

5 Characteristics of Millennials

1. **Millennials expect technology to simply work**—so you'd better make sure that it does.

They've grown up with digital devices that bundle communication, entertainment, shopping, mapping and education all in one. From an early age, smartphone use has been the norm. Millennials have always had Internet at home and in school. MP3 players have long offered them ubiquitous music options. Even their first political memories center around technology, from navigating the innovative Barack Obama campaign website to supporting activist campaigns on Facebook. Compare this to more traditional defining moments in early politicization: volunteering at a phone bank, stuffing mailers, standing outside in the rain 'til the polls finally close.

Naturally, then, millennials embrace and align themselves with technology. Because of this identification with technology, millennials tend to adopt new technology more quickly compared with the more skeptical approach of previous generations. Technology has become far more user friendly during millennials' lifetimes, particularly when compared to what previous generations encountered. The relentless focus on simplifying the user interface at Apple, Amazon, Google and other less visible technology players has set a new standard of intuitiveness across the tech industry that millennials accept as the norm. Businesses should be careful not to throw clunky, alienating devices or websites at these customers and expect patience or understanding as customers struggle to find a workaround.

As marketer J.D. Peterson puts it, "Millennials simply expect technology to work, because that's been their experience. Remember the 'blue screen of death' that users would get on their PCs? And how Mac users had the dreaded icon of a bomb when things went bad? When I've made these references to millennials, they don't even register, because the computers and devices they've grown up with essentially never crash." ... and mobile is the technology closest to their hearts.

Millennials (in large part) don't watch TV, don't go to church and don't, it appears, dream—they text. According to Pew, more than four out of five sleep with or next to their cellphones. They own more cellphones, use their cellphones more, text more and text while driving (yikes) more than other generations. They're also more likely to own a cellphone as their only phone: 41% have no landline.

Of course, millennials don't use smartphones just for texting. More than twice as many millennials as non-millennials use a mobile device to research products and read user reviews while shopping, according to marketer Jeff Fromm, whose company, Barkley, has researched the subject. Millennials even donate to charities and causes through their mobile devices. In fact, among those who donate, nearly 50% do it by phone. Smartphones, in other words, are the new catchall: a happy hour, a bar for hookups, a concierge, a style advisor ... In this generation that rarely smokes, cellphones have even replaced smoking as the thing to do in those lonely moments when existential angst threatens to encroach.

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2. Millennials are a social generation—and they socialize while consuming (and deciding to consume) your products and services.

Millennials are a sociable generation. And for millennials, this sociability is expressed online as well as in real life (“IRL”), particularly in the many arenas where online and offline activities and circles of friends overlap. Offline, millennials are more likely than other generations to shop, dine and travel with groups, whether these are organized interest groups, less formal groupings of peers or excursions with extended family, according to Boston Consulting Group data. Online, their sharing habits on Facebook, Snapchat and other social sites, and the opinions they offer on Yelp, TripAdvisor and Amazon reflect their eagerness for connection, as do their electronic alerts to friends and followers (via Foursquare et al.) that show off where they are, where they’re coming from and where they’re headed—online alerts that reflect and affect behavior in the physical world.

This social behavior has big implications for those of us who serve customers. “A shopping habit that sets millennials apart from non-millennials is their tendency to shop in groups and seek the opinions of others,” says marketer Jeff Fromm. More than two-thirds of millennials, according to Fromm’s research, “don’t make a major decision until they have discussed it with a few people they trust,” compared to around half of all non-millennials. Seventy percent of millennials are “more excited about a decision they’ve made when their friends agree with them, compared to 48% of non-millennials,” Fromm continues. Female millennials in particular regard shopping as a group activity, shopping twice as often with their spouses, friends or family members as do non-millennial women.

Millennials don’t consume food, beverages, services, products or media in silence. They eat noisily (so to speak) and very visually. They review, blog and Tumblr, update Wikipedia entries and post Youtube, Vine and Instagram videos. Often these posts concern their consumption activities, interests and aspirations. All told, as Boston Consulting Group reports, “the vast majority of millennials report taking action on behalf of brands and sharing brand preferences in their social groups.”

