The insight pro's guide to Gen Z engagement

The three most important rules brands need to successfully engage today's youth

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Introduction

Young people are powerful spenders. Yet a deeper understanding of their motivations, habits and preferences remains at large.

We talk about Millennials and Gen Zs with broad brush strokes and generalizations but "the youth" are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences and expectations are diverse. More connected to technology and each other than any generation before, they are disrupting the conventions of traditional market research.

At Rival, we've revolutionized the way our clients connect with youth on mobile. We've formed connections with young people across the world and provided them with a platform to share their feedback through sophisticated market research methodologies totally reinvented for today's mobile world.

Today's younger generations expect transparency, demand authenticity and are stingy with their trust. They are keenly attuned to the forces (both good and bad) competing for their attention and have little patience for brands who think they can break through by amping up hyperbole. While this reality has forced brands to rethink their overall approach to mass marketing, it has also had a profound effect on the market research industry.
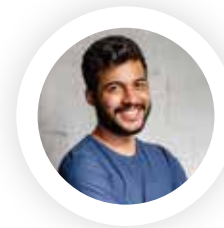
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Who Are They?

The first thing to know about young consumers is that it's not one market—or even one generation. Born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Zs make up 40% of global consumers. That's a cohort with significant spending power. We separate youth into three unique cohorts:
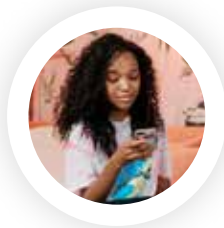
Younger Gen Zs
(14-18 years old)

Older Gen Zs
(19-24 years old)

Young Millennials
(25-35 years old)

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	Younger Gen Zs	Older Gen Zs	Young Millennials
Life stage	Highschool	College/university, learning a trade, or in an entry-level job	Starting a post-college job and/or working their way up in their careers
Living situation	Lives with their parents	Living on their own for the first time	Moving into nicer homes, possibly with a partner
Spending power	Spends <u>over $9,600</u> a year on average. 93% of parents say they influence household purchases	Often in debt (~<u>34% of students</u> borrow money to attend college) or on a tight budget	<u>Making double</u> those under 25, paying off their debt, and often combining incomes with a partner
Preferred social channel	TikTok	Snapchat	Instagram
Issue they most care about	Discrimination and injustice; <u>80% of Gen Zs have taken action</u> in the fight for racial equality	Discrimination and injustice, as well as climate change, sustainability, and the environment	Climate change, sustainability, and the environment; <u>73% of Millennials</u> are willing to pay more for sustainable offerings
Also worth noting	• Can spend with their conscience • Excited to try new things • Easily swayed by group think	• Tight budget limits purchasing decisions • Building foundational brand relationships	• Socially conscious and pocketbook-wise when decision making

Despite their differences, these groups share plenty in common. They can't remember a time without the internet; they've always had information at their fingertips and high-speed access to a range of options that fit their needs.

Where to Reach Them

To connect with Gen Zs and Young Millennials, you need to map the ecosystem in which they engage. A hint: it's not over email. By embracing the technology and social channels they *do* use—and understanding how they use them—you're one step closer to making meaningful connections with this generation.

The technology they use
It's the age of the smartphone: 96% of today's Gen Zs and 93% of Millennials own them. Smartphones have dramatically changed the way this generation engages. Texting and chats have become more popular, with an average 18 to 34 year-old sending and receiving 75 to 128-plus texts a day. Video has become a significant medium—62% of Gen Zs use YouTube daily—while gaming communities have also grown in popularity, especially during the pandemic.
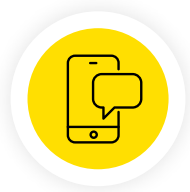
75 to 128+
texts per day

62% of Gen Zs
use YouTube daily

Growing gaming communities

From new technology, new communication styles have emerged. Chat culture has its own rules and conventions. To connect, you must understand how young people text: the conversational approach they use and the ongoing rhythm of chat-based conversations. You need to recognize how communities evolve online and understand migrations from traditional TV to streaming on mobile and other devices. In other words, your tactics must match the medium.

The social channels they share on

Social media is a big part of young people's lives. Generation Z spends an average of two hours and 55 minutes on social media daily; for Millennials it's two hours and 38 minutes. While social can be a significant part of your brand experience, not all channels are created equally.

Take Facebook, for instance. It may still be the world's most popular channel in terms of sheer numbers, but it holds little sway for this generation. Instead, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram are the top channels for young people—all used in slightly different ways:

Intimate and authentic. Where young people engage with politics/social justice issues and share user feedback on products and brands.

Temporary and immediate. Without the long-term repercussions associated with other social media channels.

Curated and aspirational. Feels inauthentic to some young people.

Conversational. Prone to an "angry mob" mentality that makes some brands hesitant to say too much.

To make social media work, your brand pages need to facilitate two-way conversations with your target demographic—in a way that's authentic and transparent (but we'll get into that later).

Creating a cross-channel experience

Young people use each medium in unique ways and move fluidly between them. A young buyer may research a product online and look for validation on social media, for example, then move to an in-person store or digital marketplace to buy it—or vice versa. This dynamic demands a continuous, consistent omnichannel experience—integrated and personalized to meet their expectations. Fast, friction-free engagements are the rule—not the exception.

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The 3 Most Important Rules for Youth Engagement

Young people want to be heard. They expect brands to be open, honest, and authentic. And, they'll open up to the brands that are. Making that connection means playing by their rules of engagement and integrating transparency, authenticity, and trust into everything you do.

