

## M2M: MARKETING TO MILLENNIALS

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### ABSTRACT

We will examine the seven core characteristics of the Millennial Generation (circa 1980–2000) in the light of current advertising campaigns in popular media. We will examine print, TV, and Internet advertising efforts targeted at this generation of consumers and analyze each one in terms of effectiveness. This exercise is designed to help raise consciousness and develop filters for analyzing marketing messages targeted at this new generation of customers.

### INTRODUCTION

I am tempted to call the change we are going through, as we transfer from one generation to the next, a sea change. A sea change, however, is both very significant and very slow. I'm afraid we won't have a lot of leisure to make this transition. We need to retool our messages, our campuses and our teaching techniques to match the needs of the Millennial Generation right now. Generation X, the students we have been working with for the past 20 years are gone, and their replacements, as is usually the case with generations that butt up against each other, are polar opposites in important ways.

The seven core characteristics of the Millennial Generation are:

- Sheltered
- Pressured
- Achieving
- Conventional
- Special
- Team-oriented
- Confident

Generation X, by contrast, is:

- Pessimistic
- Individualistic
- Ignored
- Extreme
- Slackers
- Pragmatic

These are the agreed-upon characteristics of the two generations established by Howe and Strauss. And most of my work in this field uses Howe and Strauss as both the starting point and cornerstone. They are the co-authors of "Generations," "The Fourth Turning," "Millennials Rising" and "The Millennials Go to College." That last one is a quick read and should be required for anyone interested in marketing in higher education. I cannot praise Howe and Strauss enough for their work, and, in the interest of disclosure, we have been friends and acquaintances for many years.

So I'm not going to spend time and space going over their work. If you want complete explanations of these characteristics, and the statistics and research to back them up, you should read "Millennials Rising."

But a quick look at those lists clearly demonstrate the difference between the generations and should provide some incentive to change the way we think about our audience. The group of characteristics I pay particular attention to are what I call the parental characteristics: sheltered, special, pressured. These sum up how the Millennials have been parented – and in some cases over-parented – by their fathers and mothers. And that relationship was the first thing that came to mind when I saw one particular ad that made me think "This company gets it."

## MIND THE GAP

It's been a few years since it aired, so I will explicate the Gap ad that first got me thinking that advertisers had started paying attention to the demographic characteristics of the Millennials. The ad opens with a group of about 20 young people (circa 18 years-old). All are in identical leather jackets, maybe Bomber jackets. One young man starts singing the lyrics to "They Call me Mello Yello," and if you were born before the soft drink stole the name, you will recognize it as a late 60's pop hit. The chorus joins in and they all sing in unison. At the end there are the bold words across the screen "Everybody in Leather."

This ad hit the demographic projections about this generation on many levels. First and foremost, it was about uniformity. This group is called team-oriented and conventional, and that has equated with a move toward a more collective identity. Whereas Boomers and Xers have extolled the virtues of their individuality – and Reagan's election was, in part, a mandate on individuality – this next generation is going to value group identity very highly. Niche marketing, by the way, may be a casualty of the Millennials' deep belief in the dynamics of the group. Howe has even predicted that productivity in American manufacturing will surge because of the reintroduction of mass production for a population that wants lots of the same. The phrase "Everybody in Leather" hits that message hard at the end.

Millennials swarm. They travel in big groups and like to dress alike. A group of 20 of them singing in unison echoes their own belief in conformity, which is, in turn, an indication of their conventional thinking. I know there will be misbegotten attempts by the media to paint this next generation with broad brushstrokes of rebellion and anger, but I think these are mere wishful thinking by the Boomers and Xers that now work for the media companies. In fact, though there will be new and challenging ideas from this cohort of young people, as there always is, it will be a rebellion against individuality and pessimism.

Finally this ad uses Boomer music to invoke a fact that cannot be stressed enough: the Millennials like their parents' music. And this acceptance and embracing of previous generations' music is a testimony to all of the statistics we have seen coming out of various organizations (including Statmats, the Poynter Institute, and the Harris Organization). Millennials respect their parents, often cite their parents as personal heroes, and go to their parents for advice about important decisions in their lives – including college decisions.

Another ad from the Gap that ran for a short time, after the "Everybody in Leather" ad, featured Carol King singing one of her hits with her daughter joining in. Her daughter finishes the ad with, "You know what kind of music I like? My mom's." Brilliant.

