

This is a pretty old sample. But that's the point. There were a ton of commentaries about Generation X in 1996 and (as often happens with hot topics) most of them seem pretty silly 20 years later. I'm including this because I'm proud of the way it's stood the test of time.

Debunking Generation X

BY EDWARD WEISS

If you believe the rumors, Fruitopia, one of the more artful marketing efforts in recent years, has had trouble wooing Xers, while the more prosaic Mountain Dew Dude's effort has gone gangbusters, and the elegant, almost stodgy, Dewars "Truth" campaign is an established hit with the X crowd.

What does this tell us about Generation X? Actually, not a heck of a lot.

No, this isn't another "GenX explained" piece—though I plead guilty to penning such in the past. But if you really want a few more descriptions of Generation X, fear not. Odds are that you'll get more than a few more chances before we all go to that big mosh pit in the sky. After all, food and beverage marketers have been frantically on the trail of X ever since Mr BK TeeVee assaulted his first customer, to the applause of media critics and dismay of franchisees.

Xer mania is a relatively new phenomena. The term itself didn't hit until 1992, but when it hit, it hit big. Remember the first wave of hype? "Bold new generation" "Change the face of American marketing" "Disdain of consumerism" "Contempt for selling" Pundits breathlessly explained how this new generation was going to do 81.3% of its purchasing by scanning Web sites on wearable PCs while rollerblading to the nearest piercing parlor.

Then came the counterhype. Xers were just like everyone else, just poorer and more anxious. Set up a promotional booth at the next Young Moderates For A Slightly Better Tomorrow rally and voila! instant Generation X marketing program.

Then, of course, arrived the fudgers, all of whom purported to have taken the true pulse of Generation X, which lay somewhere between all the aforementioned rollerblading and rallies.

One central fact has emerged. Xers aren't very consistent. For instance, in Neil Howe and Bill Strauss' *13th Gen*, our heroes will never "effectively organize or vote in their own self-interest." Instead, they will "take pride" in "their ability to devote government resources to help those younger than themselves." Not so in George Barna's *The Invisible Generation. Baby Busters*. There, the little devils "are primarily concerned with those issues that have the highest potential to effect them personally, as opposed to demonstrating an altruis-

tic concern for those affairs that will have the most encompassing impact." Read enough of all this Generation X analysis and you'll undoubtedly reach the same conclusion as the embattled ad exec who declared, "They don't need to stand out, while at the same time they don't need to fit in." Or, to put it another way, GenXers are half empty, or maybe they're half full, or...oh, just skip it.

What's truly amazing about the deluge of information is that it has occurred without anyone figuring out how old Generation X is! Not for lack of trying, mind you—age definitions abound. Sometimes, they were born in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Other times, late Sixties and early Seventies. Generation X has been described as people aged 25 to 34 in 1994, and people aged 16 to 28 in 1995. My personal favorite: people between the ages of 20 and 29 in any given year. If you go back far enough, you find that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and all the founding fathers were GenXers. Imagine their e-mail. "Revolution? Hey dude, that's radical!"

GEN PEPSI

The quest to define a generation and the problems inherent in that process are nothing new. You could take what was written about Baby Boomers and punch a hole a mile wide through most of it. Yuppie commercials never worked, probably because the vast majority of late Boomers were never affluent or upwardly mobile. On the other hand, maybe demographics had nothing to do with it.

After all, the Pepsi Generation campaign of the early Sixties didn't present a demographically accurate reflection of the experiences, hopes, and aspirations of the young Americans of that period. But it sure was a successful campaign. It transformed a perennial bargain brand into a fresh new product. Why? It successfully captured one aspect of the youth culture of the era. the Southern California dream, spread by Jan and Dean, and the Beach Boys. Some years later Coke's "I'd like to teach the world to sing" also struck a chord. It wasn't an accurate summation of the hopes and aspirations of the Boomers during the Vietnam years, but it managed to reflect some of the mood of the flower power movement in a way that had real mass appeal.

Perhaps it's because Generation X hasn't encountered any overarching national events on the scale of a

Vietnam or Great Depression. Maybe because they grew up with access to a highly diverse and segmented mass media. Maybe it's something else, but whatever the reason, Generation X is not a unified group with a unified image to tap into—a sharp contrast to days gone by. Oh, not every young woman in the Twenties was a flapper, or, in the Forties, a bobby soxer. And not every young man had a crew cut in the Fifties or long hair in the Sixties. But there were clearly demarcated, fairly consistent generational styles in those eras.

Now, it's a complete free-for-all. In the Vietnam era, you could make some reasonable assumptions about the cultural tastes of a guy sporting long hair and beads. Today, appearance, ideology, and taste are no longer hardwired together. A sweet-voiced left-wing folk singer like Sinead O'Connor sports the same shaven coiffure and simple clothing as skinhead bands who scream neo-Nazi lyrics over throbbing noise. No wonder so many Xer "spokespersons" have bit the dust.

Not only don't the trends associated with Generation X unite into a—if you'll excuse the oxymoron—mainstream subculture, many of them aren't even current. Sixties psychedelia, Brady Bunch nostalgia, flared pants, and Seventies disco gear, all of which have been associated with Generation X, are nothing new. Supposedly cutting-edge musical trends like rap, punk, hard-core, and techno all emerged between 10 and 20 years ago. What do all these things have in common? Only that you're unlikely to see a Baby Boomer or a senior citizen embracing them. It's almost as if a bunch of Boomers sat around and put together a list of everything they wouldn't want to wear or listen to, and said, "That's it. That's Generation X." But of course, it's not.

Generation X is less a demographic group than an industry. It's spawned books, ad agencies, consulting firms, magazines, market studies, articles like this, and God knows what else. Obviously, trying to reach tens of millions of people who are younger than Baby Boomers is a pretty sound marketing strategy and generational appeals are a factor in reaching them. But at this point, you have to wonder whether wrapping up 50 million to 70 million people in a handy-dandy GenX package is the best way to reach, anyone. **FBM**

Edward Weiss is a freelance writer and market researcher based in New York.

Generation X: THE QUIZ

Get out your No. 2 pencil and see how much you know about Xers.

- Which of the following names is used as a synonym for "Generation X?"
 - twenty-somethings
 - the 13th generation
 - Baby busters
 - slackers
 - the generation after
 - generation 20
 - the invisible generation
 - grunge kids
 - all of the above
- The term "Generation X" was first applied to:
 - teens involved in Brighton, England's "mods" and "rockers" riots of the Sixties
 - Billy Idol's punk rock band in the Seventies
 - the aimless hipsters in Douglas Coupland's book of the Nineties
- Which of the following verbatim quotes, taken from different sources, appears on the dust jacket of Coupland's book *Generation X*?
 - "21 to 29 year olds"
 - "those in their late teens and early twenties"
 - "Generation X: 25 to 34"
 - "the generation born in the late 1950s and 1960s"
- The term "Generation X" caught on because:
 - it aptly symbolizes the angst that young people feel confronting the future in these troubled times
 - it aptly symbolizes the angst that marketers feel confronting young people in these troubled times
 - it sounds good
 - it's easy to spell
 - all of the above

Answers:

- i) If you missed this one, you can stop taking the quiz right now.
- a) Yes, strange as it may seem, the term was first applied to rioting Baby Boomers on a drizzly beach in a foreign country. Billy later picked it up, then finally, Coupland.
- d) But what does Coupland know, anyway?
- All answers are acceptable.