1. Transparency

66% of Millennials and 79% of Gen Zs across the U.S. and U.K. think brands are never honest, or not honest enough. Convincing young people you're "legit" means showing them you have nothing to hide. That may mean using technology like QR Codes to let customers trace your supply chain, or helping them better understand the environmental costs of your products.

You can also build trust by making your intentions clear: let your young market research respondents know exactly why you're asking the questions that you are.

This means paying attention when young people are talking to you—starting a two-way conversation and keeping it going. This generation often uses social media, for instance, to reach out to brands with questions or to share their opinions. They see a timely and personal reply as a form of good customer service, but they want those interactions to feel like they're talking to a real person, not an indifferent corporate entity.
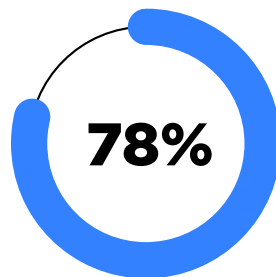
2. Authenticity

Transparency and authenticity are inextricably linked and young people demand both from the brands they engage.

For proof, just look at the role user-generated content (UGC) plays for the youngest of consumers. Millennials trust information received through UGC 50% more than information from other media sources. Similarly, 82% of Gen Zs trust companies more when they use images of real customers and 78% of Millennials say they'd rather see photos of real customers than professional photos created by a brand.
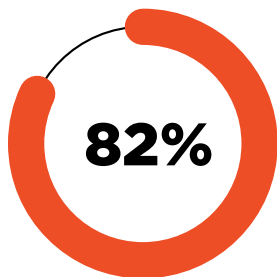
82% of Gen Zs trust companies more when they use images of real customers

78% of Millennials would rather see photos of real customers

However, young people don't just want to see and hear from real customers, they want to feel confident that the testimonials are authentic. 60% of Gen Zs say it's important that brands value their opinions. With this in mind, marketers must be brave enough to accept and include negative feedback amidst the positive reviews.

If you want to get honest answers and actionable insights from your youngest audience, you need to continually invite them into the conversation. Only through this type of direct outreach will you start to get a true representation of this young, dynamic generation.

Democratizing Fashion: The House of LR&C

When Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson and his wife, singer/songwriter Ciara, founded The House of LR&C with former Lululemon CEO Christine Day, their goal was to "democratize fashion" — making it more accessible to young buyers. It's no surprise, then, that they hoped to bring those potential customers into the conversation as much as possible as they developed the brand.

To help accomplish that, The House of LR&C teamed with Rival Technologies to create a confidential research community of more than 500 participants, all of whom belonged to their Gen Z target demographic. They asked for input on packaging, product design, and their mission statement. They also tested social media, digital CX, fulfillment, and user-generated content for use across all their digital properties. The result? "Unprecedented access to our core customers," says LR&C CMO Nancy Richardson.

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3. Trust

Only through authenticity and transparency will you be able to tap into the third critical component of youth engagement: trust.

For brands, building trust starts by showing young people you're exactly who you say you are and following through on your promises. It's important to remember that young people will call your bluff. When surveyed, 75% of Gen Zs said they'd research to see if companies are being honest when they broadcast their position on key social and environmental issues. While 76% of Gen Zs are more likely to buy a brand's product or service if they've made statements on issues that matter to them, you risk damaging your brand's reputation if you're unable to back it up. The bottom line? If you can't speak truthfully about your actions it's better not to speak at all.

> **If you can't speak truthfully about your actions as a brand, spend the time implementing the programs you need before you speak at all.**

Vote or Die: REVOLT TV

During the divisive 2020 U.S. election, a massive effort was made to encourage youth to vote. REVOLT TV took it one step further, wanting to find out why they weren't voting in the first place.

As part of their Vote or Die election coverage, Diddy's premium cable network set out to get a more nuanced understanding of their key demographic: young voters of color in America. To accomplish that, they used a multi-phased study that incorporated a survey of 1,000 U.S. participants from 18-34 years old, social listening analysis of more than 200,000 Twitter posts, and digital diaries and video selfies captured by Rival's market research platform.

The study showed a rich and multifaceted picture of today's youth and their participation in politics. In many of the open-ended responses, young voters described political candidates as "old as dirt," with whom they have nothing in common. Videos and discussions referenced issues like lack of transit options, unclear voter laws, and homelessness as barriers.

Revealing insights covered by both Time and Forbes, the study helped capture the authentic voice of young voters, challenging preconceived notions that they weren't voting because they were lazy or ill-informed.

Conclusion

While brands might find it challenging to pin down the youth market, the truth is that this generation wants to share their opinions and experiences—they just expect something in return.

While engaging with Gen Zs and Young Millennials requires getting to know who they are and what they prioritize, that's just the start. More than anything, engagement with this market requires trust—that means approaching them with authenticity and transparency. Otherwise, you won't get far.

With authenticity, transparency, and trust in place, you can begin to build meaningful engagement with this exciting generation—getting to know what they think and building lasting relationships.

You'll find it's worth the effort once you do.

About the author

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A pioneer in online research
methodologies, Jennifer is helping
shape the future of insights by
leading the charge in the
development of chats and other
conversational research
technologies.

About Rival Technologies

Rival Technologies is the world's best mobile market research platform. Building on 20 years of experience in the research space we blend best-in-class digital experiences with sophisticated market research rigor in a way that inspires people to share deep, rich and actionable insights. Email surveys are dead tech and feel more like a test than a meaningful brand engagement—which is what people crave. We engage consumers in real time, on their mobile phones in a way that feels organic, familiar, and fun. By using chat, video, and machine learning our system captures robust quantitative and rich qualitative feedback fast and effectively. Working with leading-edge brands like Amazon, P&G, Facebook, and Samsung we make market research more inclusive, accessible, and relevant to the modern mass consumer.

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