How to Market With Gen Z, Not To Them

Brands must once again reinvent the wheel for young audiences, who consume so much content daily that they have a renewed and fierce desire for physical connection.

Eighty-two percent of Gen Z and Millennials want brands to bring people together in spontaneous ways, and 76% say the best social media trends are those that show up in real life, according to data from The Harris Poll.

Marketers must also evolve as basic audience profiles and content delivery no longer suffices. Active listening and co-creation are steps in the right direction, but brands must translate these insights into real-world action.

Listening is a structure, not a tactic

At Lenovo, we have designed ways of listening specifically to improve how we connect and reach consumers, particularly Gen Z.

For instance, we've built a Gen Z Advisory Board, whose members give us raw, direct insights into what they think, create, and expect from brands today.

We use these insights to fuel almost everything—from developing concepts, improving product experiences, improving our campaign storytelling, and choosing which creators to partner with. A prominent theme has emerged: Gen Z, and increasingly Gen Alpha, identifies as "cultural participants," rather than consumers.

One Advisory Board member told us: "Most campaigns treat

communities as inspiration rather than strategic authors… ‘Authenticity’ is still shaped externally and with a capital-C corporate tonality. That creates apathy at best and distrust at worst.”

Because younger audiences don’t respond to polished, top-down narratives, we’ve focused on rooting our storytelling in the real world. . This is applicable all the way from product storytelling to brand platforms, and we’ve embedded this level of co-creation into our marketing framework.

Through active listening and responding with action, brands can be prepared for the continuous shifts in consumer expectations and as Gen Z continues to shape the future, with Gen Alpha closely following.

Turning co-creation into a marketing model

In 2021, we launched our tech-for-good initiative, Work For Humankind, which exemplifies how co-creation comes to life in our marketing, and shows how technology can create real-world impact.

Through this initiative, we’ve connected one of the remotest islands in the world with internet. We’ve brought a Gen Z’s digital persona to life with AI.

Recently, we took this concept a step further with Your Club Your Canvas, which brings young creatives into global grassroots soccer clubs to co-design limited-edition kits alongside fans, players, and local communities. All proceeds go back to those communities.

These young creatives partnered with musician and Angel City FC investor Becky G and used Lenovo AI-enabled devices and tools to create these kits.

They debuted on June 30 and demonstrate the convergence of community and tech.

The technology plays only a supporting role, however, with the creative and ideas coming directly from the communities themselves.

The model developed for Your Club Your Canvas broadens how marketing and shared creation bring people together.

This concept extends beyond individual campaigns. We've also applied this approach to our core brands.

Marketing for our Lenovo Yoga line has moved away from traditional, mass-media, luxury-led approach. Today, its creator-first and social-led. Our storytelling is "show, don't tell" and mirrors how consumers actually create and work.

Co-creation has evolved from being a tactic to a way of operating—where listening now shapes strategy.

What it means for the future of marketing

While many brands are listening, not enough are harnessing the insights and responding accordingly.

Insights only matter when they drive decisions, and brands will only succeed by using those audience observations to co-create and build experiences.

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