This relationship between parents and Millennials is framed by their agreement in music and open two-way communication on everything from cars to colleges to khakis. The reason I spend so much time and so much attention to this relationship is because it is a connection we in higher education understand all too well. Howe and Strauss coined the term "helicopter parents" to describe the way the parents of our prospective students hover above the whole college-decision process. I think most admission and marketing folks have come to realize that with this generation, you must sell the parents (and sometimes the grandparents') on your college more now than in any time in the past. So how do you do that?

Is it as simple as blending 60s and 70s music with images of large, uniform groups of young people? That's one approach, but because there are seven core characteristics of this group, you can mix and match as appropriate to your college. But those three parent-based characteristics – sheltered, special and pressured – has got to be in the mix to appeal cross-generationally. Any safety improvements you make to your campus, for example, should be publicized and marketed. In the past, most colleges didn't want to raise safety issues in any way in the fear of raising the specter of raising safety concerns. It's time to realize that ever since these parents hung "Baby on Board" signs in the back window of their cars, safety is high on their list of priorities.

So how do you mix safety with the team-orientation of the Millennials? Got ROTC on campus? Add a picture or two in your viewbook of ROTC soldiers marching, especially if you have avoided those pictures in the past. ROTC speaks to the safety concerns of parents, even if their kids aren't participants, and the team-orientation and conventional views of the Millennials. One of our admission representatives mentioned that very few students are interested in ROTC when he brings it up. I think that may continue to be true, but both students and parents have admiration and respect for the

military and that's worth a lot. And actually getting kids involved in the military, especially now, will raise safety concerns with parents.

Which leads me to my next ad.

### IN THE ARMY

At the same time the Gap ad was playing, the Army introduced its new ad campaign "An Army of One." These ads focused on the rugged individuality that people gained through Army training. If these ads were targeted at Generation X, they would have been right on target, but they were aimed at the leading edge of the Millennial generation, so it was exactly the wrong message. It would have been much more effective for the Army to stress patriotism, teamwork, and optimism. The strengths of the Army are precisely the strengths that Millennials admire, and I will go out on a limb to predict that the armed forces will not have any difficulty getting recruits in the next decade or two.

So the Army's original ad was drastically off-target. In contrast to that ad campaign, its most recent ads show a great deal of learning about their target market. In the new ad, a young man is sitting with his mother explaining to her why he wants to go into the Army and the advantage he will gain through the training and education. This change says it all. It addresses the consultative relationship between the Millennials and their parents. If you go to the Army's website, you will see a whole section devoted parents of prospective soldiers.

This organization has learned valuable lessons about its audience, and it learned it quickly. And we can learn from them. Most of you address at least part of your marketing to the parents of prospective students, but is it more of an afterthought or is it a concerted part of your strategy? How much of your website is dedicated to the parents of prospective and current students?

For our part, we introduced a live chat feature to our website as a way to reach out to the next generation of students in a medium they prefer. But about half the time, I end up chatting with parents who access our website from work. They click on the chat feature and end up talking with me. And I count that as a successful contact, by proxy, with our students.

### SPORTS MARKETING

Athletics has always been a big part of the marketing mix for most colleges. But a quick look at the participation rate of this generation in sports may give you pause. The Millennials have, as a generation, been more immersed in athletics than any previous generation. Their soccer moms dragged them to soccer (after violin lessons and before dance lessons) practice and every other team-based sport you can mention. But just having traditional varsity sports, which by definition limits participation to just the best athletes, is not an answer. You need sports offering, like intramural sports, that are inclusive.

And you need a lot of them. This generation was brought up being shuttled from music lessons to school to sports to church groups and back home in time for a late dinner and a few hours of homework. In short, they have been over-scheduled as part of being over-parented.

I was talking to classroom full of Millennials recently and asked them what they were going to do after college. I pointed out that they had been scheduled all through their lifetime and, even in college, had most of their time accounted for through classes and homework and extracurriculars. One student raised her hand and said, "I've heard that after college is when you rest." I thought to myself that I never considered my post-college years as restful, but I didn't say anything aloud.

So what kinds of sports should you be promoting to this generation of students? Clearly team-oriented sports like soccer, football, baseball, basketball, etc., make a lot of sense. Right now, we are getting many requests regarding lacrosse and ultimate Frisbee—untraditional sports with a strong team element. And what won't fly? If you look at most of the extreme sports so popular with Generation X, they are almost exclusively individual sports and have few team elements. I will again go out on a limb to predict that extreme sports— with the exception of skateboarding— will fade into obscurity on college campuses. So get ready to take down your rock-climbing walls and find some big fields for intramural lacrosse.

