

Insights from Food Brands on Marketing to Generation Z: It's Not a Product, It's an Experience

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Despite all the focus on marketing to millennials in recent years, we now must shift our attention to an even younger portion of the population that *Adweek* is declaring “the next consumer powerhouse.” The 22-and-under crowd, also known as digital natives or Gen Z, is poised to wield more than 40 percent of all consumer spending by 2020, so now’s the time for marketers to start learning how to reach these fresh-faced buyers.

Are you already marketing to Generation Z? Or are you just getting to know them? Wherever you’re at with engaging this generation, you can learn much from the way certain food and beverage and restaurant brands are reaching them (and their stomachs) through building shared social experiences—both online and offline. Forrester Consulting research concluded that brands need to deliver experiences that demonstrate both empathy and utility through using elements of immediacy, personalization, security, and entertainment. Marketers should take this into account by presenting products a liveable events to make users feel like they’re getting more than just a transaction.

Then, they must make that experience share-worthy. An exclusive report by CNN found that 61 percent of teens said they check social media frequently—even obsessively—to see if their posts are getting likes and comments. Much of this behavior stems from a focus on inclusion, with 36 percent of these teens saying they wanted to see if their friends are doing things without them. Growing up with digital devices at their fingertips, Generation Z is extremely active on and influenced by the online landscape, so hand them a chance to interact with your brand in real life and share something cool on social media to document their experience forever.

This experiential preference lends itself well to Gen Z's adventurous, non-traditional eating habits. Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at the Hartman Group, discusses the evolution in the food service sphere: "In the not too distant past, it was production that was driving economy. Things coming off conveyor belts signified quality and safety. Meals were at a set time every day. That has completely gone out the window. Now you see consumption driving economy. It's much more fun and experiential."

Create Your Own Shareable Brand Experience

To turn a simple snack or meal into a shared experience, brands are developing immersive (and Instagram-worthy) presentations of their products. These could take the shape of physical locations, in-store artwork, and product packaging. Generation Z is all about living through (and showing off) the things they invest in, food or otherwise. Even if you don't have as tasty of a product, there's always a way to present what you do as an exciting and inviting experience. The popularity of the Museum of Ice Cream proves this experiential power. Originally opened as a summer pop-up in 2016, the museum chain has four current locations in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Miami.

The museums have vibrant installations inspired by ice cream, such as pools of sprinkles, gummy bear gardens, and hanging whipped cream clouds. The magic of its appeal comes from the whimsical interactions for visitors and the perfect photo op decor that's sure to add flavor to any Gen Z-er's social media feed.

And the goal of the Museum of Ice Cream is just that: "We believe in creating beautiful and shareable environments that foster IRL interaction and URL connections, providing fun, multi-sensorial expressions of ice cream that cater to the appetites of our generation." In this mouth-watering setting, how could you not be inspired to indulge in its ice cream brand, sold in pints on site and at Target?

From its launch to today, social media is central to the museum's marketing strategy. Founder of VentureFuel Fred Schonenberg, responsible for the museum's partnerships, said, "The outward comms strategy behind this has been very fun and organic, with everyone pushing this out on social media, [such as] Snapchat and Instagram. We've had Snapchatters come to the museum like crazy. It is being shared all over the place." The location does most of the marketing work, and the team has spent minimally on advertising or marketing. Co-founder Maryellis Bunn explained, "All of the buzz has come to us, as opposed to us going to [media outlets]. Interest has been 100 percent organic."

Of course, you don't have to create an entire museum to convince Generation Z that your products or services are a worthwhile investment. But learn from the imaginative and experiential elements of the MOIC and embrace the spirit of its mission: creating shareable experiences in sensory environments.

Share in Another Experience

If you don't have the time or resources to establish your own brand experience or event, you can still be a part of the excitement by inserting your brand within an existing space. Choose an experience that is a natural fit for your brand's product and values to instantly add an experiential, relevant layer to your marketing.

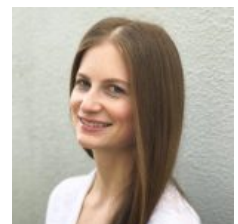
Sonic's Coachella 2018 promotion did just that. In partnership with chef Christine Flynn, the restaurant chain created deconstructed, square shakes exclusively available at Coachella—and designed specifically with Instagram in mind. Better yet, the drinks themselves were free to festival-goers—in return posting a photo with the shakes on social media. The pop-up campaign took their tech-savvy approach even further and delivered to each person's location through geo-targeting technology.

While in most cases, the product should inform the marketing platform, creating a product for a specific channel or experience in mind can work just as well to get Gen Z consumers excited about your brand. Sonic successfully took advantage of Coachella's youthful attendees and summertime heat to offer an on-demand, shareable experience. Todd Smith, Sonic's president and CMO, said, "We wanted to be the first brand, and especially the first food brand, to have a product that was designed for Instagram, offer it exclusively for sale on Instagram, and then deliver that product within minutes of your order on Instagram. We're using the platform to really drive the quality story [of these shakes] in a different way."

Sonic launched the promotion with Instagram ads targeted to Coachella attendees. Why Coachella? The brand wanted to expand its social media following and begin to build a community in a new space. Margaret Johnson, executive creative director of Sonic's agency, Goodby Silverstein & Partners, shared, "[Coachella is] full of young people, for one thing. And it's in the middle of the desert, so what better place to order up an ice-cold, yummy shake?" It brought together the best of social media engagement, on-demand services, refreshing snacks, and event integration.

Consider ways you can create a new limited-time product or existing product variation for an event like Coachella to meet Generation Z in the midst of an experience. There's no limit to the number of real-life and virtual events where your brand could lend its presence.

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Generation Z's interest in shareable experiences make branded and borrowed event features ideal for reaching this audience as they grow and begin dominating the majority of the marketplace. As Melissa Abbott of the Hartman Group mentioned, "Gen Z's diversity will continue to drive food culture trends we already see around the exploration of authentic, global food experiences." So your best bet to reach them with your marketing is to capitalize on this experiential desire.

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