

“What Drives Consumer Behavior?”
Preferences of Age Groups

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Purchasing habits fluctuate over time with every generation, but because of increased access to new technology and uncertainty due to world events and insecure futures, the consumer trends of generations have changed. In order for businesses to appeal to these consumers, it is important to understand what these buying habits are, how they have changed, and what techniques can be utilized to expand sales among five consumer segments. A recent article from American Demographics Advertising Age highlights these changing behaviors.

Birth -12 years old

It is no longer just colorful toys that attract this consumer segment, as it is no longer possible to lump sub-teens together under the same marketing roof. Because of the changing tastes of these “sub-teens” towards consumer electronics and fashion goodies, marketing for this age group has now been split into four distinct under-13 segments: newborns -to-3-year-olds, 3-to-5-year olds, 5-to-8-year-olds, and 8-to-12-year-olds.

In the wake of the September 11 tragedy, children are leading more protected lives that include more organized activities and closer parental supervision. Relationships with parents have also changed within this market segment in that parents are maintaining friendships with their kids instead of a “gatekeeper” role; therefore, stores can market products to children and parents at the same time by selling products that both segments can enjoy together.

Today, children within this market segment also differ from their predecessors in that they are technically empowered. “They have grown up in a world with ready access to multifunctional gaming consoles and Internet connections.” Due to this empowerment at such an early

age, they could well evolve into the most progressive and/or demanding generation of consumers.

When marketing for this consumer segment it is important to focus on these new media preferences. Products and marketing campaigns that are fun are also a priority, as they are still children.

13-17 years old

The image of the typical teenager has changed from that of a lazy underachiever to an optimistic, ambitious, self-assured person with a more confident and positive outlook on life. Though teenagers have not changed psychologically and emotionally over the past fifty years, from a marketing perspective, this age group is much more accustomed to being the targets of sales pitches and is therefore more aware and sometimes critical of their motives.

Because teenagers are accustomed to multi-tasking, products need to be presented in a way that will catch the attention of the consumer. As self-expression is important to many teenagers, this can be encouraged by allowing them to customize products. Community involvement and global awareness have also become more important due to the widespread use of the Internet, so products that are “earth and community friendly” may be more appealing.

18-34 years old

This market segment, also referred to as the “bling generation”, spans from those that were raised on TV images of the Vietnam War on one end and those who grew up watching MTV on the other. Because the 9/11



tragedy was a defining moment in the lives of this age group, a sense of uncertainty about their security has led this market segment to “seek lasting value in both relationships and products” (Advertising Age, page 16). Another result of this uncertainty is the increased demand for luxury products. “Technology and luxury are two things this generation clearly desires” (16).

Social responsibility plays an important role in selling products to this age group. They are not only concerned with the value of a product but also the extent to which it is environmentally safe, connected to a cause, and gives back to the community. By buying these types of products, they can feel socially responsible without having to commit any significant amount of time to these causes.

Because this age group is so diverse, they can be difficult to market to as a whole. Appealing to this generation requires offering a product with good design; good value, preferably luxury; at least the appearance of some social responsibility; and an advertising campaign that sells with the consumer not at them.

35-54 years old

This generation, called the trailing boomers, is characterized by spending a lot but spending carefully. This segment has three primary characteristics. “They are quite sophisticated in the use of technology to get information, they have the money to buy things, and they are still in the householder life stage, many raising teens” (18). Though this group has large financial obligations for children’s college funds and other expenses, according to the co-founder and senior vice-president of the think tank Age Wave, Maddy Dychtwald, “They want to spend more, they need to indulge themselves a little bit, like they are thinking, ‘If not now, when?’” (19).

This market segment wants to get a deal but not sacrifice quality. A good marketing strategy for these demanding and technologically adept consumers is through product segmentation. If a product works well for a specific consumer, price will not be a major issue, but it needs to be recognized that different products will appeal to different consumers.

Another aspect of concern for this age group is fitness and well-being. “They want to be defined in terms of their attitudes and education, health and wellness, adventure and excitement” (19). Therefore, it may be beneficial to market to this group based on state of health and ability to get out and do things instead of on their age.

55+ years old

Today, this generation is looking towards retirement characterized by youthful vigor, prosperity, and personal

fulfillment. They define themselves based on their values and attitudes giving marketers opportunities in the areas of financial, hospitality, and wellness products and services.

Two key trends describe a change in consumption patterns and priorities of adults in this market segment: “Aging Process” and “Transition to Empty Nest” (20). The aging process trend can be capitalized on through the sale of “healthier” and personal care products that offer an age-defying promise. Products that will “keep them going” are in high demand.

Though this segment was likely to have benefited from higher educational opportunities, careers, and real-estate investments, there is still a sense of apprehension about future security due to the possibility of having to accept either children or parents back into the home in the future. Therefore, the transition to an “empty nest” may not be achieved. Due to this uncertainty, many in this generation are simply concerned with catching the happiness while they can. They are focused on making purchases that will make them happy on a daily basis.

Conclusion

Each of these market segments demonstrates different purchasing habits due to varying life experiences, increased knowledge of new technology, and a hope or an uncertainty for the future. This wide array of consumer habits requires different marketing techniques. In order for downtown businesses to successfully market to each of these generations, it is necessary for them to understand how to most effectively appeal to people of all ages through the selection of products and advertising methods.

Source:

Dobrow, Larry “Birth-12 Lifecycle” and “13-17 Lifecycle”, Hanas, Jim “18-34 Lifecycle”, and Tenser, James “35-54 Lifecycle” and “55+ Lifecycle”. *American Demographics Advertising Age* January 2, 2006 pp. 12-21.