

How to Market to Gen Z: Why Gen Z isn't Persuaded by Traditional Advertising

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Summary

Generation Z is a generation that many companies want to advertise to but have yet to find effective strategies. Compared to other generations, they can be hard to persuade and hard to reach through traditional outlets. Utilizing authentic messaging allows companies to meet this generation where they are at and help them authentically live a better life for themselves. The companies benefiting from this messaging have figured out that Generation Z wants to feel like they are dealing with somebody or something that understands.

Gen Z represents one of the most influential emerging consumer groups in the modern economy with nearly 70 million young Americans who grew up online and now expect brands to speak with meaning and transparency. Traditional marketing approaches fail because they rely on one-way communication and generic messaging. Gen Z wants conversation. They want to buy into a story, not a pitch.

Brands like Ralph Lauren and Supreme have proven that success with Gen Z comes from resonance, not reach. To stand out in an oversaturated landscape, new brands must speak to: values, narrative, and perceived meaning. Quality matters, but the story multiplies value. The brands who learn to connect rather than convince will be the ones Gen Z remembers and buys from.

Gen Z Quick Stats:

- Born between 1997-2012 (currently aged 12-27)
- Roughly 69-70 million in the United States
- Most racially + ethnically diverse generation in US history

Part 1-Introduction: Who is Gen Z and why don't they resonate well with traditional advertising?

Generation Z is defined as the people who were born between the years of 1997 and 2012, during a time of immense change in the modern consumerist world. This generation has a number of trends and tendencies that are not associated with others, as they have had a unique upbringing. Generation Z was the first generation to be brought up with the Internet age and watching it grow, causing dynamic trends that can be seen as they enter the workforce and gain buying power. Brands that are able to effectively appeal to this group and gain that new buying power will be better able to survive moving into the future.

Generation Z is the next big powerhouse generation in world economics, with many coming into adulthood and making better money than their parents did at their age. This is not the case for all

though and certainly not the generally felt perception, as a majority of the US Gen Z population has a general feeling of unease with financial security. Some of this can be attributed to the internet generation they grew up in, with constant comparison being available and an onslaught of information whenever you log on. Whatever those feelings are, the fact remains that Generation Z will eventually be the next big financial component of the US economy.

As a group raised alongside every major advancement in social media and digital communication, Gen Z has been exposed to more advertisements in their first 18 years than previous generations encountered in several decades. Because of this constant exposure, they have also developed stronger filtration mechanisms that place higher value on organic content that feels natural and unscripted. They are unmoved by traditional advertising that speaks in a one-directional voice and assumes passive consumption. Gen Z instead expects conversation, interaction, personality, and proof.

This is where many brands struggle. Old marketing frameworks rely on interrupting consumers whether they want to be reached or not via commercials between shows, banner ads between articles, billboards on highways. Gen Z does not wait for messaging to come to them. They discover brands through TikTok creators they trust, YouTube reviews, Instagram fits, Discord communities, resale culture, or through friends wearing something interesting. Their taste formation is communal, iterative, and identity driven. They want products that reflect who they believe themselves to be or who they want to become.

Because of this, companies are finding that technical excellence alone is no longer enough. Quality matters, but story matters more. A brand must represent an idea, a lifestyle, a value system, or a cultural reference point. When Gen Z buys a product, they are also buying into narrative, belonging, and meaning. Brands that adapt to this shift have the opportunity to tap into one of the most powerful emerging consumer markets in the world, while those that refuse to evolve risk becoming invisible to the generation shaping the next decade of culture.

Part 2: What marketing works with Gen Z? Ralph Lauren & Supreme Case Studies

To understand what does work with Gen Z, we can look at brands that have successfully become part of their cultural landscape. An example of this is Ralph Lauren, a legacy brand that has found a second youth through modern reinterpretation. Another is Supreme, a streetwear powerhouse that has leveraged scarcity and cultural credibility instead of traditional advertising.

Ralph Lauren is a fascinating case because it represents something almost opposite of what one might associate with Gen Z. It's clean, classic, elegant, "old money." Yet that's precisely why it works. Many

young consumers today are gravitating toward quiet luxury, pieces that feel timeless and well-made rather than trend-chasing. The recent quarter-zip trend is proof. A garment once associated with prep schools, finance offices, or golf clubs has become a staple for young men trying to appear sharp, put together, but also on trend. They're not buying just a sweater. They're buying into an aesthetic and a way of signaling identity without needing to announce it loudly. Ralph Lauren didn't need a Super Bowl ad to make this happen. The trend lived on TikTok, in outfit videos, university campuses, resale platforms, and everyday social spaces where Gen Z style spreads organically. The brand listened, stayed authentic to its heritage, and let culture do the talking.

Supreme approaches the same generation from the opposite angle, through hype and cultural velocity. Supreme built an empire without traditional advertising. No TV spots. No print campaigns. Their marketing is scarcity, community, and reputation. A Thursday drop is not a product release — it's a cultural event. Gen Z responds to that because participation itself is the appeal. Whether someone buys Supreme or resells it, they feel like they're part of something bigger. Millennials valued Supreme for rebellion and skate identity; Gen Z values it for that but also status, digital liquidity, cultural capital. One hoodie can be clothing, an investment, or a flex depending on how they use it.

Both brands prove that to reach this generation, companies don't need louder messaging but need better meaning. One brand whispers legacy and authenticity, the other shouts hype and rarity. Both resonate because they are true to who they are, Gen Z can feel when something is genuine versus engineered. They don't want to be convinced; they want to connect.

Part 3: How can new brands stand out in a landscape over-saturated and under appealing to this generation?

The difficulty new brands face today isn't invisibility but sameness. An average member of Gen Z might see thousands of brands, logos, and products every week across their lives. Most of these products look, sound, and market themselves identically. The brands that win this generation are not always the most technically advanced or the most established but feel real, speak with intention, and build a world the consumer wants to enter. To stand out, brands must stop trying to advertise at Gen Z and instead invite them in.

Meeting Gen Z where they are means shifting tone, medium, and motive. A jacket is not fabric, stitching, and hardware. A jacket is a character in someone's life story. A bag is not leather and hardware but freedom, adulthood, and expression. Gen Z buys the meaning behind the object, not the object alone.

That is where storytelling becomes the sharpest tool a brand can wield. The more a product says about the person wearing it, the more valuable it becomes.

This ties directly into perceived value. Gen Z has lived through recession, inflation, and the explosion of fast fashion. If two hoodies cost \$80 and one is just a hoodie while the other represents something meaningful, Gen Z will choose the latter every time. Value is psychological and emotional before it is financial and logical. Brands must make consumers feel they are investing in themselves, not purchasing an item. Story elevates price. Purpose justifies loyalty. Meaning sustains demand even when trends move on.

Ultimately, the brands that stand out to Gen Z are not the loudest but are the most aligned with their desires and motivations. They speak the language of their audience, not the language of a boardroom. They create products with narrative backbones and build a community, not just customers. Brands should meet them where they are, speak to them, and show them how you can add value to their lives. If you can do that, you'll be a brand worth remembering.

Conclusion

Generation Z is simply operating in a different cultural frequency than the generations before them. Traditional advertising has struggled because it assumed attention was something brands could demand, not something they needed to earn. As we've seen through modern success stories like Ralph Lauren's quiet luxury resurgence and Supreme's hype machine, Gen Z responds when they feel understood rather than targeted. They reward authenticity, they recognize intention, and they gravitate toward brands that stand for something real. As more of this generation enters the workforce and gains purchasing power, the companies who learn to communicate with honesty and depth will lead the future. The ones who continue to shout into the void will simply be ignored.

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