Targeting generational buzzwords like “Millennials” means targeting no-one



If I were to tell you that marketers were using astrological signs as a way to understand/target specific groups of people, you’d tell me that’s a ridiculous strategy.

“Astrology is fake,” you’d say, and given the precision of modern marketing tools, using the stars to analyze customers or understand population segments would not only be lazy, but the chances of it working would be random at best. Yet, this is happening daily.

How? For example, thinking that millennials, a 75.4 million cohort of people in the United States alone, share a universal set of attributes.

Speaking in absolutes about a demographic that makes up ~20% of the total population of the United States with nearly no shared characteristics completely ignores the nuance, depth and uniqueness of humanity, and our diverse wants, needs and desires. We are complex creatures!

Common sense would indicate that drawing conclusions about such a loosely defined group of folks is at best “pushing it,” and at worst completely ludicrous. There’s simply no way to make an accurate, universally applicable statement about that

many people, defined solely by a 20+ year age range based on the year they were born.

There’s no rigorous methodology behind generational branding

Even if I wanted to take generational branding seriously, it’s in my opinion not good social science. “Baby Boomers” (18 year cohort) are defined as people born between 1946 – 1964, and an age range between 51 and 70.

“Millennials” (a 23 year cohort) are people born between 1981-2004, giving an age range of 12-35. Gen Z (no defined cohort yet) have birth years that range from the mid-1990s to 2000s, and, so far there is little consensus about ending birth years.

The ranges are not only inconsistent, but the fact that not everyone can even agree on these unstandardized, randomly assigned dates says it all. It’s all highly questionable, even for a softer science like sociology.

A ~20 year ago cohort is too large to mean anything when our experiences of media, culture, etc. have fragmented

Social trends now move so quickly that single moments of significance are less defining, even if at the time they were seemingly important. The 3-TV-channel world where we all watched the same things has been dead for decades and yet we still apply concepts that were created then.

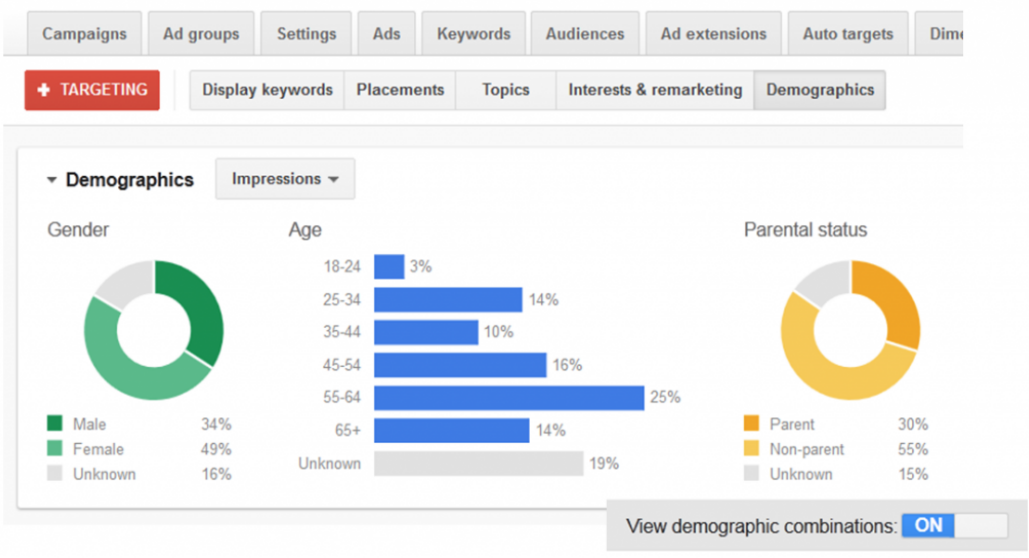
Everyone’s experience of the world from a media perspective alone is so unique we can’t underestimate the number of niche communities that now exist that have less to do with age and more to do with personality. The world and the people in it are becoming more, not less, complex and we need updated

thinking if we hope to understand it and market to it.

