

Get Ready For Generation Z

This column introduced the Generation Z audience in last year's May-June issue. New research sheds more light on the first "native internet" generation.

By Michael A. Kashmer / *Digital Broadband Programming Consultant*

Generation Z, although not the most original term, is used to describe the generation coming after the millennials. Pew Research calls this group "post millennials," and the final moniker remains to be chosen.

Anyone born from 1997 onward is part of this new generation. Millennials grew up during the internet explosion, but Z-ers master technology from birth. By the time the first Z-ers reached 10, the iPhone had launched. A handful of years later, most young Americans connected to the Web through mobile devices, Wi-Fi and cell services. This younger generation largely assumes the use of these tools.

Pew Research reminds us that generations are lenses through which to understand societal changes rather than labels with which to oversimplify differences between groups.

Stories are making the rounds about Gen Z teenagers doing very un-teenager-like things. For example, 16-year-old Ann Makosinski showed her invention, a flashlight powered by the heat of a human hand, on "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon." The inspiration for this device was the plight of a friend in the Philippines who was failing at school because of a lack of electricity to study at night.

Makosinski's ingenuity, coupled with empathy, won her the top prize at the Google Science Fair. Fallon, always a keen observer, said, "I'm going to work for her one day – I can feel it."

The changing of the guard was fastest and most dramatic after the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Terror and loss made the Gen Z-ers – adept at using both social media and traditional media – answer the call to lead school walkouts and sit-ins at the Capitol and at state legislatures across the country.

We haven't heard the last from this generation on this crisis, and that's a good thing.

DRAMATIC CHANGES IN SOCIAL NETWORK USE

In 2018, Facebook users 12–24 will decrease by nearly 6 percent. This is the first time eMarketer has predicted a decline in Facebook users in this age group. Debra Aho Williamson, eMarketer principal analyst, said, "The question will be whether younger users will still find Snapchat 'cool' if more of their parents and grandparents are on it."

Companies that focus on the youth market have a special challenge ahead of them. According to Jim Rendon in a February 25 New York Times article, Broadway musicals have been adapted for the fast-growing middle and high school

markets. A middle school version of "Annie" is an hour long with 25 speaking roles. The 30-minute elementary school version uses 20 speaking roles. It can take two years to adapt a musical for these school shows. The rights holder is heading off a fear of aging audiences and empty seats.

The educational market plays a larger revenue role each season as more musicals and some films are adapted for young audiences.

Members of my trusty preteen focus group gave me a few ideas about programs they enjoy, some available on network TV, others streamed. A CBS sitcom, "Young Sheldon," a single-camera, half-hour production, is a spinoff of the enormously successful "The Big Bang Theory." Sheldon is a precocious 9-year-old frightened by crowded places and stuffed animals displayed behind glass. This is right out of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," and preteens easily identify with the examples.

The Drum reports that 52 percent of Gen Z-ers are more likely to watch a video all the way through if it makes them laugh. "Sheldon" is a perfect fit.

The next show that Z-ers liked comes via YouTube from England. "The Diamond Minecart" is a hit with Minecraft fans and is hosted by Daniel Middleton. This low-key vlogger, with a very pleasant English accent, is spot-on talking to his audience around the globe. He won the Nickelodeon Kid's Choice Award in 2015. The channel is the sixth most popular on YouTube in Britain, with 8.3 million subscribers and 4.8 million views.

Middleton has fine-tuned his audience's love of all things Minecraft with his knowledgeable, non-threatening style. Easy for the kids to handle.

These two examples of thoughtful, humorous shows are at opposite ends of the entertainment spectrum. They were developed by very different types of businesses – CBS versus a gamer/vlogger startup – and took off from very different business plans.

Just as millennials dominated the demographic advertising focus for nearly a decade, you can expect Z-ers to make an even bigger splash.

Stay tuned. ❖

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