

GEN Z'S NICHE COMMUNITIES—HOW BRANDS CAN FORGE RELATIONSHIPS WITH IDENTITY SHAPE-SHIFTERS

5 insights from a new USC Annenberg x ACC Think Tank study

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When AMC Theaters' Nicole Kidman ad drew appreciative mockery for over-the-top earnestness, AMC embraced the humor and produced follow-up spots to capitalize on the attention.

Credit: AMC via YouTube

Forget the clichés about TikTok dances and short attention spans.

Gen Z is a profoundly nuanced generation of identity shape-shifters and marketing codebreakers. They find their sense of belonging in niche communities, where they excel in using humor—particularly satire and absurdity—as tools for connection and expression.

For brands, engaging this demographic requires a balance of cultural sensitivity and boldness, meeting consumers where they are and adapting to their dynamic expectations without being overly precious about brand image.

We recently collaborated on a study, *Unveiling Gen Z: What They Want You to Know in Their Own Words*, with graduate students at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism that surveyed more than 2,000 Gen Z adults.

The findings reveal a generation that is acutely aware of marketing strategies yet remains open to forging genuine relationships with brands-if those brands prove they genuinely "get" them.

Understand 'Zegos'

From Swifties and K-drama stans to BookTok and BeautyTok devotees-these are just a few of the passionate communities and identities that overlap, intersect and dynamically evolve, creating a rich tapestry of multifaceted personal expression. This fluid identity formation, known as Zegos, allows Gen Z to seamlessly navigate between different communities, often distinct from their identities in real-life interactions with family and friends. According to the survey, 78% of Gen Z belongs to one or more communities specifically related to their interests, hobbies, or extracurricular activities.

For marketers, this fluidity underscores the necessity of continually adapting their strategies to engage these dynamic consumers effectively. While these niches are not inherently resistant to brand engagement, what resonates with an individual in one community may not necessarily appeal to the same person in another; indeed, 74% of Gen Z say they want brands to cater to their many identities in a way that makes them feel special.

Essentially, Gen Z welcomes brand engagement-so long as your brand approaches its community with genuine respect and a deep understanding of its subcultural nuances.

Make A Joke of Your Own Brand

Humor-especially satire and the absurd-plays a pivotal role in how Gen Z engages with online content. Forty-one percent of Gen Zers pay more attention to brands that use humor and 35% say that humorous marketing makes them like a brand more.

But this doesn't mean that Gen Z is guaranteed to love your brand's jokes as written. Often, brand marketing that wasn't originally intended to be funny-or fell flat-is reinterpreted by fans, creating an unintentional yet potent connection through its absurdity. Brands that embrace the progression of the narrative-especially those that lean into having their content re purposed as memes-are rewarded for being in on the joke.

When AMC Theaters ran an [ad featuring Nicole Kidman](#) to welcome back audiences post-COVID-19, it became a viral sensation, drawing appreciative mockery for its over-the-top earnestness. While the team behind the ad may not have initially aimed for laughs, AMC seized the opportunity to embrace the humor and produced several follow-up spots to capitalize on the attention.

Cultivate Word of Mouth

Gen Z makes purchase decisions based on social currency, often sharing their experience with a product online. Validation continues to be a significant motivator, with 21% influenced to make a recent purchase because of recommendations by a peer, influencer or niche community. These decisions frequently stem from a desire to enhance their status within their respective Zego communities.

For brands, the challenge lies in striking a balance. On one hand, they need to stay on top of emerging cultural micro-moments to capitalize on them on the other, they need to amplify and nurture their consumers' existing relationship with their product.

Feel Free to Leave a Comment

In the early days of social media, brands waded into the comment section at their own peril. Times have changed. Forty-three percent of Gen Z consumers now welcome brands commenting and reacting to their content. On platforms such as TikTok, some brands even achieve higher engagement through commenting on viral videos rather than solely focusing on generating their own viral content. For instance, Urban Outfitters gained more likes on a single comment on a user's TikTok video than its entire follower base on the platform.

While brands should still feel empowered to initiate conversations, they should feel equally confident in dropping commentary.

Get IRL

Even digitally minded brands shouldn't sleep on IRL experiences. Contrary to expectations, Gen Z spends nearly as much time hanging out in person as online. Half spend time with friends in person at least once a week, and 59% say they'd go out more if money weren't an issue. Additionally, 53% prefer intimate experiences that enable connection over visually appealing "Instagram-worthy" experiences (15%) or high-tech, immersive experiences (11%).

For example, Nespresso launched a new coffee machine with an engaging experience in a 35-square-foot elevator designed for two. It's not about the grand spectacle but the ability to connect meaningfully.

This is a complex generation of consumers that needs to feel understood and communicated with on a very personal level, more so than brands are generally accustomed to doing.

However, it is a generation that has a deep feeling for brand personality, and that can be a great opportunity if you know how to speak to them.



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