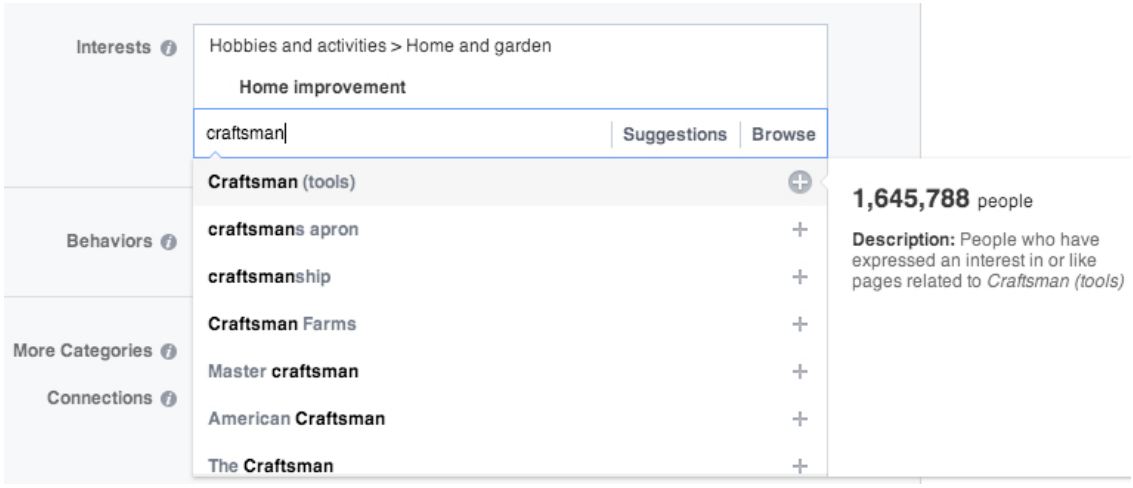
Psychographics show far more in common than year born / demographic breakdown by year born. If you can target, not just arbitrary ranges as defined by buzzwords, but by people who live in a specific area, are married and are interested in weightlifting and organic food you would have to be willfully ignorant or lazy to think stepping back and targeting everyone is a good idea.

With the depth we have available for ad targeting in tools like Google AdWords and Facebook ads, it's inexcusable to not take the time to target the right message to the right users. The sophistication of our marketing capabilities means we're doing our shareholders and customers a disservice not to go deeper.

Sample AdWords ad targeting capabilities mean reaching specific and precise segments relevant to us:



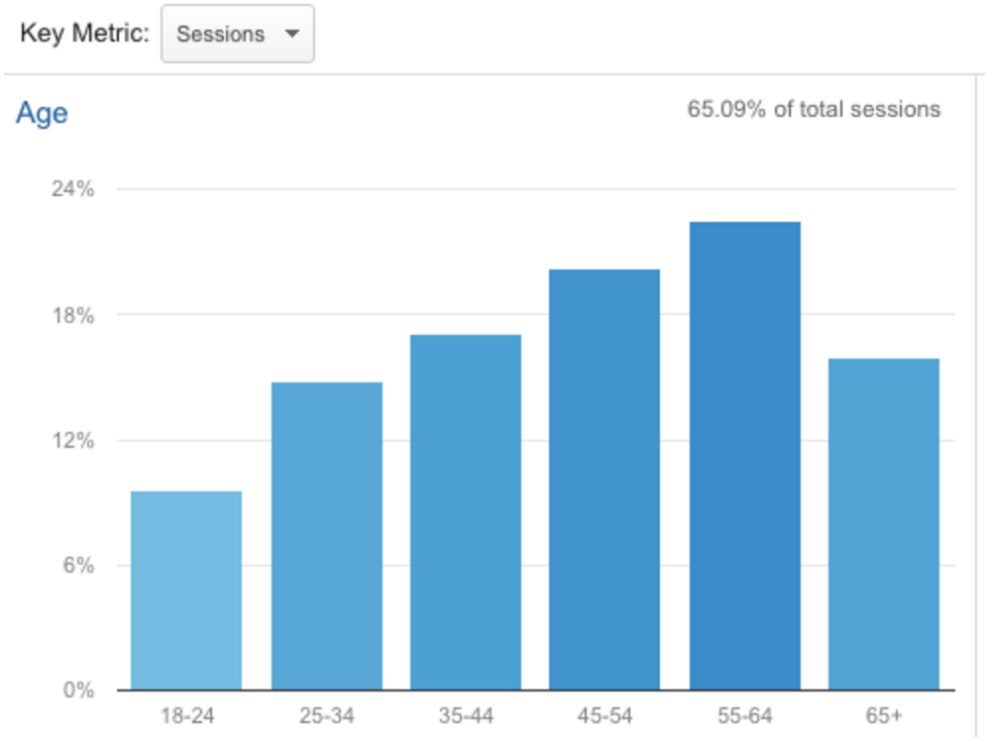
Sample Facebook ad targeting capabilities reach specific social communities that care about our brand:



