

A Viderity White Paper



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Debunking the Need to Customize Online Experiences for Different Generations

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Demography and the Internet

Although it's engrained in our daily lives like the wheel or modern aviation, Internet usage by the general public is less than 20 years old. Statisticians are constantly measuring how this civilization-altering phenomenon affects different generations. The Pew Research Center, a reputable Washington DC-based nonprofit "fact tank," recently put together an initiative called "The Pew Internet Project." This project published a survey in 2008 based on adult Internet users. The survey was gathered from a series of telephone interviews between 2006 and 2008, with a margin of error of 3% (plus/minus). Researchers divided the age demographics of adult Internet users into six groups.

Generations Explained

Generation Name	Birth Years, Ages in 2009	% Of Total Adult Population	% Of Internet-using Population
Generation Y (or Millennials)	Born 1977-1990, ages 18-32	26%	30%
Generation X	Born 1965-1976, ages 33-44	20%	23%
Younger Boomers	Born 1955-1964, ages 45-54	20%	22%
Older Boomers	Born 1946-1954, ages 55-63	13%	13%
Silent Generation	Born 1937-1945, ages 64-72	9%	7%
G.I. Generation	Born 1936 and earlier, Age 73+	9%	4%

Generation Y would be described as those who came of age in the new millennium. Generation X'ers are often depicted as savvy, entrepreneurial loners who grew up with the computer age, but not necessarily the Internet; however, they did design most mainstream websites. The Baby Boomers, "Younger" and "Older," represent those from the great spike in fertility that began in

1946 after the end of World War II and ended in 1964 around the time of the birth control pill. Incidentally, the Boomers are broken into two groups since enough research shows that the two decades of Baby Boomers are culturally heterogeneous. The Silent Generation are those who were children during the Great Depression and World War II. Their “silence” refers to their conformist and civic instincts, deferring toward Establishment authority, in contrast to the anti-Establishment Baby Boomers. Finally, there’s the G.I. Generation (also called “the Greatest Generation”) that “saved the world” from the Axis powers during World War II and endured the Great Depression.

Survey respondents from these generations were asked what made them unique. Although results varied within each group, one quality emerged above the others: The Silent Generation identified with World War II and the Great Depression by 14%, Boomers identified with their work ethic by 17%, Generation X identified themselves by their use of technology by 12% and their work ethic by 11%. However, Millennials identified themselves by their use of technology by 24%, with music and pop culture at 11%.

The Rise of Generation Y

It’s not just Generation Y’s use of gadgets that inspired such a response – it’s the way that they’ve grafted technology to their *social lives*; they blog more frequently than the older generations, sharing personal

feelings, photographs, and music. According to the Pew Internet Project, 87% of Generation Y goes online, outnumbered only by teenagers at 93%. Millennials have a plethora of ways to exchange information from Twitter to Facebook and beyond, and share their opinions with millions of people – not just how they feel emotionally, but also their views on the products and services they *could* purchase. This final realization has gotten many corporations, organizations, and government entities really excited – to a fault.

There’s this Zeitgeist, this “spirit of the age,” that executives want to climb aboard when it comes to website design. According to a column written by web design consultant Bruce Temkin, Millennials love websites that are immediate, interactive, vibrant, not text-heavy, and above all social. He argues that design approaches should reflect these sentiments.ⁱⁱ Should executives and government agency directors jump on this bandwagon?

Already there are discussions of how to link communication and commerce with Generation Z – customers “that have never known life without the Internet.” An article on the site Social Wizz noted that Generation Z’s consumer and content decisions are made almost exclusively through social networks, that they won’t tolerate traditional advertising breaks, and that they are in a state of “constant partial attention.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A strategy report on the blog site for Telco 2.0 discussed how the days of waiting to receive things from providers were gone, and how the “digital generation” actively engages with providers. They termed this process of interaction and engagement as a “participation imperative.” To realize this imperative, the report’s authors developed a

Customer Participation Framework (CPF), which is a template for validating new services or application ideas. It would support different phases of the product or service innovation process in several ways^{iv}:

- At concept initiation, to validate ideas against customer needs;
- During the development and trial phase, to ensure usability issues are properly addressed;
- In the execution phase, as a means of feedback iteration and measure of success

Generational Myths

However, who said that wanting engaged interaction between a provider and a customer was only representative of the Millennials? Although Millennials were exposed to the Internet at an earlier age, and consider it part of their “social” existence, most of the older generations aren’t that far behind when it comes to their use of online information. Approximately 82% of Generation X are online, as are 79% of Younger Boomers and 70% of Older Boomers, according to the Pew Report. Ironically, the older generations are even more frequent visitors of Government websites, retrieving health information online and making online purchases.

Activity	Online Teens	Gen Y	Gen X	Younger Boomers	Older Boomers	Silent Gen	G.I. Gen
Visiting Gov Sites	*	55%	64%	62%	63%	60%	31%
Getting Health Info	28%	68%	82%	74%	81%	70%	67%
Buying Online	38%	71%	80%	68%	72%	56%	47%

* no teen data for these activities^v

Older generations, who actually *vote* more frequently, are more interested in the content of local, state, and federal websites. It would be advantageous to web designers to craft sites that are more representative of the needs of older generations, who see the Internet more as a tool than a facilitator of one’s social life. Moreover, it’s quite possible that young people’s attitudes, social interactions, interests, and tolerance for sharing private information online will change during their lives. As people take on more professional responsibilities, they tend to be more guarded about their online personal behavior.

