

Marketing to

● **Divorce, diversity, and declining incomes shape the consumer behavior of Generation X. With a broader definition of family, young adults may give consumer advice to many friends and relatives. As cautious romantics, they may create stable marriages and make smarter buying decisions. They accept racial and sexual diversity as facts of life. And they hate advertisements that use hype or insincerity.**

by *Karen Ritchie*

I have become fascinated lately with a speech pattern linguists call “the rising inflection.” For those who may be unfamiliar with this term, it describes the habit of allowing one’s voice to rise at the end of a sentence. It makes an ordinary declarative sentence sound like a question. Thus, “we received your proposal?” has the identical inflection as “Can we go to Disneyland?”

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There is a slight pause at the end of the sentence—a pause not long enough to allow more than acknowledgment from the listener, but slightly longer than one would normally leave between declarative sentences. I have observed that this is a common speech pattern among young adults, and especially among white men and women.

On the coasts and among the more highly educated members of “Generation X,” the pattern often incorporates an exaggerated pronunciation of consonants, so the “s” is more sibilant and “th” more breathy. The overall effect is that the speaker is being very careful to phrase her thoughts. And of course, the speech is



Generation X



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peppered with qualifying phrases: perhaps, like, sort of, just, you know, totally. Sometimes these modifiers are strung together in a phrase with the rising inflection, to create a sentence such as, "He's just, sort of, like, you know, clueless?"

Xers speak this way because they find it gentler and more accommodating. The rising inflection, the slight pause, and the modifiers are intended to acknowledge that the listener might have a different opinion and an opposing point of view. Xers are more sensitive to diverse points of view, so they make a conscious effort not to co-opt the listener or assume that he or she holds the same opinion. This hesitant tone is meant to prompt a response from the listener. It means something like, "You may not agree with this part, but hear me out, OK?"

Unfortunately, that is not the way most boomers hear it. To boomer ears, this speech pattern sounds uncertain, hesitant, questioning. It is as if the speaker wasn't sure of what he was saying. To boomer ears, this is a speaker begging for advice and direction. This is a speaker who wants to be told what to do. But Xers know perfectly well what they think, and boomers who rush in with unsolicited advice are likely to encounter resistance and/or resentment from Xers, who are only trying to be polite. This is a common example of how the generations misunderstand each other in very basic ways.

The communication gap between Generation X and baby boomers creates more than just family problems. When boomers create advertising that parodies Generation X, the results can be the opposite of those intended. When marketing to Generation X, middle-aged executives need to understand that consumer targets have values different than their own.

The differences in values create differences in consumer behavior. For example,

Xers are more likely to have participated in household chores at a younger age, so they are more knowledgeable about household products than boomers were at their age. They are more likely to seek a balance of work and leisure activities than boomers were as young adults. They are more diverse and more accepting of diversity, whether it is defined by ethnicity or by sexual preference. And while they are not anti-advertising, they are repulsed by insincerity—and they are experts at spotting it.

BROAD DEFINITION OF FAMILY

Today's young adults are perhaps closer to their parents than any recent generation has been. Rather than breaking ties with parents during the turbulence of adolescence and moving on to new adult families, the members of Generation X tend to rebound after college and other brief experiences of independent living. Then, as adults, they must redefine their relationships with the same parents, siblings, and stepparents they grew up with. That Xers tend to work out such relationships during the years they spend at home is demonstrated by the fact that nearly half of them continue to live at home through their late 20s.

In fact, Generation X is helping to form a new extended American family, one that includes close friends, stepparents, adopted and half-siblings, live-in lovers, and a host of diverse relations. An important aspect of this new extended family often involves a renewed bond between Generation X and older family members. In a 1993 survey conducted for *Details* magazine, 51 percent of Generation X said they "admire their parent(s) more than anyone else," and 29 percent described their mother or father as "my best friend."

