boomers were still in the labor force in 2019, and the oldest Boomers were staying in the labor force at the highest annual rate for people their age in over 50 years. As of the third quarter of 2021, however, [nearly 67% of Boomers were retired](#). Lingering uncertainties associated with COVID as well as "The Great Resignation" are clearly playing a role. Given increasing life expectancy, however, the practice of working past retirement age may become more common over time.
- Boomers love social networks! According to [Renolon](#), over 82% of Baby Boomers are using at least one social media site. In addition, over three-quarters of Boomers are Facebook users and 67% regularly use YouTube.
- As a group, Baby Boomers are staying healthy and living longer. This enables them to work later in life if they choose, which in turn gives them more disposable income. As a result, this is a demographic that no marketer can afford to overlook.

Giving Consumers What They Want

According to [PPC Protect](#), the average person saw between 500 and 1,600 ads per day back in the 1970s. Of course, this was before the dawn of online marketing. In 2021, the average person encountered an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 ads every single day. With the constant barrage of marketing messages coming at us these days, some might expect consumers to prefer fewer touchpoints or contacts. In actuality, consumers want to be regularly contacted by familiar and trusted brands. Developing a keen understanding of your customers—including demographic information like age and the associated preferences—is key to establishing a trusted relationship. When a customer is made to feel like an individual, this goes a long way toward fostering familiarity and trust. Marketing messages will resonate better, because the consumer will feel like the brand truly understands his or her personal needs.



Age-related marketing can deliver the personalization and individualization that all consumers demand, but it should be remembered that the various age groups often want different things.

Generation Z

Unlike some of the older generations who remember a time before digital marketing, the members of Gen Z have been exposed to information overload for as long as they can remember. As such, they're experts at filtering through enormous amounts of information, so marketers have a very limited window in which to capture and keep their attention. Gen Z consumers are used to instant gratification, so marketing content must be engaging and clearly beneficial to capture their attention and be worthy of their time.

Gen Zers seek authenticity and will quickly reject brands that don't align with their personal beliefs and values (e.g., environmental friendliness, gender equality, support for the LGBTQIA community). In addition, talk is not enough—Gen Z consumers know the difference between a company that is putting on a show and one that is truly making a difference. Younger consumers want to do business with brands that demonstrate a commitment to their community. It can be difficult to capture the attention of Gen Z, but they can become powerful and loyal brand ambassadors for companies that they trust and believe in.

Because they grew up with digital screens, Generation Z consumers are extremely open to video messaging, mobile marketing, and quick response (QR) codes that can be scanned to connect them back to their screens. That said, it's important not to overlook more traditional marketing like direct mail, even among the youngest consumers. Since they are exposed to so much digital messaging, print-based communications are more of a novelty for younger consumers, and print can cut through the clutter of their digital lives.

Millennials

Now that they are entrenched in the workforce and settling down with families, Millennials have an incredible amount of purchasing power. They grew up during a time of rapid technological innovation, so they are always interested in trying new things. Quality will sometimes override price as the most important factor, but Millennials still want to get their money's worth.

As the very first Facebook users¹, Millennials are social media natives who put a lot of credence in peer reviews. In some cases, a series of positive online reviews can be more of a selling point than any form of official brand advertising. To effectively reach Millennials, brands are tasked with being able to share positive reviews via multiple channels, even

¹ Facebook was originally developed by college students, exclusively for college students before becoming available to others shortly thereafter.



channels that better lend themselves to shorter messaging (e.g., Twitter). Because Millennials place so much credence in online reviews, these reviews should be as visible as possible. When using direct mail or other forms of physical advertising, consider incorporating QR codes that can be linked to product reviews, and encourage/incentivize your consumers to post reviews of their own. Be sure to address any negative reviews and strive to improve a poor customer experience, because a bad review carries just as much weight as a good one.

