

Gen Z Research

7 Rules to Getting
Authentic Insights



RIVAL GROUP COMPANIES

Gen Z: Influential, outspoken...and mostly a mystery

Gen Z (born ~1995–2012) now makes up a huge segment of consumers – roughly 30% of the world’s population – and is expected to be **27% of the workforce by 2025**. They wield immense spending power and cultural influence, yet they remain a bit of a mystery to many brands.

This generation of digital natives has never known a world without the internet or smartphones. They’re savvy and cynical about marketing by default, but the good news is they do want to be heard and involved. Gen Z will gladly share their opinions – bluntly and candidly – if you approach them the right way.

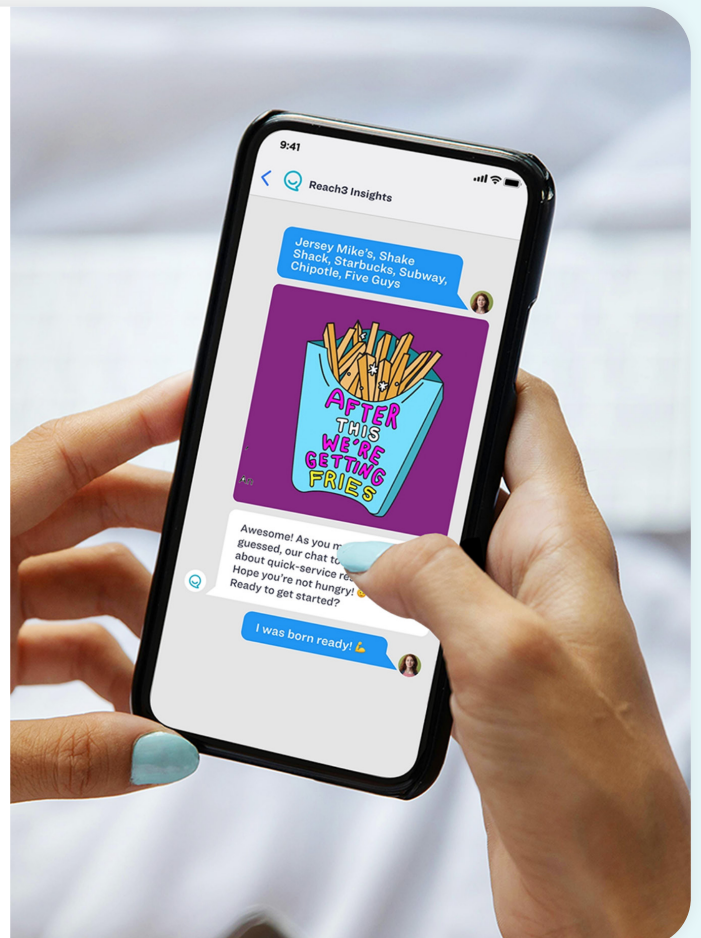
If you’re looking to engage these young people for insights, you have to align your research approach to their behaviors and expectations. This guide outlines 7 rules for researchers, marketers, and brand strategists looking to connect with Gen Z through modern insight approaches.

1

Know your audience

Don’t get it twisted: the market of “young consumers” isn’t one single block. Within Gen Z itself, a high school sophomore has a very different life experience than a 24-year-old college grad starting their career. And just a few years older, young Millennials in their late 20s and 30s have different spending power and goals.

Which of these cohorts are you really trying to engage and understand? Before anything else, be crystal clear on who among young consumers you need to reach.



3 distinct groups of Gen Zs



Younger Gen Zs (Early teens)

These Gen Zs are in elementary school and middle school. They are dependent on their parents and don't have their own money, but they are already actively driving key purchasing decisions.



Middle Gen Zs (Mid- to Late Teens)

This group is in high school or early post-secondary, starting their first jobs. They have minimal expenses and have disposable income to spend on what they enjoy.



Older Gen Zs /Young Millennials (Early to Mid-20s)

They are in college or have their first full-time jobs. They probably are having to live on a budget for the first time, which impacts their purchasing decisions.