Clearly, even after Xers move out on

their own, many continue to depend on an emotional and social connection with parents. The transition to adulthood is neither angry nor sudden, as evidenced by the large number of Xers who continue to receive financial help from Mom and Dad. In the *Details* survey, 40 percent said they get financial help from their parents in emergencies, 24 percent said their parents paid their doctor and dentist bills, 24 percent had parents who paid insurance bills, 16 percent got help with the rent or mortgage, 16 percent with clothing or jewelry, 10 percent with car payments, and 7 percent with an allowance. Only 26 percent said they never got financial help from their parents for any of those things.

Many Xers (45 percent of *Details* respondents) also feel an obligation to repay parents for the help they give, because this is an adult relationship with benefits for both sides. Reciprocity can take many forms, but it often involves Generation X taking on continued responsibility for household chores, maintenance, and shopping. As their parents age, the need for such assistance does not diminish, but may in fact increase. And as Xers come of age, they may find their parents depend on them more rather than less.

Because young adults now remain at home longer, many marketers underestimate their importance as consumers. If marketers have not considered the degree to which the parent-child relationship changes over time, they may not have noticed that many Xers have become "designated decision-makers" for their parents or other relatives. This may be especially true in those areas where young adults have particular expertise, such as electronic equipment, computers, or in some cases, automobiles. Since so many Xers were children of working parents, they were given shopping chores early on. An Xer may have begun by

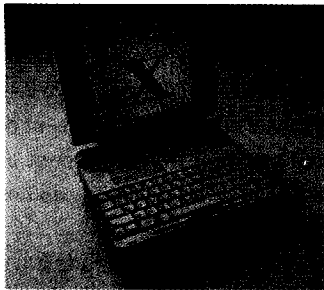
picking up milk at the store and progressed to specifying a new computer. Now she is hiring a contractor to remodel the house for her parents or advising on the purchase of a new car.

Adult children of divorced parents often have a lot of family members to choose from. If an Xer cannot get along with his mother, he can join his father's family and adopt a stepmother. If he feels

By delaying marriage until one's education is complete and a career has been established, young adults are also increasing the economic stability of the future marriage. They are delaying the birth of children, which will also help to maximize resources. Both partners expect to work and to share in household chores, which should make for less stressful partnerships. As a result, young mar-

Boomer women, some of whom have spent a lifetime opening new opportunities for women, are understandably puzzled when Generation X women preface a statement with, "I'm not a feminist, but...." Boomers are concerned when Generation X women are quick to claim the benefits of feminism and equally as quick to disavow any association with it.

Boomer men and women who have



Many young adults help their parents make purchase decisions for computers or cars.

closer to his mother, he may remain attached to her relatives as well, including a new spouse, housemate, or significant other and his relatives. Many Xers maintain contact with a large network of relatives and friends, including several different family branches. In this manner, a single Xer with a high degree of expertise about computers, for example, may consult in several households and be a significant influence on purchasing decisions in all of them.

CAUTIOUS ROMANTICS

Today's young adults will eventually get married. But they will do so later in life than boomers did, and their marriages may represent a return to a more stable lifestyle than we have seen in recent decades. First of all, Xers are playing the statistics in favor of lasting marriages: they are marrying at a later age, which may increase the maturity and stability of each partner.

ried couples should enjoy greater financial security, more discretionary income, less conflict, and more stable marriages than boomers have. Generation X may, indeed, achieve its goal of marriage for life.

Marriage for Generation X will probably not mean the formation of a totally separate nuclear family. Boomers who married earlier often saw getting married as another aspect of adolescent separation. Marriage was a badge of independence and adulthood, and many boomers were therefore anxious to put space between their old family and their new spouse. Generation X will be more settled and more accustomed to the extended family that evolved during their single years.

In the workplace, Generation X will continue the balancing act between career and home but will keep in mind the lessons of the baby boom. Today's young adults do not question the achievements of boomer women in the workplace, but they often question the price of those achievements.

worked hard to gain the success they enjoy do not understand when an Xer expresses a reluctance to make personal sacrifices for the sake of career. This is a version of the "grass is always greener" syndrome. Boomer women were willing to sacrifice some of their family life, which they had in oppressing abundance, in return for a chance at a career. Generation X women have a clear shot at the executive suite, but often have been working since high school and long for a change of pace. They place a greater importance on the home and family life they missed as children and are unwilling to compromise that ideal for a job. While Xer women will continue to work, they will not sacrifice their personal lives or families to the degree that boomer women did.

