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Why Millennials are resistant to advertising and politics

by Jay Gronlund - Jun 17, 2015

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Much has been written about Millennials, the first “digital generation” (18-35), and their growing influence on business and society. These 86 million younger people are now the most important generation in terms of size and purchasing power – they spend \$200 billion annually. They are also the most diverse, with 43% non-white and 25% speaking a foreign language at home. And they will represent 40% of the electorate by 2020, so their potential clout for shaping our future should be enormous.

Understanding and adapting to their distinct attitudes and behavior is essential, however. What makes Millennials so challenging is their level of trust in brands and politics, driven primarily by the internet which lets them better judge transparency, credibility and authenticity. The results of a recent (10/14) survey by two consulting firms, Elite Daily and Millennial Branding, show how different their perceptions and buying habits are:

- Millennials don't trust advertising – only 3% are influenced by traditional media like TV and print, and only 1% say an adv would make them trust a brand more. Instead they rely more on feedback (mainly online) from friends (37%), parents (36%) and experts (17%) before making a purchase.
- The answer for marketers is to engage, not “sell” to Millennials. 62% say that if a brand engages them online (e.g. social networks), they will more likely become a loyal customer.
- Sharing certain types of information is essential for building brand loyalty – on the quality of a product (39%), their experience with the product (30%) and most important, a brand giving back to society (75% said this is “fairly/very important”).

Trust is the key reason for their reluctance to get involved in politics, too. Recently I led a panel discussion at my college reunion (Colby) on how our values

and attitudes have changed over the years, with special focus on this distinctive Generation Y segment (i.e. our kids). Their potential role in politics was recognized by my classmates, but the panelists (all educators) offered another insight based on their close experience with these younger students – most simply do not trust the government, especially Congress, and are very frustrated as they have lost faith in electoral politics as a way of tackling society’s problems.

This trend of declining brand trust in our core institutions is not surprising given the growth of fraud, inefficiencies and corruption in Government. The 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer found that the government remains the least trusted institution for the fourth consecutive year, now at 41%. Consistent with this negativity, government officials score the lowest for trusted leadership (38%), with CEO’s next at 43%. A 2014 survey of Millennials by Reason-Rupe confirmed these negative perceptions, noting that our government has a high potential for corruption:

- 66% say the government is inefficient and wasteful (up from 42% in 2009)
- 63% feel that regulators favor special interests over the public
- 58% say government agencies generally abuse their power

The irony is that Millennials tend to be more civic minded than other generations. Many are keen to participate in public life – 63% give to charities and 43% actively volunteer to be part of a community organization (source: 2014 Survey by Deloitte). They are very concerned about questions on public policy, from climate change to healthcare. While they recognize that the government has the greatest potential for addressing social issues, Millennials believe strongly that they are not doing anything about it. In fact, they feel that the government is having a negative impact on the top challenges for society:

- Economic/unemployment, -15%
- Environment/resource scarcity, -12%
- Inequality of income and wealth, -31%

These jaundiced views are reflected in their voting trends. In the 1972 presidential election (Nixon versus McGovern), half of eligible 18-24 year olds cast ballots, but only a third of them voted in 2000. Occasionally a new, fresh candidate like Bill Clinton in 1992 and Barack Obama in 2008 will stimulate youth voting, but the general trend is downward. In the 1970s almost three quarters of the young regularly discussed politics with their parents. Today three quarters seldom talk about politics, and 60% have negative views of politics, according to political scientists Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox.

Most Millennials don’t want to be labeled as a Democrat or a Republican, preferring to be an Independent (40%, according to a recent poll by Harvard’s Institute of Politics). They also see Congress as a place that “oldies” control. This generation doesn’t trust either party to handle the social issues they care most

about (only 28%), but tend to lean more Democrat (43%) than Republican (22%). Source: Reason-Rupe Survey.

Their growing apathy is having an impact on their interest in running for political office too. The survey by Lawless and Fox indicated that only one in nine young people would ever seriously consider such a political role. Furthermore 25% of younger Millennials have no opinions about politics, and they are likely to think all politicians are “awful people”.

This trend of Millennials resisting traditional advertising and turning their backs on politics is certainly disconcerting. The main reason for their alienation boils down to their increasing distrust of core institutions like government and business. To re-build trust, Edelman offered five areas where marketers and politicians can improve their performance:

1. Integrity/Transparency– ethical practices, taking responsible actions to address issues
2. Engagement – listening and getting feedback, honest communications
3. Products & Services – innovative, high quality, customer experience
4. Purpose – improving the environment, addressing society’s needs, supporting local communities
5. Leadership/Operations – honest and admired leaders, global sensitivity, consistency

The first step is to assess the current level and causes of this distrust, – i.e. a comprehensive brand audit (we have a template for this, which has become an effective tool for clients and my students, if anyone is interested). This Millennial group offers such enormous potential for shaping our future and solving society’s challenges that the task of re-establishing authentic trust warrants a new perspective by marketers and politicians, followed with urgent action.