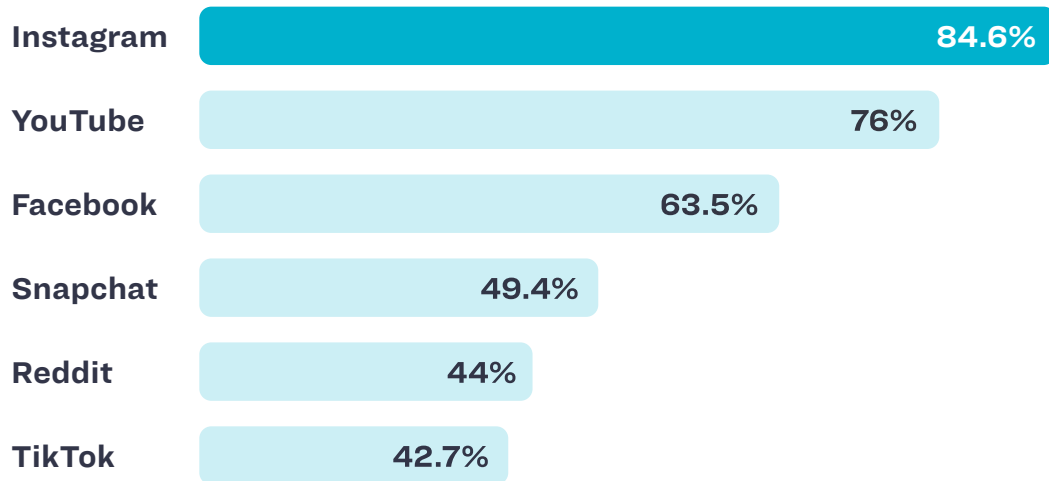
Understanding the nuances of each cohort — and what matters to them — is critical to brand engagement. But there are principles that are common to them, just like the rules in this guide.

2

Meet them on the channels they use

If you want Gen Z's feedback, go where they already are — and that's on their phones and social apps. Gen Z practically lives on mobile: **98% of Gen Z owns a smartphone**, and many spend over 4 hours a day online on their phones (some studies say even more). Want to reach real Gen Z consumers? They're not hanging out in traditional research panels or answering long email surveys — but they are on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Discord, etc. Each platform has its own vibe and personality, so plan your engagement accordingly.

Top social media sites used by Gen Z (by monthly use)



Source: Rival Technologies and Reach3 Insight study, 2024

Each platform has its own tone, format, and expectations

Choosing the right one is crucial for collecting authentic feedback from Gen Z.



Aspirational and curated

- Visual-first platform reliant on filters and polished content
- Often seen as staged; authenticity must be intentional
- Mini-influencers could be an effective way of reaching your Gen Z audience



Immediate but fleeting

- Ephemeral messaging creates low-pressure engagement
- Offers spontaneity without long-term digital trace
- 55% of Gen Zs recall watching an ad for >2 seconds



Niche and personal

- Community-driven, often organized around shared interests
- Originally gaming-focused, now expanding to other verticals
- Supports qualitative conversations in real time or asynchronously



Intimate and authentic

- Short-form, high-engagement video platform
- Gen Z expresses opinions on everything from products to politics
- Ideal for quick, candid feedback and spotting trends early



Informative and trusted

- Long-form and short-form video content co-exist (Shorts + traditional videos)
- Gen Z turns to YouTube for product reviews, how-tos, and authentic creator perspectives
- Creators shape opinions — a space for influencer-led research engagement



Be mindful about demo questions in your recruitment surveys. These young consumers were raised to not give their information to random people online. The first step is to build a genuine connection.

Be transparent.

Today's young consumers have sensitive BS detectors. In surveys over the past few years, around **79% of Gen Z said brands are never honest or not honest enough** – essentially, they assume companies hide something. To convince Gen Z you're legit, you need to show you have nothing to hide.

Explain the why behind what you're doing. If you're asking them questions in a feedback study, tell them upfront what the purpose is, how you'll use their answers, and how it ultimately benefits them or their community. This generation was raised with internet privacy concerns and scams around every corner, so they won't give info to some random form without context.



“Among a generation fueled by skepticism, trust is paramount for both engagement and loyalty. And since authenticity, honesty, and transparency are critical in building that trust, they should be the goals of every marketer with young consumers in their sightlines.”



Jennifer Reid, Co-CEO and Chief Methodologist,
Rival Group (Rival Technologies & Reach3 Insights)



Running a sweepstakes? Be transparent about who won the raffle and publicize the winners – prove you're not running a scam (you're not, right?).

Be authentic

Growing up bombarded by polished ads and Photoshop, Gen Zs are drawn to brands that keep it real. In fact, **84% of Gen Z say they trust a company more when it uses actual customers in its ads and content**, not paid actors or stock photos. They want to see real faces and real stories they can relate to.

So, wherever possible, speak with a human voice and spotlight real consumers' experiences. For instance, instead of a glossy, very formal tone in your survey introduction, use a friendly, down-to-earth voice. Instead of studio-produced images in your concept test, try candid photos or videos of real people using your product.



Don't be this guy! When engaging with Gen Z, never pretend to be one if you're not part of this generation.