Marketers would be wise to note this temperature change, but should not read it as a return to the 1950s. Boomer women made the market for power suits, Rolex watches, Saabs, and BMWs. For

Generation X, balance and perspective will be a primary goal. Look for a continued emphasis on leisure activities and family entertainment, economical and functional clothing, quality day care, and home offices.

Apartment furnishings and appliances in smaller or more portable configurations will be useful to young singles and young married couples alike. Small, economical automobiles like the Geo Metro and the Chrysler Neon are already popular with this market.

Any product or service that feeds the need of young, single Xers to stay in touch and in control at the same time will do well. The future is bright for cell phones, beepers and pagers, answering machines, computer mail, and fax machines. These are necessities—not luxuries—to Generation X.

Banks, insurance companies, and credit cards would do well to overcome their long-standing mistrust of applicants without credit ratings and to look for ways to provide services to Generation X. Their good work history, high aspirations, and consumer savvy will ultimately make them good customers.

DIVERSE FACTS OF LIFE

Throughout the life cycle of Generation X, diversity will be an increasingly important factor. Products that recognize individuals' different or special needs will continue to do well. The growth in the market for beauty products designed to meet the needs of black or Hispanic women is a good example. Ethnic foods are another, both as packaged foods and in ethnic restaurants. So, too, are music videos, language instruction materials, legal services, job-placement agencies, and clothing catalogs that cater to odd sizes.

In terms of sheer numbers, the emerging Hispanic market will be of paramount

importance over the next decade. Mainstream marketers need to recognize that Hispanics are well on their way to becoming the largest ethnic minority in the United States, and that Hispanic population growth is fueled by the immigration of young adults. The high concentration of young Hispanics in a few metropolitan areas makes them the majority of shoppers in many urban retail districts, and their influence is bound to increase.

Another large group just beginning to emerge is one that has never been targeted by mainstream marketers as a viable consumer group: the homosexual market. While gays and lesbians have remained a relatively invisible market segment to older generations, the AIDS epidemic acted as a galvanizing force on young people during the 1980s. Homosexuals have felt the need to come forward in defense of their special health-care needs and to combat prejudice and misunderstanding. Gay and lesbian civil rights activism has gained some support from both homosexual and heterosexual communities, and individuals are increasingly willing to be publicly identified as homosexual.

Most of these changes have taken place during the lifetime of Generation X. Indeed, the broad acceptance of sexual expression in the college-educated segment of twentysomethings is still largely unrecognized in the balance of American society. Bill Clinton stumbled upon this particular generational schism in the early days of his administration when he attempted to change the status of gays in the military.

"If you come out in college, there is an openly gay faculty member you can talk to and a gay student group, and you can even take Queer Studies 101," says Sarah Schulman, novelist, playwright, and gay activist. "But in most states, you still may

not have your basic civil rights," she says in the *New York Times*.

Few reliable statistics exist about sexual orientation, but it is generally acknowledged that homosexuals represent a potentially large market of upscale, well-educated professionals, perhaps as many as 12 million adults. Almost 40 percent of same-sex unmarried partners hold college degrees, compared with 18 percent of unmarried heterosexual partners and 13 percent of married spouses, according to the Census Bureau. While only 14 percent of the partners of gay men and 19 percent of the partners of lesbian women have less than a high school education, 21 percent of heterosexual spouses and 26 percent of heterosexual unmarried partners do not have a high school diploma.

"I get the sense that these kids have crossed over the river," Tony Kushner, Tony-award-winning author of Broadway's *Angels in America* says in the *Times*. "There is a new generation arriving whose visceral ideas of homosexuality will be completely different."

Whether or not your company chooses to target homosexuals or Hispanics as potential customers, it will become increasingly important to avoid negative stereotypes and unwitting offensiveness. For Generation X, this market is simply another factor to deal with in an increasingly complicated world.

