Naming for Generations

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Across generations, everyone wants a name that signals connection and feels like it was built just for them.

Over the last two decades, marketers and branders have continuously tried to determine how to reach the new, younger generation. Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are the focus of so much brand research. Should brands be adapted to this generation and its specific desires?

Many brands encounter this question when they're creating a name for a company, product, or service. Are Millennials (born between 1980-1994), so distinctly unique in what they want or expect from a brand name when compared to Generation X (1965-1979) and Baby Boomers (1944-1964)? And what about the Centennials,

also known as Generation Z (1995-2015)? How are their brand-name preferences different or the same from the previous three generations? One common belief is that younger generations expect things to sound young, hip, and cool. Text speak is often held up as an example of "youth speak."

We set out to explore whether these potential intergenerational differences in brand name preferences truly exist. If so, how are they different? And if not, what are the commonalities across generations.
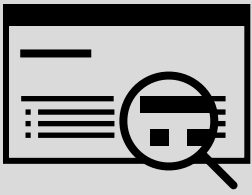
What did we do and how?

We conducted an online study with 2,000 general consumers in the United States.

We created two potential offerings:
1. A digital-comminucations app
2. A retail fashion brand

For each of those two offerings our team of expert namers created 16 potential names for respondents to evaluate. The names represented a variety of types or name categories, including:

- Descriptive, straightforward, or transparent names –these names tell it like it is. They signal the product being offered, clearly and without fanciful language.

- Suggestive, evocative, or metaphorical names these names allude to the product indirectly or express an idea related to the offering, sometimes in an unexpected way.

- Coined, made-up, or text-speak names –these names take a familiar word or phrase, but make it unique by dropping letters, combining it with other word parts or numbers, or using abbreviations.

- Edgy names – these names push the limits of what's typically expected or considered normal in an industry. Sometimes names with otherwise negative connotations fit this category.

The survey was designed to test how names in the four categories (descriptive, suggestive, coined, and edgy) were received by the different generations. In particular, we used multiple metrics to measure name perception, gauging interest, motivation, memorability, and fit for the product and consumer.

Attributes
Unique
Attention getting
Motivational
Appropriate for the offering
Memorable
Fits me

Respondents also evaluated the names on specific characteristics. This allowed us to look beyond the constructed name categories to see the characteristics respondents and generations associated with individual names, how each characteristic impacted attribute perceptions, and how each generation is similar to or different from the others.

Characteristics
Descriptive
Bold
Clever
Modern
Boring
Overused

What we found relies crucially on this element of the study design. We uncovered that while some preference is influenced by name categories, generally, name perception is related to less predictable characteristic associations. This accounts for high variability among the generations, because what appears bold for one, may not be bold for another.

What did we find?

Our findings revealed just how difficult it is for a brand name to engage and excite your audience, especially across generations.

At a high level, simple, straightforward, descriptive names were rated highest, looking like a safe bet. But this view is misleading. Older generations strongly have a descriptive-is-best mentality when evaluating names, while younger generations make it difficult to generalize about name categories.

When we look at the younger generations, we see the preference for descriptive names crumble. Gen Z, in particular, has a higher bar for what names interest and motivate them, which isn't as straightforward as wanting an edgy or text-speak name. For the youngest generation, it isn't about one particular category, but about specific names that speak to them or connote specific characteristics. Consequently, we see big hits and big misses with this generation.

Overall, the study found:

- All generations are curious about names they find clever.

- Baby Boomers & Gen X want something straightforward, but also something that they find to be clever.

- For Gen Y & Gen Z connections are less tied to name categories—it is most important to find names that resonate with them.

- Aross generations, these findings highlight the importance of knowing your audience and carefully crafting a name that speaks to them.

Findings

1 Younger generations rate names lower overall.

Take-away: *They have a higher bar for what names get them motivated.*

We found that younger consumers have higher expectations for brand names. Overall, they rated names lower than did their older counterparts, suggesting they have a higher bar for what constitutes a good name. This is a consistent trend from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, with each generation, scores decreased. On average, a majority of Gen Xers and Boomers (55%) said the name motivated them to learn more, whereas this enthusiasm drops to 50% of Gen Y and 44% of Gen Z. As branders, we need to do more to hook this younger audience especially with other brand and marketing tools.

