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Gen Z are not little Millennials

Gen Z, those 20 and younger, are still forming their shopping habits, but it's clear they're focused on social values and frugality.

Shelley Balanko | Sep 05, 2018

With an upper age limit of 20 (as defined in the Hartman Group's recent research), Gen Z are inexperienced when it comes to shopping for themselves. They don't have well-developed opinions and habits around shopping and brands, since they are still in a formative period in their lives. While many industry analysts and pundits have surmised that Gen Zs will be an enhanced version of Millennials, Hartman Group's

new Gen Z 2018 report[AS1] found that currently, they look quite different from Millennials, who are looking for quality cues, transparency and sustainability credentials, simple ingredients, nutrient density, and new and exciting flavor experiences.

At this early phase, if Gen Z resembles anyone, they look much like their Gen X parents, but we believe this is more a reflection of their lack of experience than of their own personal food values.

Gen Zs tend to have more progressive social values than older generations—and they've grown up within the wellness and foodie culture that Millennials have defined. They will look more like Millennials in their flavor preferences and purchasing habits as they get older and gain more responsibility for their own shopping and health.

All that said, they do seem to be a practical and frugal generation. So, how this combination of social values and frugality works out in store will be interesting to track. Interviews and data suggest that Gen Z will be much more attribute-oriented than brand-oriented, for the following reasons:

- Except for a few iconic brands like Oreos or Doritos, they currently are quite brand agnostic. Store brands and name brands are equally appealing.
- They grew up with store brands like Simple Truth, Kirkland, Trader Joe's and 365 that devotees consider as good as, if not superior, to name brands. Being a store brand doesn't automatically make something lower quality or less appealing.
- Gen Z are highly educated when it comes to diet and health. They learned in school how to read labels. They know to watch out for "chemicals," look for simple ingredients, and how to parse out nutrition facts. They believe organic food is better because of the lack of pesticides. They know that to evaluate quality and nutrition, they need to look past branding and packaging at these other factors.

They won't be a big, 180-degree shift from Millennials; they will be a strengthening or even full fruition of trends that we've seen among Millennials. Cooking is a good example. Over the long term (like the last couple of decades), we've seen cooking moving away from being something mom did by herself. In the past few years, and especially as Millennials have come into their own as adults, this has meant a more democratic and shared approach to shopping and eating.

Gen Z may be the first generation where shopping and cooking is truly no longer a gendered task. Boys and girls are equally likely to make their own food, and they see cooking as an accessible skill that anyone with an internet connection can learn to do, and indeed should learn, because it is healthier and less expensive than eating restaurant food all the time (again, they are frugal and practical). How they will deal with these tasks as they begin their own families is going to be interesting.

One thing that will likely be different as Gen Z gets older is where they shop. Many don't understand why their parents don't shop more online, and because they're not experienced shoppers themselves, they don't share their parents' fondness for picking out their own items—fresh or otherwise. Their phones are already their connection to the rest of the world. For them, grocery shopping online will be natural. That doesn't mean they won't go in-person occasionally, but the drivers will certainly be different.

Gen Z live on their phones, which means the way that they search for and consume information and inspiration is different from older generations (though not terribly different from Millennials). The sources that cater to their smartphone habits—snackable videos, app-based sources, infotainment, highly visual, social media friendly—are the ones they're going to use most often. In the Gen Z 2018 report, the Hartman Group profiled Tasty (the BuzzFeed brand) that is providing a model for what Gen Z wants for food instruction and inspiration. We think that Tasty might just be Gen Z's "Joy of Cooking" because it's teaching a generation how to cook.

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industry landscape and matching clients' business needs to The Hartman Group's customized solutions-oriented offerings. Balanko graduated from the University of Windsor with a doctorate in applied social psychology. She has a master's degree in applied social psychology from the University of Saskatchewan and a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of British Columbia.

Learn more about Gen Z's food desires from Shelley Balanko during the "Generational Marketing to the Health-Conscious Masses" Workshop on Saturday, Nov. 10 at 8:30 a.m. at SupplySide West in Las Vegas.

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