WHY THEY HATE HYPE

Commercials have been a part of Generation X's world since infancy. Today, Xers see advertising as another familiar marker that orients them and gives them something to talk about. Of course, advertising can be stupid, misleading, offensive, or, worst of all, boring. Advertising can also be clever, amusing, or entertaining, and occasionally an ad actually tells you something you want to know. But there is,

among Generation X, a sense of information overload. To some degree, its rejection of hype is a self-protective mechanism.

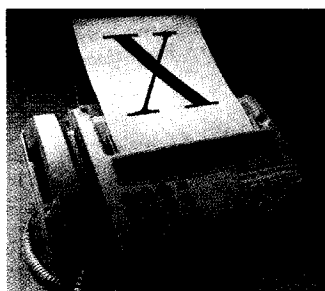
Generation Xers don't dislike advertising. They dislike hype. They dislike overstatement, self-importance, hypocrisy, and the assumption that anyone would want to be disturbed at home by a salesperson on the telephone. To the degree

best-selling mousetrap in America" or "the mousetrap for upscale vermin" are not likely to persuade Generation X.

It has been observed that Generation X has no heroes. Unlike boomers, Xers do not tend to idolize their role models. With unrelenting pragmatism, they see the whole person, warts and all. In the *Details* survey, not a single Xer—not

compared with 18 percent of boomers.

The diversity of this generation will remain a formidable challenge. Rather than defining targets in terms of primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in the future, targets will probably be defined as conglomerates of equally important but diverse segments. Each segment will be desirable for reasons that may not be



Beepers, fax machines, and e-mail are necessities to Generation X.

that contemporary advertising is guilty of hype, advertising will have to change.

If you wish Generation X to adopt your product, it must be perceived as a useful product—not one to be purchased for reasons of status or to make a statement, but one that fulfills a genuine need. Never mind that young people and others tend to get their wants and their needs mixed up. We're talking about perceptions.

Just as Generation Xers are anti-hype and skeptical of social movements, so they also reject the concept of conspicuous consumption. "Keeping up with the Joneses" has never been a goal for them. They are too busy keeping up with their own parents. Besides, the Joneses in 1994 are far more likely to be the Wongs, the Abdullahs, or the Garcias. Neighbors who speak another language are likely to have far different aspirations. The diverse cultures now co-existing in America make it dangerous to assume that we all aspire to the same things. Products that hype their own success with copy points like "the

one—wished to change places with Madonna or Michael Jackson.

Not only have Xer icons been relatively short-lived phenomena, but those who do last seem destined to a life of continuing media abuse. Think of Sinéad O'Connor, Andre Agassi, Roseanne, and Shannon Doherty. This pattern may make it difficult to employ a celebrity spokesperson in advertising directed to this audience.

On the other hand, Xers have a decided preference for the elevation of the ordinary. They like to see the common man come out on top. And they particularly love to see one of their own get ahead. Witness their continued respect for such low-key role models as Bill Gates of Microsoft, or Matt Groening, creator of "The Simpsons." Such success at an early age gives them hope for their own situation. Many Xers were also charmed by the common-man-with-common-sense appeal of Ross Perot in 1992. Twenty-one percent of Xers cast their vote for Perot,

shared by other segments of the market. Marketers may need to vary product design, distribution, cost, and promotion, depending on the part of the prospect group they wish to conquer or to preserve.

The jury is still out on the ultimate economic success or failure of Generation X, and that is beyond our control. Whatever their fortunes may be, it isn't helpful to concentrate on the possibility that today's young adults may be forced to settle for less. Instead, businesses should study the needs of Generation X and serve them as a valuable group of consumers and employees. After all, Generation X is the next generation of responsible adults. ●

TAKING IT FURTHER

For more information about the 1993 *Details* magazine survey on the attitudes of young adults, telephone (212) 598-3797. *Marketing To Generation X* is available for \$25 from the American Demographics Marketing Power Catalog; telephone (800) 828-1133.