2 Descriptive names overperform with older generations and underperform with younger generations.

Take-away: *If you use a descriptive name, you will likely appeal to older consumers most, but risk losing younger ones.*

What kinds of names get the most attention? What kind of names avoid pitfalls? Taking a deeper look at the name categories (descriptive, suggestive, coined, and edgy), we see differences emerge again. Descriptive names as a whole are received more positively than other name types. The other categories show much more variability: some names are loved, and some are hated. From the highest to lowest rated descriptive names, there is only a 7% difference in overall favorability, whereas there is a 29% gap for edgy names. For this reason, descriptive names can seem like the safe bet—they are generally liked and less likely to be hated.

This overall picture doesn't hold for all generations. The higher ratings of descriptive names are largely driven by older consumers. In particular, 68% of Boomers say they are motivated to learn more by descriptive names. This descriptive-is-best mentality decreases through the generations with only 45% of Gen Z feeling motivated by descriptive names.

Finally, we were left to wonder: Beyond the differences we found in the data, was there something that unified the four generations? Was there a theme or trend that can help companies create names that speak to multiple generations?

3 Centennials really like edgy names, but they also really hate them.

Take-away: *To attract the younger audience, you need to take a risk with edgy names, but you also need to check with your audience to make sure the risk will pay off.*

The younger audiences are most drawn to edgy names, but they are also quite picky and easily turned off. When we dig into the individual names, we see that 70% of Gen Z are motivated to learn more about the best performing edgy name, while only 25% are motivated by the lowest performing edgy name. Put another way, edgy names need to connect with this generation to receive the benefit from pushing the envelope.

Gen Z consumers don't want a name that stands out for the sake of standing out. They need something that stands out in a way they find interesting, relatable or clever. When naming for younger generations, it is particularly important to understand the audience and be fresh and creative as they define those characteristics to ensure the name hits all the right notes.

4 Everyone wants a name that feels clever, feels like it speaks their language, or feels like it was crafted just for them.

Take-away: *Know your audience and use your name to signal that connection.*

Despite differences in how the age groups respond to the four name categories, there is consistency in the elements that impact overall name perception. This consistency is found by looking not at name categories, but at name associations or the characteristics each name embodies, e.g. warm, expert, adventurous.

For all generations, interest and motivation are more strongly driven by three specific characteristics—clever, modern and bold—than by how descriptive or edgy consumers find the name. The strongest characteristic that drove motivation across the age groups was cleverness.

What does it mean for a name to be clever? Being clever is like an inside joke. It's subjective. What one person finds clever, another may not. A name is clever when you get it, and it has a subtle nod towards that understanding. What is consistent across generations is the desire for a name that signals that understanding.

There are still differences between the generations. The older the consumer the more strongly their decision is driven by these attributes. Younger consumers have a more complex set of criteria in evaluating names, we can't just look for a name of a particular category or one that has a specific characteristic. This means that whether you're creating a descriptive name for your older audience or an edgy name for Gen Z, the most important factor is that you know your audience and use words, names, and language that signal a connection for them.

How to name for the future

In naming and branding, we're always looking for the simple angle, the clear truth, the obvious answer. But when it comes to naming for different generations, there may not be one simple answer. Each generation seems to want names crafted for them and their needs.

While descriptive names may be a safe bet with the older generations, those names may not capture the attention of younger consumers who expect more from brand names. Perhaps using additional brand tools (messaging, visual identity, etc.), might be helpful to get younger audiences to take notice.

Our findings suggest that you need to spend time and energy developing smart names and conducting the right research to verify that your name resonates with your audiences. The more effort you put into creating and validating your name, the more likely it is that your name will resonate with its intended generational audience.

For today and tomorrow, here are three priorities to name for the future:

1. **Know your audience and use your name to signal that connection and understanding.**

2. **If you use a descriptive name, you will likely interest older consumers, and will need to use other tools to capture the attention of younger audiences.**

3. **To attract the younger audiences, you may want to take a risk on a bold or edgy name, but also check with your audience to make sure the risk will pay off.**