

Generations

MARKETING RESEARCH BULLETIN

Research reviews for church leaders.



GENERATIONS



Welcome to the *Marketing Research Bulletin*, a periodic report created for all Unity leaders, by the Association of Unity Churches Communications Department. This Bulletin provides valuable information on recent trends affecting church growth.

Information overload is a part of modern life, and data on trends affecting churches is no exception. We created these bulletins to give a quick reading for busy church leaders. We read multiple resources, including books and articles written by church growth experts, business writers and trend watchers in many disciplines. For those interested in greater depth, we

have included listings for further reading. In addition, to make it as practical as possible, we give ideas of implications for churches.

It is with love and awe for ministers, and those leaders who work alongside them, that we dedicate this work. And with blessings!

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For several decades, demographers have observed that experiences shared by people during their formative years have a lasting impact on their values and attitudes. By its nature, this information includes sweeping generalizations about groups of people. Though this may mean stereotyping, the information proves valuable in our understanding. The information is based on statistically reliable data collected from samples of people in these groups. Not everyone in a group will have the same pattern, but most will recognize the pattern as dominant. At the same time, we honor the differences among individuals and respect all groups for their own formative experiences and contributions.

For all generations, there is a boundary effect on either edge of the birth time periods. Those on the edge tend to be affected more by those who came before or after than those in the middle.

Matures

Born between 1900 and 1946, this generation includes two waves with a current population of 68 million. The GI's were born in the first part of this time period, and the Silents were born in the second. We talk about them together because they share many of the same experiences, values and motivations.

Two Waves

The GI's take value in being team players who work within the system. This group's growth paralleled the growth of

government, as they received benefits for education, housing, jobs, and now the most generous pensions and medical care in the nation's history. Silents tend to be more cautious and quietly assertive. Silents also married and had children early.

Discipline and Sacrifice

Both groups lived through economic upheaval in their childhood. Discipline and self-sacrifice were very important to them as they came of age. They experienced common goals and the team effort of a nation working to overcome economic hardship, to build suburban America, and to defeat common enemies in two world wars and the cold war.

Since they grew up in a period of upheaval, they had to re-establish the social order itself. Their job was to rebuild, to bring about a better life. This led to an emphasis on hard work, self-sacrifice, and teamwork. These people had a clear sense of purpose in what they were doing, and everyone shared in the work and sacrifice. Authority came from external sources, though they had confidence in their own abilities. This translated into a strong faith in institutions, and also the need to fit in, to conform. This generation prospered, and their sense of success was linked to conformity.

Success

Because they consistently achieved success after success, their core values were affirmed. They created a better standard of living, and participated in the American Dream. They celebrated their success with material rewards.

In a sense, material goods came to represent the fulfillment of their spiritual values. Retirement centers are a reflection of their conformity, material satisfaction, and of their greatest fears: crime and personal safety. They do not see these communities as isolating.

Marketing

With these characteristics in mind, we can reflect on this generation's behavior toward churches. With their conformity and trust in institutions, it is easy to see why they find a church (and a denomination) and stick with it. They also are good volunteers because they continue to believe in making things better for someone else. This is a reward in itself for them. As for marketing to the Matures, no one wants to be characterized as "old" (and the same may apply to other terms used, such as senior citizens or elderly). They see themselves as being active and, in surveys, few acknowledge suffering or loneliness.

One idea to keep in mind is that this group overcame daunting odds to achieve what they did. They want to enjoy life, though wisely and responsibly. Experience, wisdom, stability and security are good values to emphasize. The traditional church service, where worship is meditation, fits with their values. Music preferences are also age related - those born before 1927 prefer the "old gospel hymns" (written between 1900 and 1935). Those born between 1927 and 1946 prefer the classic hymns of the church - written 200 to 300 years ago. (Herb Miller)

Summary Implications

The information presented for this group is less extensive than the following because our research has focused on the two younger generations in response to needs voiced by many churches. If you want to know how to serve the needs of this group, look at the traditional church model. Most have mastered serving this group - as evidenced by the many who identify their congregation as this age. What we do provide should give you some insight into the background and motivations. It can also serve as a foundation for greater understanding of all groups mentioned here.

