



Engage:GenY

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Boomer Brands Take Notice

by [Mike Doherty](#), Friday, June 4, 2010, 3:02 PM

Steve Cannon from Mercedes-Benz gave a great presentation at the recent Association of National Advertisers' Brand Innovation conference. Steve talked about how Mercedes realized it was a Boomer brand and all it would take is a cold shoulder from Gen Y to really hurt its business. It got proactive and through a market research online community (MROC) created an engaged "Gen-Benz" community to build customer intimacy with Gen Y.

This is exactly the type of smart engagement that I referred to in my last post ("[Gen Prototype](#)") as it recognizes Gen Yers as the digital natives they are and shows that the brand (in this case, Mercedes) cares about them by involving them in a wide variety of aspects of its business.

This got me thinking about other Boomer brands that are managing the transition to Gen Y well and those that aren't. Here are a few examples and what can be learned from each.

Dr. Scholl's has re-invented itself from just an orthotics company for your grandmother to a something cool that takes the "ow" out of your high heels. The transformation started with its fun gel campaign and partnerships with Stacey London, the style expert from TLC's show "What Not to Wear." Dr. Scholl has even become a shoe company whose shoes just happen to be good for your feet. Through collaborations with cachet brands like Burberry for espadrilles and distribution in places like Fred Segal, it has connected with culture, nostalgia and created collectability, which for Gen Y is key to a brand's worth.

Crate & Barrel recognized that while its simple and clean style is not overly expensive, it feels a bit too "grown up" for many Gen Yers, and it created CB2 which offers furniture and other accoutrements that feel hipper than your parents' stuff and are priced for first homes. It's a smart extension that provides a great runway into Crate & Barrel for their next life stage.

"**Saturday Night Live**" was created by Boomers for Boomers but the show has managed to maintain relevancy for 35+ crowd by being an active participant in pop culture and by embracing the lives of its viewers, including Gen Y. The Facebook campaign to get Betty White to host is an obvious example of Gen Y's cultural force. They saw how hilarious she was in her Super Bowl spots and turned her hosting gig into a mission. This is particularly interesting as it proves that like Betty White's brand (no offense to her), you don't have to be a new brand to appeal to Gen Y.

Others that are well on their way are **Barnes & Noble**, which is selling portable reading devices, and fashion brands like **Lacoste** and **Ralph Lauren**, which are embracing new sports and cultural references.

There are many brands (**CNN**, **National Geographic**, etc.) that have their work cut out for them if they want to reach the wallets of Gen Yers in the content business. For Gen Y, formats like CNN that were once revolutionary are irrelevant. Headlines along with a touch of analysis are available everywhere. Check out [this article](#) for a good read on CNN's woes.

For Gen Y, content can be informative and educational but also entertaining in the process (à la "The Daily Show," Huffington Post). There isn't time for both entertainment and information digestion separately. Content providers could learn from sites like [www.funnyordie.com](#) and [www.break.com](#). For National Geographic, it seems that with a new face and new ways to distribute its content, it could be reborn as the content source for conscientious Gen Yers passionate about environmental and cultural issues worldwide.

Another category that comes to mind is over-the-counter drugs and healthcare. Gen Yers have headaches, sports injuries and backaches like the rest of us and they, too, need pain relief. Companies like **Tylenol**, **Bayer**, **Advil** and even **Band-Aid** could learn how to relate to Gen Y from brands like **Vitaminwater**, which helped the generation care about staying hydrated.

No brand can ever rest easy with one target audience, but brands that have relied heavily on Boomers for their success really need to think like Mercedes and consider how they will engage the wave of Gen Y consumers that could be the key to their futures.

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Ted Faraone from **Faraone Communications**
commented on: June 04, 2010 at 7:17 PM
Very interesting bit about Mercedes. I am a boomer (54 years old) and learned to drive on my dad's first Mercedes. Never bought one, however, because by the time I had the money, the car had gone soft. BMW was more sporting. I ended up very happy with a six-speed Vette convertible, which opened my wallet in part based on appearance. The performance and handling aren't bad either.

Chris Koch from **Q1Media**
commented on: June 04, 2010 at 3:23 PM
Barnes & Noble also owns SparkNotes.com which is prevalent in many high school and college students day to day, much like Cliff Notes in my day (prior to the internet).

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MIKE DOHERTY

Mike Doherty is president of Cole & Weber United. He is a marketer with more than 25 years of experience creating effective growth strategies for a diverse group of clients. Working on both the agency and client sides of the business, Mike's passion lies in helping clients find new ways to go beyond the boundaries of traditional advertising to effectively engage customers in branded experiences.

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