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Generation Prototype

by [Mike Doherty](#), 4 hours ago

If you are in the "consumer durables" market, you already know that it's a label that doesn't make much sense to Gen Y. For Gen Yers, the consumer durables equation seems to look like this:

Product Lifespan = Adopted + Adapted + Left Behind for the Next Version

Hard goods with soft lifespans: To a Gen Yer, durability is often acknowledged as being *relevant*, but its importance is *relative* to different products. It's not too much of an exaggeration to say that there are really three recycling bins in Gen Y homes: Paper 'n' Plastic, Compost, and eBay/Craigslist.

If Gen Yers are fortunate enough to get their hands on a v1.0 iPad, they will love being one of the first to have one, but they also know that there are more versions to come in a few months, making their hot item quickly feel outdated.

Likewise, when it comes to fashion, H&M and Forever 21 have made it easy for Gen Yers to have the most up-to-date look with little investment -- the clothes become as dispensable as the trend. In the end, short shelf-lives are no big deal. When something is important and adds value to a Gen Yer's life, it's seen as a worthwhile expenditure regardless of how long its lifespan is.

So from a business point of view, what does this mean? For starters, the concept of innovations as long-term investments may be an even greater disconnect with this audience.

The conventional methods of realizing ROI by devoting time, testing, conducting countless focus groups and sinking costs into a plan starts to add way too much effort and overhead. In fact, all that rigorous business planning may only guarantee that your new product is irrelevant by the time it's green-lit.

Take advantage of a focus group of millions: One way to capture the attention of Gen Y is to meaningfully engage it in a brand's product development plan. Because Gen Yers personalize everything, they are very comfortable pulling apart (both literally and figuratively) what isn't working for them, refashioning a different version and presenting it to their comrades in experimentation to see if it flies. This makes Gen Yers great partners for innovation.

One way to engage them is through tools like Passenger ([thinkpassenger.com](#)) that provide Market Research Online Communities (MROCs). These communities enable consumers to stick their toes into the primordial soup of new products by trying out the latest and greatest and then providing feedback on what works and what doesn't.

Thinking of Gen Y as "Gen Prototype" allows any brand the opportunity to experiment with product development in ways never before imagined or possible. This might be the moment to toss out old ROI models and get creative by trying out ways to make products faster, cheaper and even more relevant.

In terms of mobile, we've also found surprising success by throwing down the gauntlet of time. Rather than focusing on time, money and whether the idea is worthwhile, consider developing mobile phone applications using a simple "App in a Day" rule. A time constraint can often push teams to develop quickly and cleverly. Risky methodology? Perhaps. Surprising rewards? Absolutely. And at worst you've invested two or three days in a great learning experience.

Consider innovation as the new mother of invention: Could anyone have predicted that Paul Gardner's famous quote, "A painting is never finished -- It simply stops in interesting places," could be the philosophy for product innovation in the 21st century? In the context of reaching Gen Y, it's worth taking very seriously. By pausing their "art" in interesting places, marketers can gauge Gen Y's interest, which can generate excitement about new product launches and spark the imagination of what's to come.

Bringing consumers into your virtual development lab can have an added benefit. After having a positive experience during the development process, Gen Yers return to their social media home base with an improved perception of your brand. In social media, this type of research also works as marketing, and can create early advocacy.

What can a brand learn from the fast-paced life and creative ingenuity that makes Gen Y Gen Prototype? The answer may lie in a brand's ability to be light on its feet, take chances whenever possible, and prove itself a true continual innovator in its category.

This commentary is insightful. I recommend it to others.
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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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