Boomers

The current population of 78 million Boomers was born between 1946 and 1964. A product of their parents' success, Boomers participated in a better standard of living without having to sacrifice for it. Instead of using external measures of worth, this group evaluates its achievements in terms of personal fulfillment. They believe in individual accomplishment. This is a distinctly different value system from that of the Matures.

Entitlement

It is easy to see why they grew up with a sense of entitlement and high expectations about the potential of life. These dreams were not only for themselves; they grew up believing they could fix the world. Because of the unbridled economic growth they grew up with, they share a confidence in unending progress

and prosperity. With this sense of economic security, they focused instead on themselves, on experimentation and fulfillment.

This sense of entitlement sets them apart from the Matures and GenXers. This is why they are often characterized as being driven by success, self-improvement and individual accomplishment. They rejected the conformity of their parents in favor of individuality, and became the generation that broke all the rules. Something new could always be indulged, since, in the economic boom, there was little chance for failure. A job and a paycheck would always be there when they settled down. They busied themselves with tearing down the institutions that made their childhood apparently idyllic.

Crusade

Their mission was to push the system closer to perfection. Any flaws they saw stuck out in contrast to the promise of how things ought to be. They believed they deserved better, and they set out to fix the world. Every fight was a battle of good versus evil. Control is another common theme. Much of their behavior (in the marketplace) is motivated by remaining in control. In contrast to Matures, there was no value to them in self-sacrifice for a common goal. They found that traditional ways of doing things were obstacles to their own fulfillment.

Disappointment and Control

According to Smith and Clurman, 1979 was the turning point for Boomers. This is when several

crises came together (i.e., stagflation, Three Mile Island, hostages in Iran, unemployment), cracks in the facade of unending prosperity. They would never be as sure of themselves again. They took on the attitude that if they could not change the world, they would enjoy it. This led to the conspicuous consumption of the '80's. It was as much about control as greed. Until the stock market crash of '87.

Suddenly Boomers rejected the marketplace. They found their best efforts at working hard in the '80's led to more disappointment. They saw their latchkey kids, unemployment, unprecedented debt, and their financial heroes being hauled off to jail. For a while they were bitter, casting themselves as victims. (Remember the popular TV show, *Thirtysomething?*) Recently, they have begun to regain their sense of possibility.

Work and Leisure

Another difference from Matures is that Boomers have not put work and leisure into separate compartments. Work is still the primary way in which they express their creativity. They are unlikely to retire as previous generations have, but will probably continue to work, possibly in second careers. This will no doubt affect churches since it affects how people will spend their time in the coming years.

Marketing

They will continue to emphasize individuality. Now they also yearn for the carefree world in which they grew up. They want a sense of calm, knowing their lives are stressed out

and overcommitted (even though by their own choices). They want to spend more time with their children, and see raising them as an expression of personal creativity. Enriching experiences they can share with the entire family will be especially attractive to them. They want the little time they have with their family to be a celebration.

Worship to them is synonymous with celebration (in contrast to the meditation of the Matures). Music preferences are generally for the post 1960 time period. An emphasis on relationships and families will be popular with this group. Informality is also a key interest (formality equals phoniness). The ideal prototype of a worship service for attracting Boomers would be the high performance (think concert or theatre) seeker service as is offered at Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois. There is generally limited participation (i.e., one song, greet each other), which works for this crowd who prefer the role of anonymous spectators when church shopping. Also included are adult contemporary music and a practical, life-application lesson. The church then provides a more substantive service for regular attenders and members. Simplicity is definitely of value to them, but it must be accompanied by control. They are the most likely generation to want a lot of information before they buy something. For churches, this still translates into their thoroughness as shoppers, and a recognition that it may take them a long time to make a commitment to membership. Offering newcomer

classes to learn more about Unity and the church would be a good strategy with this crowd. They remain interested in acquiring knowledge, and this will translate into the desire for experiences that offer hands-on learning.

Summary Implications and Ideas

Following are conclusions about the types of offerings that would be attractive to this group. Emphasize workshops and other opportunities involving:

- something new and novel (i.e., offer new programs periodically)
- self-improvement (i.e., learning a new skill, improving self-esteem)
- individuality and expressing creativity (i.e., classes in art or music)
- coping with stress and feeling a sense of control in their lives (i.e., how do the Unity teachings do this?)
- more time with children (i.e., intergenerational or family activities)
- celebration (i.e., worship service)
- information about the ministry for newcomers (i.e., newcomer classes where it is okay to learn before committing)
- hands-on learning (i.e., journaling classes)

Many churches are already doing these kinds of activities. It is also crucial to emphasize these ideas as benefits in all communications. By “advertising” with these themes, you will be more likely to engage the interest of Boomers.

