

"Screenagers"

What You Can Do to Penetrate Their Hearts

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Several months ago, we hosted another focus group of students (ages 16-24) and asked them: What are your preferred methods of communication? We thought it was a good question. After all, we're all about trying to connect with this Millennial generation--so we thought we'd ask just how they wanted to receive our messages. Their response shouldn't have surprised us.

Their top eight methods of communication are:

1. Text messaging
2. Internet (i.e. MySpace or Facebook)
3. iPods and Podcasts
4. Instant messaging
5. Cell phone
6. DVD / CD
7. Books
8. Email

I want you to notice a few things about this list. First, note that email is last on the list. One student described email as "a way to communicate with older people." Second, with one exception, this list moves from more personal to less personal in nature. They want something customized not generic if they're going to pay attention. Third, and most importantly, these students prefer a "screen" for six out of their top eight favorite methods of communication.

The Screen Age Every generation shares common characteristics. However, each generation is defined by some shared elements in their developmental years. The primary elements that define a generation are:

1. Shared Music
2. Shared Experiences
3. Shared Crises
4. Shared Television Programs
5. Shared Celebrities (people of influence)
6. Shared Age and Era

Today, the delivery of almost every one of these elements share one thing in common--they are driven by a screen. Call me the master of the obvious, but students want to interact with a screen. In fact, we've begun to call students "screenagers" because they are more at home in front of a screen than watching a talking head on a stage. They want a personal message, but want to control how intimate and vulnerable they become. They like the option of signing off when they wish.

The fact that text messaging landed at number one on the list tells us a lot about students today. Bear with me as I venture some observations about why text messages are the preferred method of communication:

1. Text messages represent very current communication. More so than voicemails, a text means I need to interact now about something relevant to you.
2. Text messages are generally sent from someone you know. Unlike phones, you generally don't get a "wrong number" or generic call on a text message.
3. Text messages are brief and to the point. The person texting doesn't waste words; in fact, they usually abbreviate the message.
4. Text messaging is in your control. The receiver can stop when they want to. This kind of control is attractive to students today. They want communication on their terms.

Students today are inundated with messages, from every side. I believe they're most likely to respond to a text message because it allows them fast, current, relevant communication with friends--but at a safe distance. They like intimacy without a lot of vulnerability. It sounds like a paradox and perhaps it is. I believe this is but one of several paradoxes that exist among Generation Y. Consider this. This is the first generation who does not need authorities to access information. Why? They have screens. However, they do need authorities, like you and I, to help them process that information. We can interpret it for them. This is our challenge.

Tim