RIVAL TIP

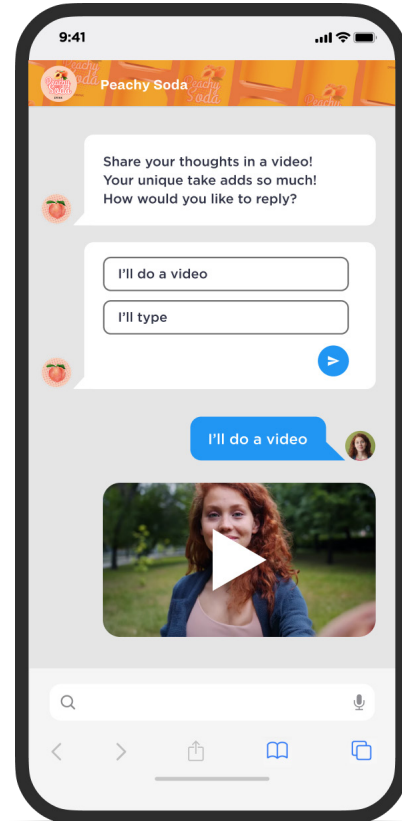
Want to sound authentic to Gen Zs? Don't pretend. A better approach is to get a Gen Z (like your younger employees) to review your surveys, discussion guides and other research materials. Ask them to point out anything "cringey" or anything that sounds inauthentic.

5

Use videos

When it comes to videos, Gen Zs are obsessed. From TikTok to Instagram, from Facetime to YouTube, videos are part of Gen Z's daily life. Videos can help build trust with Gen Zs. (Which, as we shared previously, is super important.) Take a quick video selfie and add it to your next survey —it shows participants there's a real person behind the survey.

Also, give Gen Zs the option of responding to qual questions via video instead of just text. Many of Gen Zs talk to their friends this way. Videos also tend to be richer and more in-depth, giving you additional context on how Gen Z consumers are thinking and feeling.



Use video to get video. A short and informal selfie video from one of your team members explaining what the research is all about can encourage participation and boost responses.

6

Build trust

Gen Z will fact-check and call your bluff in an instant if something feels off. Remember, they grew up with limitless information at their fingertips; when a brand makes a claim, their reflex is to hop on Google, Reddit, or ChatGPT to see if it holds up.

What does this mean for you? First, be consistent and honest in everything you do.



Any disconnect will be noticed. If your survey asks for feedback on a “sustainable eco-friendly initiative” but elsewhere your company has news articles about wastefulness, expect Gen Z to bring that up. They can —and will — connect the dots.

Building trust might involve some extra up-front effort: perhaps have an open FAQ or intro video before a community or survey where you transparently address “Who is running this study? Why do we care about your opinion? How will we use it? Will your feedback actually make an impact?” Gen Z will appreciate the candor.

If you can’t share something (e.g. a secret new product concept), at least acknowledge that: “We can’t share all the details yet, but we promise we’re not going to misuse your time or info. We’ll keep you in the loop when we can.”

3 examples of effective Gen Z research



This renowned media giant uses Rival to boost participation from Gen Z in their long-standing A-List Community. The company engages young fans for UX research, concept and creative testing and everything in between.



A leader in peer-to-peer payment, Cash App launched communities to engage their users, many of whom are Gen Z. Insights from the community directly help to improve marketing, enhance innovation, and drive retention.



Working with Reach3, Kellanova used Rival to engage Gen Z in a multi-phased, quali-quant innovation research. Gen Z and multicultural audiences helped Kellanova understand new product territories and turn ideas into successful products.

Keep the conversation going

Let's face it: Gen Zs are less likely to participate in market research. So, when you get their attention, why not continue the conversation? The best way to do this is through an insight community.

A conversational community where you reach participants via SMS has proven very effective with Gen Z. With the ability to remember what you already know about your members, you can keep your activities relevant and enjoyable. For best results, follow our [rules on community management](#).



Want Gen Zs to continue to participate? Offering incentives is important. But you also have to make sure the participant experience is fun. No one wants boring surveys, so avoid them at all costs.

Your checklist: How to engage Gen Zs

- ✓ Be clear about the cohort you want to engage.
- ✓ Choose the right channels — meet Gen Z where they are.
- ✓ Be transparent and honest.
- ✓ Don't fake it or pretend. Be authentic.
- ✓ Use and ask for videos.
- ✓ Build trust.
- ✓ Keep the conversation with a community.

Looking to level up your Gen Z research?

Foster deeper, more authentic connections with Rival's conversational research platform. Drive transformative results with real-time insights from today's modern consumers.



Mobile-First and Chat-Based



Quant, Qual and Unlimited Videos



AI-Enhanced Tooling



Next-Gen Communities