GenX

This group, now about 45 million,

was born between 1965 and 1982, and has never been able to presume success. This has made them a wary and cautious generation, not to be mistaken for apathetic. Instead, they are determined to be involved, responsible, and in control - not to be victimized by life’s uncertainties. Where uncertainty created angst for Boomers, it is a call to action for Xers. They are more different from Boomers than any other two successive generations.

Matures and Boomers also grew up in a world where things were either good or bad. In contrast, Xers grew up in a world where they saw good and bad in all things. Every choice is a balancing of rewards and risks. This is an important distinction in the formation of Xers. It calls for greater flexibility and adaptability. You must be able to anticipate, be prepared to move fast. Many Xers seem mature beyond their years because of the risk-saturated world they experienced when growing up.

Diversity

They have also come to see there are many options, all equally valid. They tend to be less judgemental and more accepting of the differences in people. Diversity is a major component of their experience - a core perspective. In fact, this generation itself expresses greater diversity in all ways than previous generations. Though they have commonalities, they defy pigeon-holing. The idea of choosing from a menu of choices is appealing to this group - allowing them to customize their own “program.” A menu of options is key.

Enclaves

Their diversity also leads them to desire connection with others like them. They tend to form their own enclaves with distinctive characters. Small groups of others in this generation are desirable. Accountability groups should be a priority for churches wanting to serve the needs of this generation. They long for real experiences of love and compassion and opportunities to serve real people in need. This means that committees are not attractive ways for them to serve, where members vote and someone else executes the decision. The new paradigm calls for teams, where decision and execution are the responsibility of the whole team.

Beliefs

Another aspect of their diversity and acceptance is that truth is always open to debate. Each truth can evaporate in the face of another discovery or perspective never before considered. (*Postmoderns, the Beliefs, Hopes and Fears of Young Americans*, Craig Kennet Miller, 1996) The reaction to a statement such as “We have the truth” is likely to be “Yeah? So does Buddhism, the psychics, and (fill in the blank).” The idea that there are no values stems from this. Yet, for them, having no set values does not mean an absence of belief. It means each person sees the world through her own perspective and determines for herself what to believe and value.

With that in mind, one study showed just over three quarters considered themselves to be believers, assuming the Judeo-

Christian view of God as Creator. The same study had 10% identified as seekers, 6% as agnostic and 5% atheist. Instead of taking an institutional approach, most are interested in developing their own spirituality. They want to know where everyday life and God fit together, and that their opinions and insights count. They will not be satisfied by empty platitudes, easy answers or prayers devoid of action. To be relevant it must affect life at work, in the family, in the community and most importantly in relationships.

Success

We often hear that a large number of this generation are still living at home with parents when they reach young adulthood. They are marrying and buying homes later. Singlehood is a growing lifestyle. Part of the reason is that they were twice as likely as Boomers to be children of divorce, leaving them with few marriage role models. This also taught them about poverty and financial insecurity. In fact the divorce rate alone was a major influence on their ideas about marriage, family and trust. The financial insecurity, reinforced by corporate downsizing, has been a factor in staying home with parents.

From the perspective of older generations, these factors together paint a picture of a generation that cannot get its act together. Xers themselves do not see it that way. They have developed their own definition of success different from other generations. Fulfilling relationships are seen as a more accurate measure of success, along

with growing in knowledge and wisdom. Developing skills that are transferable to the future can be a good motivation for both church classes and volunteering. These might include personal areas such as relationship skills, or career oriented skills like team building.

Marketing and Media

This is the most sophisticated generation in terms of marketing, where media play a large part. Xers see a “whirling vortex of diverse images, messages, and chance opportunities.” (Smith and Clurman) Eclectic combinations of old things are new to them (notice the interest in retro-chic?). They pick and choose to make their own combinations.

