

UNDERSTANDING

Today's Teens:

Insights Gleaned from Teen Qualitative Sessions

Christine Efken discusses similarities and differences between teenagers today and those of previous generations and also offers guidance for moderation.

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Today's teens can't imagine a time without personal computers, answering machines, fax machines, cordless phones, ATMs, and VCRs.

In today's tight economy, marketers are faced with increasing challenges to grow their franchises. At the same time, they have limited funds to develop and launch products that create news, increase sales, and advance the brands in the minds of consumers.

As an alternative, many marketers are instead considering introducing their brands to new consumer segments, and most are discovering teenagers. Marketers have quickly discovered that by creating a brand that is personally relevant to teens, they can develop long-lasting relationships that could yield a sizable return on their investments.

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Why Teens?

- Teens are one of the fastest growing segments of the population. Currently, there are more than 32 millions teens and this segment is expected to continue to grow until 2010.
- Teens spent an estimated \$170 billion or an average \$101 per week in 2002.
- They have more ways to shop than ever before; they embrace online and direct-mail experiences.
- They are willing to experiment with products, yet tend to remain loyal to those that either work for them or enhance their lives.

The key to marketing to teens is to better understand who they are and how they view and use your product. To assume you understand teens because you were once a teen can be disastrous. To put things in perspective, consider that today's teenagers were born between 1984 and 1990, which means that:

- They can't imagine a time without personal computers, answering machines, fax machines, cordless phones, ATMs, and VCRs. (Many teens today have the majority of these consumer electronics in their bedrooms).
- They have always had access to cable and MTV.
- They are too young to remember the first space shuttle tragedy, the student protest at Tiananmen Square, or that Americans were held hostage in Iran.
- Most have never owned a record player or turntable because compact discs were introduced when they were toddlers.
- Roller skating has always meant in-line skating.
- Popcorn has always been prepared in the microwave.
- The AIDS epidemic, famine in Africa, and the Arab-Israeli conflict have been discussed on the evening news nearly every week since they were born.
- Since they never had the opportunity to see him play, they know of Larry Bird as a retired coach.

Then and Now

This is not to say that today's teens are uniquely different from their predecessors.

While they may differ demographically, they are psychographically quite similar to previous generations. Let's consider some of the common characteristics.

Aspirational. Just like when we were their age, today's youths look forward to the opportunities, privileges, and rites of passage (i.e., driving, dating, no curfews) that are associated with the teen years. Junior-high students are excited about attending high school, meeting new friends, learning new subjects, and participating in or attending extra-curricular activities. High-school students are looking forward to being upperclassmen, learning to drive, going to the prom, earning money from part-time jobs, and going away to college.

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Eager for new experiences, yet anxious too. Describing themselves as being "risk takers," "adventurous," and "willing to try new and different things," teens today, though somewhat worried about unexplored territory, enjoy experimenting with new foods, activities, fashions, music, sports, and cultures.

More comfortable around friends than family. Often valuing and preferring to spend time with their friends, teenagers can feel disconnected from their family members. Teens often more easily relate to their friends because their peers think and feel the same way, and face many of the same situations. Further, they tend to select their friends based on common interests and enjoy spending time with peers because they don't have much in common with family members. It's not that they dislike their family, it's that they can more easily share their thoughts and feelings without the risk of being judged with their friends. In many families today people have busy schedules and multiple jobs. There has been an increase in broken families, too. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that teens feel more comfortable with friends.

Eager to stand out, while trying to fit in. Though they claim to have their own sense of

style, most teens get their fashion cues from looking at other teens. So at the same time that they are trying to stand out and make their own personal statements, they are also trying to fit in by shying away from styles or activities that draw unwanted attention to them. It is not so much that they want to be cool, but that they avoid being seen as uncool or negatively labeled (“nerd,” “wannabe,” etc.) by their peers.

Seekers of more freedom and fewer restrictions. Teens generally feel that their lives would be better if they had more freedom and greater access to places and events. From extended curfews to modified school policies (no uniforms, repealing the ban on personal electronics, enhanced off-campus privileges, etc.) to spring-break trips abroad, teens today, like those of years ago, want greater freedom and independence.

Music is a key component of their world. From downloading new music from the Internet to buying CDs, and from attending concerts to listening to the radio, these teens are clearly heavy consumers of music. Moreover, music, according to teens, is a universal language. Music can serve as an ice breaker or conversation starter for teens when they are first introduced to a group of new students and also serves as a setting (e.g. concerts) for social outings. They also use music to define their generation and identify with songs that reflect the moods and events of their generation.

21st-Century Kids

Unique in their own right, teens of the 21st century are different from those of the past in that they:

Embrace technology.

Teens are highly knowledgeable about and comfortable with technology, specifically consumer electronics. Technology not only fills their need for immediate

access to information, it helps them to stay connected, filling their need for a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Today's youths are very comfortable with the Internet, using online services for sending email, chatting, shopping, downloading music, and for researching information needed to complete homework assignments. Additional electronics products they claim they regularly use or aspire to own include PDAs, mobile picture phones, CD burners, portable music systems (iPods, MP3 Players, etc.), DVD players and flat-screen televisions.