Much like the members of Generation Z, Millennials expect the brands that they do business with to know them as individuals. Because they like to feel recognized, rewards programs are a great way to keep Millennials engaged with a brand. Encouraging Millennials to watch videos, share to social media, or leave product reviews—and then rewarding them for doing so—can be quite effective. Millennials enjoy doing these things anyway, and these activities can also have benefits to the brand in the form of positive reviews, an active social media presence, and greater customer loyalty.

Generation X

Many Gen Xers are parents with children who still live in their households, and some are also caring for or supporting their aging parents. As a result, they may be making financial decisions that affect multiple generations. Although Gen X consumers grew up shopping at traditional retail establishments, they have fully embraced online shopping. They also respond well to both traditional and newer forms of advertising—direct mail or radio/television advertising can be as effective as e-mail marketing or social media ads.

Although they are certainly not as young as the so-called digital natives, Gen Xers use social media quite a bit. As such, social media networks—particularly Facebook—can be an excellent tool for marketing to this generation. This is especially true if the advertising is personal. Like the other age groups, Gen Xers love feeling like the brands that they do business with truly understand their needs—so get to know your customers far beyond name and address! Age-appropriate toys can be marketed to parents, Kitty litter or dog food can be marketed to pet owners, and life/property insurance can be marketed toward homeowners.

Having grown up with computers, the members of Generation X remain quite comfortable with emerging technologies. They also grew up with the Internet, so they will frequently conduct their own online research before making a purchase. Inauthentic claims or gimmicks can damage the customer/brand relationship because Gen Xers will often come into a sale well-equipped with legitimate information. If marketing is not transparent and honest, Gen Xers will take their business elsewhere. Many members of this generation grew up in single-parent households or saw their parents struggle with financial hardships.



As a result, Gen Xers are quite cynical by nature, but the upshot is that they tend to be quite loyal to brands that have earned their trust.

Baby Boomers

Many Baby Boomers have entered or are approaching retirement, but it's important to remember that today's seniors are quite different today than they were a few decades ago. They are living longer, richer lives and are remaining active into old age. Now that their careers are winding down and their children have reached adulthood, many seniors are financially well-positioned to enjoy their retirement. Whereas discounts are generally quite appealing to younger consumers who are just starting out, Boomers are more likely to splurge on the top-tier items that they've worked so hard to enjoy.

As might be expected, Baby Boomers still prefer more traditional forms of advertising. Social media ads are often misunderstood and may be construed as spam, but television/radio commercials and direct mail communications are often effective. Even in today's age of chatbots, most people across all age groups would prefer to interact with a real person, but this is especially true of Boomers. When making a purchase, they like having access to a human being (preferably in person) who can answer their questions and make them feel comfortable in their decisions. Despite any preconceived notions, many Baby Boomers are spending quite a bit of money on new technologies, but they will often want to interact with a person before taking the plunge.

Although it is often assumed that Boomers are less tech-savvy than their younger counterparts, they are huge users of social media and have also become quite comfortable with online shopping. They are also incredibly loyal to tried-and-true brands that they have been using for years, as well as newer brands that can prove their quality. As a result, it's very important for all brands to remain accessible to seniors. A Millennial might prefer to research a product, interact with a brand, and make a purchase using little more than a smartphone, but few Boomers would be comfortable doing the same. Given their tremendous spending power and disposable income, brands must enable seniors to shop on their terms.



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The Bottom Line: Marketing to the Individual

Age-based marketing is often beneficial because the various generations will often have similar preferences or behaviors, but all people are individuals first regardless of generation. Brands cannot assume that younger consumers won't be receptive to traditional direct mail, nor can they assume that Baby Boomers won't want to "Tap to Pay" with their iPhones. There is no "one size fits all" marketing approach that all consumers of a certain generation will respond to, so today's brands must reach customers wherever they are. This means delivering a seamless marketing experience across all channels, including mobile, social, e-mail, in-person, and via direct mail.

Regardless of age, all consumers want brands to reach out to them via multiple touchpoints. Preferences will often vary by individual, though, so today's brands must develop new and innovative ways to stay connected with consumers on their terms. By combining traditional and digital communications, brands can connect with consumers, add more value to the customer journey, create more leads, and ultimately drive more sales.



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