

5 Ways to Market Your Business to Multi-Generational Customers

How can small business owners effectively connect with buyers of varying ages? Here's what you need to know.



Business and finance journalist [@TeriCettina](#)



IMAGE: Getty Images

Even if you think your company is targeting customers in one particular age group, chances are that you're actually attracting prospects from *multiple* generations. Case in point: A music store that traditionally catered to CD-loving Baby Boomers now also appeals to teenage vinyl enthusiasts. The challenge: How can small business owners effectively connect with buyers of varying ages, who may have different values and preferences about marketing messages?

- **Be authentic.** Regardless of their ages, today's consumers are savvy. "They don't want cheesy, over-the-top sales pitches -- they want to clearly understand what's valuable about your product or service and choose it themselves," says generational expert Lynne Lancaster, coauthor of *When Generations Collide*. That's even truer of younger customer than older ones, she says.
- **Choose classic logos and visuals.** Unless you are very specifically wooing a single demographic, don't box yourself in with your company logo, catchphrase, and/or typography. A too-trendy

marketing approach can turn away older customers, while an overly stodgy logo or look to your marketing materials and website may alienate younger customers, says Lancaster. Aim for a middle-ground approach that doesn't exclude any of your key customer groups.

- **Go where your customers are.** You don't necessarily have to spend a lot of money on specialized marketing messages for different-aged customers. Instead, use essentially the same marketing message or article but *place it* in different traditional and social media channels, suggests Sarah Sladek, CEO of XYZ University, a management-consulting firm. Pick the two or three generations of customers most important to you and target them. For instance, says Sladek, you might place an ad in a local community newspaper, and e-mail a marketing message to reach your Traditional customers (born 1925-1945); e-mail and post it on Facebook to attract Baby Boomers (born 1946-64) and Generation Xers (born 1965-80); rely on Twitter to hit GenXers & Generation Y buyers (born early '80s and '90s); and tweak your message into image-based Instagram posts for Generation Z customers (born after 1993).
- **However, when you do target-market older customers:** *Ask* them, perhaps using opt-in check boxes on mail, e-mail, and newsletters, how they'd prefer you contact them and how often, so you don't deluge them with annoying mailers and e-mails, says Lancaster. Also, direct mail and catalogues still work well for reaching Traditionals, who value the power of print. Loyalty cards and special gifts ("Enjoy a free bagel next time you stop in!") tend to work well for Baby Boomers. "Because they grew up as part of such a large cohort, they appreciate being singled out and appreciated as regular customers," explains Lancaster.
- **And when you market to younger customers:** "GenXers are often your most skeptical, hard-to-reach customers," says Sladek. A good way to connect with them: share personal stories on your website or in social media of customers you've helped or community organizations your company supports. Generation Y customers tend to be social and collaborative: Encourage happy GenY customers to post reviews of your business on sites like Yelp, where their peers will read about you. GenZ customers are highly visual: Get their attention with hip Instagram photos or humorous 1- to 2-minute YouTube videos about your products or clients.

"In the past, it was enough for a small business to just hang out its shingle and do a good job," says Sladek. "Today, with so many platforms and communication methods, business owners really have to be actively engaged in building relationships with their customers. Marketing really means connecting with your customers in many different ways and on their turf."

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