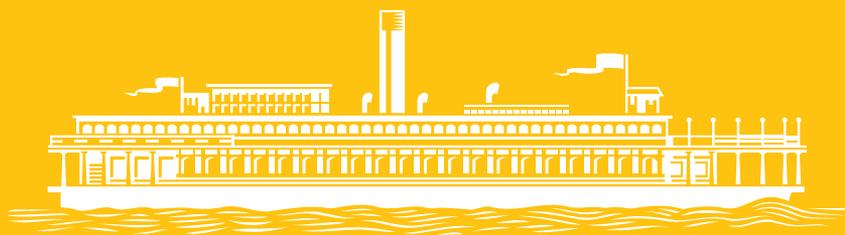


Meet the Gen Y parents
by Katie Ryan
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If you've been thinking of Gen Y—those born between 1977 and 1995—solely as multitasking, techno-savvy kids and teens, it's time to reload that image.

Hard to believe but true—Gen Yers are growing up and having families. While they're not yet the primary demographic in the parenting cohort, 27 percent of today's 18- to 25-year-olds already have children.¹ And the majority of those who haven't yet had kids plan to do so in the future.

Evidence of a changing market

Over the last year, we've noted the emergence of brands, media, and experiences designed to connect with the particular mindset of Gen Y parents. The rate at which these changes are surfacing suggests that a marketplace shift is not only under way but also gaining momentum. This makes it critical that brands pay close attention to how the new moms and dads tackle this life stage, if they want to capture Gen Y as potential customers.

As anyone who's had Gen Yers on their radar recently can tell you—they're different.

Technology is normal, not novel

One defining characteristic of Gen Y is its relationship with technology. This generation grew up totally tech connected and not at all wowed by new developments—better, faster, cheaper are the norm.

Most critical for marketers is understanding that Gen Yers not only feel differently about technology, they also use it differently than other generations. A recent study from the Pew Research Center entitled *A Portrait of Generation Next: How Young People View Their Lives, Futures, and Politics* confirms that 18- to 25-year-olds have been the driving force behind the rise of instant messaging, texting, and social networking sites.² In spite of concerns that too much tech can be isolating, Gen Yers use technology as their primary means of connecting to a much greater extent than any other generation (including Gen Xers, who represent the majority of today's parents).

So it comes as no surprise that a new type of social networking site is emerging—not just for Gen Yers themselves, but for their babies. The *New York Times* recently noted the interest

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For the generation that lives on Facebook, parenting is an increasingly public, not private, experience.

in sites that let users create online, interactive baby blogs that can be shared with friends and family. With ready-made templates allowing parents to easily design and update personalized content, these do-it-yourself journals are replacing traditional baby books. They are also becoming one of this generation's must-have shower gifts and are available free from providers such as TotSpot, Kidmondo, Babyjellybeans, and Baby Blogs.

Listening to new voices

While Gen Y's propensity to use new technologies for traditional parenting tasks is reflective of the general transition to digital living, there are more fundamental shifts to consider as well—ones that affect the underlying experience of being a parent today.

For the generation that lives on Facebook, parenting is an increasingly public, not private, experience. The sense of isolation that plagued previous generations of mothers—and helped drive the women's movement of the 1960s and '70s—is being replaced with a 24/7 community bound by the desire for honestly shared experience.

The online parenting magazine Babble articulates this cultural shift in its mission statement:

“We created Babble for one very simple reason: we can't find a magazine or community that speaks to us as new parents. Every publication we encounter presents procreation as a cute and cuddly experience, all pink and powder blue, at best an interior decorating opportunity, at worst a housekeeping challenge. None of it is true to the experience we are having, and that we see around us.”

It goes on to say:

“This, then, is the first part of Babble's mission: to tell the truth about parenting, to bypass the clichés and dig into the magical and maddening reality. Our commitment to readers is to explore the

world of parenting on a daily basis with ruthless honesty, and with the humor and lyricism natural to the subject.”