As for marketing to specific age ranges? Of course there are product categories with immutable segments for a certain demographic. But buzzwords like “Baby Boomer” aren’t required to market to these groups effectively.

Additionally, you want to be more specific than a 20 year cohort to accomplish this in a meaningful way. For example, a 34 year old millennial living in a city has little in common with a 20-something millennial just finishing college in a small town – yet generational buzzwords lump them together.

In Google Analytics, we break out age ranges in smaller, more manageable chunks, so you can analyze college-age students in a specific area which would be far more instructive.



To some, the word millennials has become just a blanket term for young people. This almost comical story of an iconic American brand grasping for relevancy shows what may be a typical situation in boardrooms, where a group of executives clearly feels behind the times.

So it seems like an easy solution to just use broad strokes like buzzwords. A brief quote from this story illustrates:

> *The other challenge is that many people who work at American Express aren't all that millennially minded themselves. If you visit Amex's headquarters in Lower Manhattan, you'll find squared-jawed men in bespoke suits and fashion model-glamorous women, but not a lot of young people in the uppermost ranks … In one Amex brainstorming session, according to an executive I spoke with, participants spent 10 minutes trying to figure out what FOMO meant before turning to Google. They discovered it stands for "fear of missing out." It is unclear if the group recognized the irony.*

I don't think this habit of over-generalization comes from a desire to marginalize millennials, but I do believe it's a

broader way people use to try and make sense of a technology-driven world.

In most analyses of millennials, the way technology shapes and controls their environment is key to understanding whatever point is being made about them. This categorization provides a way to add a human layer to the discussion around those who have been born into a world where technology and the internet automate our existence.

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Why waste time with generational buzzwords when we have so many better groups to analyze/target/study instead?

For example, with recommended actions:

- Users who responded to holiday ads last year that become recurring customers over the next year (run more of those specific ads next season, replicate for your other product categories and double the budget if the numbers were previously great!).
- The specific location with the highest average purchase order or customer loyalty for a national restaurant chain (or better yet, the top 5%). What went right here? What are the common traits among customers here and how can we attract more of them to our other locations?
- For a pharmaceutical company with a new arthritis drug, targeting people ages of between 30 and 60, the average onset of RA According to the Arthritis Foundation (this is a specific, actionable age segment, not the nebulous “baby boomer” and is immutable range, no buzzword

required).

- All your site visitors who added something to their shopping cart but don’t complete checkout. For sure these include people of all ages; likely optimizations don’t even require demographic data.
- Users who follow your brand on social channels (aka your influencers) – what can you learn about this very specific group that is unique to your brand. Incredibly useful to understand these folk and their nuances so you can best nurture those relationships.
- The top 20% of your customers by annual spending or product category. How can you grow these really valuable segments?

The above list is just to get you thinking, but to me it’s so exciting what’s now possible that to keep doing what was always done is doing our work and sector a huge disservice.

Or, you could just ignore all of this and just make stereotypical ads for millennials without actually getting to know them, so that you too can repeat Pepsi’s gaffe and become a global embarrassment.

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ytics is a great place to start, it most certainly shouldn’t be where you stop.

In this post, we'll cover some of the best free and paid tools available for SEO

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