Marketing hype is a turnoff. They tend to have an air of defense when it comes to the information they take in. What they really want is an honest approach. The challenge is to communicate meaningful information about our churches, without assuming that our message intrudes upon a passive audience (the style Boomers grew up with). We must be invited by a knowledgeable consumer to give the information sought, at the moment he is willing to listen. Their style is to try it on before they buy, so creating a variety of entry points will be helpful. The high participation seeker service as offered by Saddleback Community Church in California is an ideal model for engaging Xers. It includes a lot of congregational singing, a practical sermon, and adult contemporary music (like Boomers, they prefer that written after 1960).

As media consumers, they tend to be skeptical and irreverent, yet they still use the media for entertainment. In this way, technology is not special in itself, but it forms the backdrop. It is a means to an end, not the end. Yet technology in its new forms, is involving, active, and controlled by the user. The point is how the pace and intensity grab the user. With all the images flashing by, it is a surface aesthetic - deep understanding is beside the point. The new paradigm of viewing is that it is the sum total of all the channels viewed at the same time that provides a new perspective.

The most effective ways of reaching them are visual. They are the TV generation. They are also the least likely to read or look at a newspaper. At the same time, Xers are going to movies, galleries, and museums in increasing numbers.

“Parallel” Information Processing

This brings us to a point about how Xers think. Because of their media experience, they are able to process information from multiple sources simultaneously. They can watch TV, talk on the phone and study at the same time. In fact, it is difficult for them to process information in a linear way like generations before them. This is crucial in designing worship services for this age group, and the reason why churches catering to them are using multimedia formats. Notice that channel surfing also influences them to discard media that do not entertain.

Another aspect of their thinking shows up in learning style. As one

interviewee put it, “You come at it completely different now. You don’t start with: ‘This is true, therefore believe it.’ You start with: ‘ This is attractive,’ and then you move toward, ‘This is relevant,’ and after you have established those two things, then you say: ‘You want to know why it’s attractive or relevant? - because it’s true.’” (Miller) The Socratic method is useful here - the student is asked probing questions to help him clarify the issue for himself.

Happiness

All of this does not mean Xers have no sense of humor. They are much more likely than any generation to describe themselves as fun-loving. A vast majority feel the need to find more excitement and sensation in life. This is attributed to more than their age. They tend to see fun as a life value. Crusading was for Boomers, sacrifice for Matures. They want a job and a life. In contrast to Boomers, they see their job as a distinct thing from their life.

Instead of getting caught up in causes, they are doing what it takes to get by. They see the bottom line as survival, and are pragmatic about it. At the same time, being personally happy is the number one goal. This does not mean buying into what others say is happiness, but defining it as an individual pursuit.

Trust

They are also more peer focused than any other generation. They rely on their friends for advice on what to believe, because they

have learned they cannot trust older generations. Remember, the older generations left them a legacy of unprecedented divorce and unstable homes, crime, environmental crises, and so on.

Summary Implications

Following are conclusions about the types of offerings that would be attractive to this group.

Emphasize workshops and other opportunities involving:

- menu of choices (i.e., several workshop options)
- connecting with others and relationships (i.e., workshop on building good relationships)
- hands-on service opportunities (i.e., community service project)
- discussion (i.e., using the Socratic method, discussion on belief systems and values among peers)
- practical insights on God and everyday life (i.e., Sunday lessons with direct application to Monday through Friday)
- balance (i.e., class on balancing life pressures, job and home)
- variety of entry points (i.e., concert open to the public, or high participation celebration service)
- visual, exciting communications (i.e., multi-media Sunday service)

Many churches are already doing these kinds of activities. It is also crucial to emphasize these ideas as benefits in all communications. By “advertising” with these themes, you will be more likely to engage the interest of Xers.

Connecting with God: 14 Ways Churches Can Help People Grow Spiritually, Herb Miller, copyright 1994, Abingdon Press.

Marketing to Generation X, Karen Ritchie, copyright 1995, Lexington Books.

Post Moderns: The Beliefs, Hopes and Fears of Young Americans, Craig Kennet Miller, copyright 1996, Discipleship Resources.

The Purpose Driven Church, Rick Warren, copyright 1995, Zondervan Publishing.

Rocking the Ages, The Yankelovich Report on Generational Marketing, J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman, copyright 1997, HarperBusiness.