The Most Surprising Group They Socialize With? Their Parents: Here’s a revolutionary fact about millennials: They get along with their parents. According to Pew, teenagers today get into fewer fights with their parents than Mom and Dad did with theirs as teens. According to authors Joeri Van den Bergh and Mattias Behrer, six out of 10 teens eat with their family four or more nights per week. Incredibly, 85% of teens name one of their parents as their best friend, rather than naming a peer. And more than a third of millennials of all ages say they influence what products their parents buy, what shops and restaurants they visit and what trips they take.

This striking lack of conflict between generations means that millennials can be vital carriers of a business’s commercial message to not only their friends but also their

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parents. At the rate they're spreading the word, it won't be long until almost everyone passes for a millennial, as far as attitude and buying patterns go.

3. They collaborate and cooperate—with each other and, when possible, with brands Millennials have a positive, community-oriented “we can fix it together” mindset.

Millennials want everyone to get along, and they think everyone should be able to. As authors Van den Bergh and Behrer put it, “Contrary to previous generations, Gen Yers were brought up in an atmosphere of equal relationships and co-decision-making.” Parents and educators throughout their childhood emphasized collaboration and cooperation, as did even the shows they grew up with: Millennials cut their TV teeth on the collaboration-themed educational television shows *Bob the Builder*, *Blue's Clues* and *Barney and Friends*.

Millennials enjoy the possibility of collaborating with businesses and brands, as long as they believe their say matters to the company in question. They don't necessarily see a clear boundary between the customer and the brand, the customer and marketer, and the customer and service provider. Alex Castellarnau at Dropbox, the popular file transfer service, put it to me this way: With millennials, “a new brand, service or product is only started by the company; it's finished by the customers. Millennials are a generation that wants to co-create the product, the brand, with you. Companies that understand this and figure out ways to engage in this co-creation relationship with millennials will have an edge.”

4. They're looking for adventure (and whatever comes their way).

Millennial customers crave the joy of adventures and discoveries, whether epic or every day. Millennials often view commerce and even obligatory business travel as opportunities rather than burdens, due to the adventures that can be had along the way. I'm reluctant to chalk up this phenomenon to youthful wanderlust alone, because the breadth of experiences this generation craves suggests there's something more at work:

- When shopping, they prefer an “experiential” retail environment, where shopping is more than a transaction and the pleasure of being in the store isn't limited to the goods that customers take home.
- Far more millennials than non-millennials report a desire to visit every continent and travel abroad as much as possible, according to Boston Consulting Group.
- More than twice as many millennials as those in other age brackets say they are willing “to encounter danger in pursuit of excitement,” according to Barkley. This may sound irrelevant to you as a businessperson if you don't sell bungee ropes or the like, but consider the idea of “danger” more broadly than actual risk to life or limb. Embracing danger as a customer can mean traveling across the city for artisanal cupcakes, knowing that there's a high risk of disappointment since the bakery famously sells out each day before 10 a.m., or shopping, as a lark, at a popup store with no history and nothing but word of mouth to recommend it.

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- When millennials dine out, for example, they're often in search of something exotic, adventuresome, memorable or new to explore during their dining experience. This has helped transform cuisine searches ("tastepotting") into an adventure—and food truck-following (a concept sure to evoke fears of stomachache in some of their elders) into its own culture.

5. They're passionate about values—including the values of companies they do business with

Millennials are a highly values-driven generation, specifically in terms of the values that authors Winograd and Hais call "civic" values: the values that relate to good citizenship. This can be attributed to their upbringing, say Winograd and Hais: While growing up, "young millennials were revered, praised, sheltered, befriended and carefully guided by their parents to lead well-structured lives based on adherence to clear and mutually agreed-upon rules. This has produced a generation of young people that is, by most measures, accomplished, self-confident, group-oriented and optimistic." Boomer parents have taught their children that every voice matters, that bullying is bad and equality is worth fighting for, that it takes a village. In large part, this generation polls as a gentle, loving generation; specifically speaking, polls conducted at a similar age with previous generations displayed less of these civic-values inclinations.