Use their bedroom for more than just sleeping. Teens spend more time in their bedrooms than in any room of the house. This is perhaps not surprising given that many describe their bedrooms as mini-entertainment centers comprised of a television, music system, video-game system, computer, telephone, and a VCR or DVD player.



Are involved in more sports and athletic activities. Seeking to look and be healthy and fit, teens participate in a variety of athletic activities and sports from pick-up games, team sports, and working out to in-line skating, cycling or running (both with friends or individually) as a means of transportation. Physical activity helps them to stay physically and emotionally balanced as well as provides entertainment, social interaction, and a means to exercise their competitive natures.

Are heavy consumers of media. Perhaps because of the plethora of publications and programming alternatives available to them, teens are heavy consumers of television, radio, film, and magazines. Granted that some of their consumption is more passive (having the radio or television on as background noise) than active, teens consume media to stay informed as well as to pass the time (magazines and movie rentals, in particular).

Lack heroes. Sadly, today's teens generally do not have heroes (with the exception of parents or other relatives). Though some respect and

admire the accomplishments of athletes and entertainers, few seem to have a single individual whom they would classify as a hero or who has a style they seek to emulate.

Think more globally. Perhaps because of their exposure to so many cultures on television and in film, worldwide access via the Internet, and the variety of individuals who form the fabric of their communities, teens today are intrigued by and more accepting of the world's myriad cultures. Many have come to realize that the peace in their world will evolve from knowledge and understanding of cultural differences.

View adversity as a part of life. Teens today seem to display a remarkable sense of tenacity. Many teens have dealt with major issues, including poverty, attempted suicide, the effects of drug addiction (either personally or that of a friend), pregnancy, and physical abuse by family members. Many, however, seem to accept these experiences as part of life and growing up, which, indeed, may be the case today.



Implications for Conducting Teen Research

Given the basic similarities and differences among past and present teenagers, it is important to consider some of the implications for conducting research among this segment.

Unconditional positive regard is paramount when researchers work with teens. It is essential that teens feel welcome and know that their opinion is valued. As difficult as it may be, moderators have to try to remember what it was like to be a teen and empathize with teen respondents. As a moderator, acknowledge what a participant says despite what you think. Keep the lines of communication open and accepting to maintain rapport with this group.

Remember that what one teenager says might represent the views of many teens not in the group. As with adults, a moderator's verbal and non-verbal responses can encourage or discourage teens' communication. Be particularly careful not to roll your eyes or cross your arms (even if you are cold), since teens may think you are closed to their communication and not receptive to their thoughts.

Have a sincere and genuine interest in this population. They have a keen ear for insincerity and will respond (or not respond) accordingly.

Be non-judgmental about the opinions they express. Look past their purple hair or pierced body parts. Absorb their insights without passing judgment on the way they look, express themselves, or the opinions they hold.

Use smaller group sizes. Construct a more intimate group by limiting the number to six teenagers, slightly smaller than the average adult group, which will help to keep them focused and give you a deeper and richer understanding of their viewpoints.

Keep the length of the sessions reasonable. Teens, like adults, find it difficult to sit for long periods of time. Teenagers also have busy schedules, so respect their time constraints. Teens work well in sessions that are approximately 90 minutes in length—longer than the average television sitcom, but shorter than the MTV awards. Also, consider organizing sessions according to their schedules. To avoid conflicts with after-school practices and part-time jobs, consider organizing weekend sessions.

Make teens feel welcome by providing teen-appropriate snacks and beverages. Choose snacks that stimulate their energy and that do not put them to sleep. Shy away from offering pizza or sugar-laden goodies and, instead, offer healthy snacks like protein-packed power bars, juices, and bottled water.

Establish a comfort zone. Teens need to trust the environment. Tell them you understand their needs. Let them know they can use their language. You do not have to approve of their slang, but you should recognize it's a part of their world, even if it seems harsh or coarse to you. At the same time, avoid using their language or slang. Respect that their language is theirs, not yours. More importantly, you do not want them to think you are trying too hard to be one of them. It is also important to avoid using marketing jargon. For example, don't say "frozen novelty" when you mean an ice cream bar or ice cream sandwich.

Listen for contradictions. Ask the same questions in different ways. Point out their contradictions and ask for clarification. Direct communication conveys that you are listening to them. This approach will allow you to challenge them without coming across as critical.

Observe body language. The body and face communicate a great deal about how teens really feel about topics. When possible, consider offering a variety of stimuli and watch for teens' non-verbal responses. Do they smile at the packaging? Frown? Roll their eyes at the storyboard? Do they look at the person next to them to see their response first? Keep in mind that with teenagers, silence or no response is, indeed, a response and should be further explored.

Teens are some of the most fascinating consumers in today's marketplace. They are dynamic and willing to try several brands in search of one that provides superior performance. Yet, like any other market segment, they seek brands that offer compelling benefits in a personally relevant fashion and tend to remain loyal to those brands that enhance their ever-evolving lifestyles. As with marketing to any other segment, the key to success when researching teens is simply understanding the consumer. 