During our online chat room sessions, we get a lot of questions about whether there's enough to do on campus. Now, being in central Minnesota, we expect that, but I think there's a hidden message in those questions. I think we are about to be plunged into a group of students who expect a level of activity that we may not be ready for. If you think you've got enough sports for these kids, think again. If you think you have enough clubs, better check your lists. If you think your courses will keep them busy with homework, you should understand that the Millennials set records for the average amount of homework they did during high school. Imagine facing a student body of over-achieving, over-scheduled, over-parented kids and you can begin to understand the challenge facing a lot of colleges.

## FILTERS

Marketing to Millennials is going to demand change. We are facing two decades of students who are polar opposites of the generation we faced for the last two decades. But because we will be facing them for a long time, we aren't necessarily forced to trash all of our marketing strategies and change our efforts completely overnight. Rather, I recommend that you, as marketers, should develop filters based on the seven core characteristics, so when you send an e-mail or a brochure or a viewbook or buy an ad, you can use the seven core characteristics as a kind of checklist.

You simply take a look at each piece of your marketing strategy and analyze whether it addresses one or more of the characteristics. Chances are, without even thinking about it, your marketing piece meets one of the criteria in the list. And if it meets one of the parent-Millennial cross-generational characteristics (pressured, sheltered, special), all the better. It helps a great deal to develop these filters as you watch ads on TV or messages in popular movies. No one was surprised when *Finding Nemo* was successful, but when I watched it, I knew why. It hit the checklist of generational markers on a couple of levels, and its central message, about the pros and cons of protective parents, was strongly on target. I watch the *Gilmore Girls* because I like the show, but there's no way to overlook the relationship between the mother and daughter in that show as anything but generationally significant. And because the show is directed at my core audience, I watch the ads carefully.

One recent car commercial has me intrigued and a little perplexed. It features a bunch of people playing Frisbee, but they are in cars and SUVs. They throw the disc out the window of their car and someone else in another model catches and throws it on. So is this a demonstration of the fact that old Boomers can't run around like they used to and will now be forced to use their cars to play Frisbee? Or is it an attempt to emulate Ultimate Frisbee, a Millennial sport, and thereby encourage young people to convince their parents to consider these automobiles? All I know is that I suspect they are trying to be cross-generational, but I'm not sure their message is clear.

So here are some concrete elements I've got on my Millennial checklist when I look at our colleges and our marketing efforts.

- Is it group oriented? Do our pictures have more than three people in them and, if not, why not? These kids are comfortable in larger groups and our colleges should give them images they can identify with. If you absolutely must use two people in a photo, make it a faculty member acting as a mentor for one or two students.
- Is it optimistic? Aside from the typical optimism of youth, this generation believes it will achieve great things, and your publications, ads and web sites should reflect the optimism of education. The darkly ironic humor of Generation X is no longer applicable.
- In terms of images, are there a lot of them? If you don't know what the Raven's Quotient is and what it measures, look it up on the Internet. In short, this generation is much more visually sophisticated than your previous audiences.
- What colors do you use? The blacks, dark browns, beige, and gray tones of the past decade are quickly being replaced by bright, bold colors like orange, yellow and red. I heard a young person somewhere say "pink is the new black." Believe it. These colors also reflect an optimism about the future. Watch Target ads.
- Do your marketing efforts feature sports images and, in particular, team sports. Don't just use them in your athletic brochures; use them everywhere.

- Britney Spears is out. Trust me. Millennials are more conservative about dress, sex, drugs, rock and roll, drinking, religion, and politics. If you have outspoken liberal faculty . . . Ok, I have no idea what to do with outspoken liberal faculty. But they have a tough row to hoe in the next 20 years, and when they come to the provost to complain about "kids these days," you may want to tell them that their conservative students are demonstrating a generational trait, not a moral failing.
- Finally, you can't stress safety enough. Everything your physical plant workers do to improve security, fire safety, and student safety is worth talking about.

This is in no way an exhaustive list. And the more you watch the marketing efforts of organizations like The Gap and the Army, while using your filters, the more you will see new ways to appeal to this next generation of students.

While Jon Stewart and The Daily Show tend toward the dark and ironic, I think he showed enormous insight into the next generation at a recent commencement address:

"And the last thing I want to address is the idea that somehow this new generation is not as prepared for the sacrifice and the tenacity that will be needed in the difficult times ahead. I have not found this generation to be cynical or apathetic or selfish. They are as strong and as decent as any people that I have met. And I will say this, on my way down here I stopped at Bethesda Naval, and when you talk to the young kids that are there that have just been back from Iraq and Afghanistan, you don't have the worry about the future that you hear from so many that are not a part of this generation but judging it from above."

#### ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Some research done by AARP revealed that about half of all grandparents help current college students financially so they can afford their education.

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