More millennials than non-millennials integrate their beliefs and causes into their choice of companies to support, their purchases and their day-to-day interactions. More than 50% of millennials make an effort to buy products from companies that support the causes they care about, according to research from Barkley, an independent advertising agency. And they're twice as likely to care about whether or not their food is organic than are their non-millennial counterparts, according to Boston Consulting Group. When you consider how money-strapped many millennials remain, their willingness to put a premium on such issues is striking.

Millennials are concerned with more than political and ethical issues. They also care about what's genuine and authentic. This interest falls somewhere between a purely aesthetic preference and a search for honesty, for truth. And it's a powerful force for motivating millennial customers.

A Warning About Generalizations, Including Mine

I've provided a number of generalizations here that I find valuable in understanding and, ultimately, successfully serving millennials as customers. But I want to add a caveat to these generational generalizations.

Your customer is an individual first and a millennial (or a Baby Boomer or a member of the Silent Generation) second. Knowledge of a macro trend can make you a lot of money over time. However, it's something that can also cost you dearly if your eyes are on the proverbial forest and you stop seeing, and serving, the individual trees. Even if

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my descriptions, on average, suit your customer's generational cohort to a T, the specific customer in front of you may not.

Conversely, don't assume these generalizations only apply to millennials. Because of millennials' influence on their elders, as well as their elders' increasing comfort level with technology, many expectations and behaviors that are now standard for millennials will soon spread to the majority of customers.

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Characteristics of the Millennial Generation

Born between the years 1981 and 2000, their current age (2006) is 6 to 25 years old

Special

Have always been treated as special and important. This generation of children has been the most wanted. Every milestone was marked with celebrations and praise. They may carry a sense of entitlement about them and have an expectation of frequent positive feedback. It's been instilled in them that they are vital to the nation and to their parents' sense of purpose. They feel they are here to solve world problems that older generations have failed to solve. They may claim they want privacy, but they crave attention.

Sheltered

Highly protected as children. Grew up in a time of increasing safety measures (car seats, baby on board signs, school lockdowns). They were rarely left unsupervised. They were sheltered from having to take care of their own conflicts as parents advocated on their behalf, and "spared" them from unpleasant experiences. As college students, they may expect faculty and staff to shelter, protect, and nurture them – and resolve their conflicts for them. Millennials are the focus of the most sweeping youth safety movement in American history.

Confident

They are motivated, goal-oriented, and confident in themselves and the future. They expect college to help launch them to greatness. They may brag about their generation's power and potential. They have high levels of optimism and they feel connected to their parents. They are assertive and believe they are "right". In Canada the Millennial generation is called the "Sunshine" generation.

Team-Oriented

They are group oriented rather than being individualists. They may sacrifice their own identity to be part of the team. They prefer egalitarian leadership, not hierarchies. They are forming a tight-knit generation. While they are group-oriented within their own cohort, they may "politely" exclude other generations. They do not want to stand out among their peers, they want to be seen as part of the group. They dislike selfishness and are oriented toward service learning and volunteerism.

Achieving

Grade points are rising with this generation and crime is falling. The focus on getting good grades, hard work, involvement in extracurricular activities, etc. is resulting in higher achievement levels. They see college as the key to a high paying job and success, and may miss the bigger picture of what a college education is all about. They are pressured to decide early on a career – and have been put on a career track orientation since grade school. Their focus is more on the world of achievement rather than personal development. The Boomer generation made their mark in the humanities and arts, whereas the Millennials prefer math and science fields.

Pressured

Tightly scheduled as children and used to having every hour of their day filled with structured activity. This generation may have lost a sense of pure spontaneous play. They may struggle with handling free time and time management in general. In elementary, middle, and high school, have had more hours of homework and less free time than any of the previous generations. They feel pressured to succeed. They've been pushed hard to achieve, to avoid risks, and to take advantage of opportunities. They may take on too much, and then think others should be flexible with them when they want to negotiate scheduling conflicts. They think multi-tasking saves time and is a smart thing to do, but aren't usually aware of the poorer quality of results.

Conventional

Respectful to the point of not questioning authority. They are civic-minded and believe the government knows what's best and will take care of them. They fear being considered non-conformist. Their clothing, music, and cultural markings will be very mainstream. They value their parents' opinions very highly. They support and believe in social rules, and are more in line with their parents' values than most other generations have been. They are trying to invite rules and norms back into the culture.