This interest in community—and reality—is brought to razor-sharp focus by the recent explosion of Mom blogs. The indispensable content aggregator Alltop.com contains links to hundreds of blogs and content sites in its Moms section (moms.alltop.com).³ This is Alltop's single largest topic, featuring perspectives from all manner of moms: single and married, working and stay-at-home, rural and urban, not to mention Korean moms, entrepreneur moms, frugal moms, writing moms, and stylish moms. For any parent-focused marketer, it's also worth checking out the links in Alltop's Dads and Parenting sections for an even broader array of original voices.

While the majority of these blogs are written to resemble public diaries chronicling the trials, tribulations, and challenges of parenthood, some brand-centered blogs are emerging as well. A few, such as the Graco blog are overtly corporate sponsored. Others, such as Mom's Favorite Stuff are supported by advertising but objective in their “real mom” recommendations. And, combining the old with the new, Johnson & Johnson's award-winning BabyCenter and ParentCenter sites have incorporated first-person chronicles into more traditionally structured magazine-like content with proven appeal.

Unique generational identity

Another characteristic parent-relevant brands can tap is Gen Y's sense of generational identity. Members of Gen Y view themselves—although not other generations—as part of a distinct tribe.⁴ Customization is a given. Gen Yers grew up expecting to have things their way—being able to express one's individuality is considered a fundamental right. These attitudes help explain why Pew's research found that more than 50 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds have opted for tattoos, piercings, or nontraditional hair colors. It also helps illuminate why Gen Y is significantly



Seventh Generation markets its chlorine-free diapers as a way to not just “change your baby. Change the planet.”

less likely than any other generation to have old-fashioned values on family and marriage. In fact, 60 percent of Gen Y overall, including 67 percent of Gen Y females, completely disagree with the idea of women returning to traditional roles.⁵

They are also obsessed with celebrities, and are the only generation to have grown up believing they would be both rich and famous. Note the rising popularity of the Celebrity Baby Blog (acquired by Time Warner’s People.com last May), Celebrity Baby Scoop, and Babyrazzi, as well as the mushrooming of product-focused baby articles written by celebs.

Color them green

As the first generation to have grown up celebrating Earth Day, Gen Y has a well-developed ecosensibility. No surprise then to note the number of green brands that have sprung up over the last year targeted to parents of small children.

- Seventh Generation is the first to market chlorine-free disposable diapers, with online ads encouraging moms to not just “change your baby. Change the planet.”
- Retail giant Toys R Us introduced its own line of natural wooden toys and natural cotton plush animals on Earth Day. The packaging, identified by a green “R” seal with the words “Recycle, Renew, Reuse, Re-think,” contains 70 percent recycled material.
- Consumer-culture observers from Iconoculture recently spotted an organic pacifier from the Danish company Natursutten. Made from pure *Hevea brasiliensis* rubber, it is 100 percent biodegradable.

- Taking a page out of the Netflix playbook, the BabyPlays Toy Rental program lets members rent over 250 toys, adding a new dimension to the rent-versus-buy debate among young parents.

Opportunities for targeting today’s—and tomorrow’s—parents

The impact of Gen Yers as parents is just beginning to be felt in the marketplace. However, this group will become increasingly important as it moves to the center of the parenting target.

Emerging and yet-to-be-invented brands have a unique opportunity in this changing marketplace. By mirroring Gen Yers’ perception of themselves as a distinct tribe, they can become the brands that this generation of parents owns. Established family-centered brands will need to evolve their messaging, and possibly their core ideas as well, to remain relevant.

The sheer variety of highly targeted content offers any brand nearly limitless ways to connect with Gen Y parents. Grassroots campaigns, traditional web advertising, and branded content specific to this audience are all routes worth exploring.

Successful marketers need to recognize that although Gen Yers are entering a predictable life stage, they want to be treated as individuals. Their identity will not be erased by becoming moms and dads. The key to branding success will be reaching Gen Y parents where and how they live, and speaking to them in a voice that honestly and accurately reflects their unique perspectives, attitudes, and experiences. ■

1, 2, 4, 5 Pew Research Center for People and the Press, “How Young People View Their Lives, Futures, and Politics: A Portrait of ‘Generation Next’” (2007).

3 moms.alltop.com (accessed 3 June 2009).

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