Perhaps a better approach would be to adapt to the attributes of clarity, immediacy, and interaction that are valued in Generation Y sites, with the degree of depth and breadth that older generations value. After all, Baby Boomers don’t want to wait for information from an inanimate source either.

Government Sites For Diverse Users

The site at Usability.gov provides guidance and tools on ways to make websites and other communication systems more user-friendly for a wide variety of users. In an article called “The Case for Usability in Government,” the authors stated, “Given its large presence in citizens’ daily lives, it is essential that government agencies not only

involve citizens in developing online Web sites, but also measure and report how a Web site is meeting users' needs. Usability helps you do this! By embracing usability now, government agencies will be helping themselves operate more effectively and efficiently in the future and prepare for the following:

- Visits to government Web sites will continue to grow in the future. More visits equal more work, questions, emails, complaints, and phone calls, especially if the site isn't easy to learn, use, or responsive to users' needs.
- Federal Web managers will be held to a higher standard as government initiatives like the [E-Government Act](#) and the [President's Management Agenda](#) request agencies to show citizen-centric approaches and implement performance-based measures. The E-Government Act of 2002 focuses on improving the methods by which Government information, including information on the Internet, is organized, preserved, and made accessible to the public.^{vi}
- Resources are diminishing. We're being asked to do more with less. Designing Web sites the right way the first time sets a foundation for more efficient improvements long-term."^{vii}

These sentiments are similar to those discussed in the "Customer Participation Framework" in the Telco 2.0 article mentioned earlier; at conception, development, and execution, having customer feedback is essential in e-government web design.

What are examples of exemplary government websites? FastCompany.com published its list of this year's best and worst of government web design. Some bright stars were:

- The post-Obama / tech-friendly whitehouse.gov site, which was described as simple and professional in design, with appealing color schemes, slideshow news items, high-resolution images, and blogging. Of course this is the same President known to use Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. So a comfortable tech-culture is prevalent within the current administration.
- The USASpending.gov website has colorful icons and helpful tool tips that one's grandma could navigate. It lays out quantifiable information (such as budgetary issues) expressed in colorful pie charts, bar graphs, and a dashboard of numbers that are easier to read than an issue of USA Today.
- Another site that gets it right is the U.S. Postal Services Priority Mail website that looks streamlined for the general public and small businesses.

As for government websites that get web design wrong, sites that are revealed in the bibliography link^{viii} engage in such practices as being too minimalistic, having too much white space on the screen, or having an appearance that's a bit amateur in appearance. Other faults include having borderless images, boring black HTML text, cheesy animated GIFs, standard blue hyperlinks, and grainy images. Another issue to be mindful of are organizational "traditions" and methodologies of government agencies and contractors, who may be intimidated by new web designs that run contrary to web designs perceived to be intuitive and simple to use. Multiple steps to maneuver through a site that only had two or three steps before, and an overwhelming information dump, are as frustrating as

waiting on the phone for cable TV customer service.

Summary

Whether you want to call them Web Babies, Millennials, or Generation Y, the economic impact of those born in the 80s is just becoming fully realized – especially in terms of them representing 82 million people and spending an estimated \$200 billion annually.^{ix} That said, web designers for government sites don't necessarily need to think in terms of a younger clientele, but more in terms of not having a passive clientele at all. That begins by addressing the needs of users, regardless of age. Aaron Nighswander, a former Telecommunications Chief with the Peace Corps, said, "There has to be a recognition that users will have a different level of comfort when using technology. An organization needs to recognize different comfort levels when designing any system that will be used by a diverse set of users. The success of a system will depend less upon the use of advanced technology than on the ability of the system to meet the needs of users."^x

End Notes

ⁱ Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project December 2008 Survey, http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Generations_2009.pdf

ii

<http://experiencematters.wordpress.c>

om/2007/12/05/designing-experiences-for-gen-y/

iii <http://socialwizz.com/?p=842>

iv

http://www.telco2.net/blog/2009/03/defining_the_digital_generatio_1.html

^v Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Generations_2009.pdf

vi <http://www.archives.gov/about/laws/egov-act-section-207.html>

vii

http://www.usability.gov/government/case_for/index.html

viii Ibid

ix "Generation Y Web Design, and Eye Tracking": http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cach e:wF5PYIOPH9YJ:users.wpi.edu/~djamasbi/Djamasbi%2520et%2520al%25202010-%2520IJHCS%2520%28web%29.pdf+desig n+preferences+generations&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESiGspshsDFxI0-dMSn2NoMEpkLXEDI_jmUipvsOTaztq8OmQa2gB6mGkq4pA9lhPfDEr8KMGY_V9gGjtxi0Dj4w1nG6GxYAmu6PcUteqnaOOblR9hGkcdU2woeifZzGGxUDeBwa&sig=AHIEtbRjfbxOp198dLlvesM2OOyi562Tg

^x Interview with Aaron Nighswander, former Chief of Telecommunications, Peace Corps Oct. 18, 2010.