

# MARKETING EFFECTIVELY TO DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

By Ruth Mitman, PhD

**T**oday more than ever, businesses need a competitive advantage – something that sets them apart from others who sell the same products or services. Extraordinary customer service can provide this competitive advantage. We know that customers are not all alike. There are, in fact, five generations of American adults each of which reflect different core values. Understanding the values, attitudes and consumer behavior of these generations, gives us deeper knowledge of our customers and their expectations.

A generation of people share the same historic environment and similar life experiences and they share buying habits and customer service expectations. While every member of a particular generation is not exactly the same, recognizing the generational influences of our customers will help us understand their expectations as consumers. Some of these generation groups are well known, such as the 'baby boomers', but there are actually a total of five distinct generation groups:

**GI Generation:** Born between 1910 and 1930, they grew up during the Depression and World War II.

**Silent Generation:** Born between 1933 and 1945, they grew up in easier times. With rising prosperity, jobs were plentiful.

**Baby Boomer Generation:** Born between 1946 and 1964, they experienced the Vietnam War and conflict at home with the civil rights, feminist and environmental movements.

**Generation X:** Born between 1965 and 1977, they are the product of latch-key parenting and unprecedented divorce rates. The most unsupervised generation of young Americans in our history, they developed a fierce 'I can take care of myself' attitude.

**Generation Y:** Born between 1978 and 2000, they have been raised in the most child-centered environment ever. They have been nurtured and programmed with a slew of activities since they were toddlers resulting in both a high-performance and high-maintenance generation.

What does all of this mean for your business? Knowing how to effectively interact with your customers and your potential customers is crucial. As an example, let's look at how the differences between two of these groups might affect your marketing approach.

## GI GENERATION

Members of the GI Generation are often frugal and cautious, seeing debt as a literal sin. They believe their goals will be achieved by sacrificing, saving and working hard. Given their experience of the war years, they trust in government, big business and each other.

- They will see you as an authority figure. They will ask for your advice and recommendations. You must earn their trust.
- Use the formal, "Mr. or Mrs. Jones", never "Henry" or "Helen". Respect is important.
- Use the age of your company and your years of experience to your advantage.
- Take extra time when serving these older customers. Personal service and relationship building are crucial.
- Expect to interact with more older women than men as women live longer than their husbands. They may be less experienced in business matters and may need more attention.

## GENERATION X

Members of Generation X grew into independent, goal-oriented entrepreneurial thinkers where ease with information and technology became one of their most important survival skills. They look for jobs that satisfy curiosity, ambition, financial needs and work-life balance.

- Have a Gen X-er review your website. Gen X-ers invented the art of Internet comparison shopping and are very comfortable with online shopping.
- Strive for excellent customer service and righting mistakes. Gen X-ers are more cynical than those from the previous generations. They are not brand loyal. You must earn their trust with each purchase.
- Note that Baby Boomers often seek Gen X-ers' counsel before making technology purchases. Even if Gen X-ers are not your target market, they may be influencing the buying decisions of your actual target market.

Recognizing the generational influences of the marketplace is critical to your business success. It provides a broad context for understanding your customers and their expectations. It helps build strong customer relationships. It helps you fine-tune your marketing strategy and communicate more effectively. It is the true definition of having a competitive advantage.

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