

# Generation Y: tricky for sports

Target Direct Marketing's **Richard Cordiner** discusses how sports marketers can reach out to the difficult Y generation.

Demographic shifts are often responsible for building both definitions of time periods and of the people who inhabit them.

Throughout history, demographic patterns have produced new generations of consumers, each evolving a different set of values and characteristics that defines their time period and dictates their purchasing behaviour. Baby Boomers – those who were born shortly after the Second World War – have forced marketers to adapt the way they communicate with audiences; they are generally strong-minded, ambitious and confident in the products and services they choose to use, and proficient in their decision-making processes.

Boomers are now the most powerful consumer group in the UK, numbering nearly 20m and entering the 'grey' phase of their lifestage that marketers have so often failed to understand. They reject the traditional notion of 'grey life' portrayed by marketers and do not think of themselves as old.

Despite forcing marketers to become more adept at understanding this audience in order to communicate effectively with them, Boomers may turn out to be a relatively easy target audience when compared to their successors – Generation X and, more importantly for sports marketers, Generation Y.

## Uncanny X Men

Though definitions vary, Generation 'Xers' were broadly born during the 1960s and early '70s. Xers are generally less fortunate than their predecessors and are unlikely to match their parents' economic heights. They have been faced with diminishing opportunities in the workplace and a breakdown in traditional family structures characterised by a decrease in extended family support. There is increasing public debt, and unprecedented demographic change is resulting in an ageing population with inadequate funding that will result in very serious implications and financial burdens for Xers.

Supporting this demographic trend will fall squarely on the shoulders of Xers in the next 15-20 years through pension funds that will have been plundered long before they see any benefits. These developments have significantly shaped this generation's perceptions and by inference their consumer habits, and for marketers of all products and services this has posed a significant issue. Generation X is a relatively indifferent group which has

proved to be more time-rich but less brand-loyal than its predecessors. Xers have grown up in a world inhabited by marketing messages and are sensitised to information overload as a result. They are connoisseurs of advertising and respond only to messages that target their ideals; at the same time, their familiarity with the marketing process has meant that they are potentially more responsive and appreciative of 'good' advertising. The same cannot be said of their successors, the most important generation for sports marketers today – Generation Y.

## The Y Men cometh

Generation Y – often referred to as the 'Millennium Generation' – are generally held to have been born during the 1980s and early '90s. They are asserting a significant impact on their parents' spending patterns – a dynamic labelled by marketers as 'pester power' – and the distinctive buying habits they already display are likely to be carried through to adulthood. They too are influenced by changes in societal and familial structures, with non-traditional one-parent households and the multicultural society being the norm for them.

For sports marketers it is vital to understand that economic and social developments are shaping Generation Y's consumer behaviour regarding leisure and sport, and as a consumer segment they will prove drastically different from their predecessors. So what are the characteristics of Generation Y?

Generation Y has grown up in an environment that is even more media-saturated and brand-conscious than that of its predecessors. 'Yers' are more brand-literate, more image-conscious and more advertising-savvy; they grew up with an intrinsic understanding that advertising exists to sell a product. Traditional tools such as hype and promotion are proving less effective in a media environment characterised by increasing clutter, and Yers are turned off by communications that seem insincere or manipulative.

For sports marketers, the situation becomes even more complex: Generation Yers are displaying a decrease in overall sports participation. A Mori Family Monitor study carried out in April 2000 in conjunction with the Youth Sport Trust revealed that although the opportunities for sports participation

have increased in the UK, 73% of adults believe children are now less active than they were as youngsters. This is supported by the Sporting Goods Manufacturer's Association in the US which reports an overall decrease in traditional fitness-related activities such as soccer, softball, baseball and basketball. The main reason cited for this decline is the increase in competition from other leisure activities, such as watching TV, surfing the web and playing video games. So how do you market sports to the PlayStation Generation?

## Tapping the market

Generation Y has been reared in a society heavily influenced by popular media, with movies, television, magazines and video games shaping their perceptions and beliefs. The internet has empowered this generation with information at its fingertips, and Yers are part of a global society in a way their predecessors cannot fully understand.

Global inclusion breaks boundaries of race, gender and religion, with clothes, music, computer games and recreational activities having become the new social status indicators. Sports marketers need to understand this dynamic in order to communicate successfully with Generation Y: "Cool Rules", manifesting itself as a set of life-guiding principles that are essential for social inclusion and acceptance.

Trying to imitate the intangible quality of Cool in advertising is virtually impossible for marketers to accomplish, and so it is vital to understand the Hip-Hop culture that powers this market in order to sell sports to them. This is a delicate process; little known products may be too novel to be considered Cool, and popular products will be perceived as too mainstream. Sport can communicate the values of Coolness provided it is handled in an honest manner, not with marketing based on demographic variables that are now outdated. Psychographic variables such as music taste and social awareness are more important barometers as to which brands can be communicated to Generation Y, and sports marketers must attach their product or brand to these consumers' value system in order to outlive fads.

The success of this will be dependent on the sports marketer's ability to understand this value system and communicate cohesive values in the sporting property. ■

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