



Engaging digital Boomers, Gen X and Millennials: Generational differences don't always match stereotypes

| By Pete Cape

What's the woman in this photo doing? If you think she's dialing a phone number, perhaps you're a Boomer (and you probably know how to work a rotary phone!). If you said she's texting, you're probably from Generation X. If you think she's uploading a selfie to Instagram, you may be a Millennial – and if you imagine she's adjusting her home-heating temperature as she leaves the office, you're perhaps part of the generation to come.

The finding from SSI's recent study of digital citizens in the U.S., U.K., Australia, France, Germany and Japan is that differences are more likely to be generational than cultural. Some of these generational differences are large – and also more subtle than stereotypes might suggest. Boomers use smartphones; Gen X still love CDs; Millennials still have PCs. Each generation simply uses this technology at different times and in different quantities.

It's useful to think of Boomers as digital immigrants who had to learn new technologies from scratch because the technologies didn't exist while they were growing up; Gen X as digital pioneers, who grew up learning to use these technologies; and Millennials as digital natives who didn't have to learn anything at all – this technology was always just part of their lives.

Can generations keep up with rapid technology change?

Some wonder if the Boomer generation will soon be left behind as has happened with the generation before them. Our study found that Millennials and Gen X are abandoning feature phones much faster than Boomers are – along with their CD players and PCs – and Boomer households may soon start to look increasingly old-fashioned. Millennial and Gen X households are much more likely to have a smartphone and an MP3 player than a CD player, and much more likely to have a smart TV, while Boomers lag behind. When we think of cutting-edge technologies like Google Glass, the Apple Watch or 3-D printers, this is where Gen X might also start to lag behind.

Generations consume music in completely different ways too: Millennials stream it while Boomers and Gen X tend not to. A third of all music is purchased by people who are over the age of 50 (which is why music charts have to include downloads to provide a realistic picture of popularity). The idea of going out and buying music is a completely foreign concept to younger generations. We can see where the future of music consumption lies.

The interconnectedness of our digital world

When it comes to connecting with other people, every aspect is moving online: 80 percent of Boomers stay in touch with people online but our study found that only 22 percent of them say this

is the only way they stay in touch – a number which increases as we go through the generations. In fact, one in three Millennials only communicate with their friends and family online.

When we look at meeting new people the differences become starker. Very few Boomers only meet people online but it's very common practice among Millennials. These differences are interesting when applied to business. Think about Airbnb: to a Boomer it means bed and breakfast but to a Millennial it may mean an opportunity to make a new friend!

The interconnected world is in action when you order a taxi through your mobile phone, watch the ride through GPS and give feedback via social media. You become a good rider and they become a good driver. It's perfect. One-to-one communication is increasingly becoming one-to-many. As smartphones become our device of choice, consumption of things becomes sifted and chosen, not broadcast to us.

The common thread in these examples is that the processes behind making connections and putting things together is changing. At the same time technology is enabling us to become more interconnected and stay in touch with more people than ever, technology is also driving us to do things remotely rather than in person – from our social life, to our practical life (banking, food shopping, making travel arrangements), to our leisure life (watching TV and movies, playing virtual sports).

This means that every aspect of the purchase channel is changing dramatically. There are huge challenges and huge opportunities for marketers as we come to grips with personal-casts versus broadcasts and in-the-moment versus scheduled information consumption. And when we increasingly consume things at arm's length rather than in-person there are major challenges for commerce to adapt.

Results from this first wave of the SSI Digital Citizen study leave us with an intriguing picture of a rapidly changing digital landscape. Understanding these changes is especially challenging when we realize that the median age of Fortune 500 CEOs is 55 – firmly in Boomer territory. How will older generations keep up with this rapid change? When will Gen X start to fall behind? As for Millennials, connectedness has changed the way they live and will change the way the world works. They do different things and they do them in different places. A Boomer CEO may think he is getting “with it” by having a Facebook page and his Gen X CMO might think she is “in touch” by getting an Instagram account, meanwhile Millennial customers are talking about products on Snapchat and Vine!

Looking forward, the generation born between 1985 and 2005 will arrive squarely in the line of sight of market research over the next decade. What will they have to say about being a digital citizen of our connected world? And how will we as marketing researchers make sure we have the right techniques to hear their authentic voice? 🗣️

ABOUT THE STUDY:

The study was conducted in U.S., U.K., Australia, France, Germany and Japan with over 1,000 participants in each country. Sample was from SSI's proprietary online panel blend.

Interested in learning more? Don't miss the recording of the Quirk's and SSI hosted Webinar, “Understanding Today's Global Digital Citizen.” LINK: <https://www.surveysampling.com/digital-citizen-webinar-offer>

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