Gen Z's Brutal Feedback on your marketing

What this generation has to say about even the best brand's marketing out there & what you can do to win with Gen Z
About **knit**

Knit helps brands understand this next generation of consumers through **on-demand feedback from Gen Z & Millennials**. Get instant answers to your biggest youth consumer strategy questions and feedback on all your product or marketing ideas – by tapping into Knit’s youth consumer panel (the largest in the nation). Access both the “what” and “why” behind all your decisions through our extensive quant & qual solutions, and ensure you talk to your exact audience through our robust segmentation capabilities (geo, interests, and more).

**Trusted Youth Research provider of:**

- JBL
- H-E-B
- JARritos
- Cargill
- Ecolab
- REVOLT®
- San Antonio Spurs
- WNBA
- Minneapolis Twins

More on Knit at: [goknit.com](http://goknit.com)
The new consumers in town

It’s possible that by now, you’ve heard the term “digital natives” to describe Gen Z so often that there’s a chance that the phrase’s meaning has become, well, a little washed out. Toss in a quick reference about how this generation is also the most diverse ever, and that they have an undying commitment to be socially responsible, and you hit Gen Z bingo.

But if you’re here today, you know Gen Z is more than that. To really wrap your head around just how important the youngest generation is becoming to the everyday marketer, consider the following:

- 40% of the world’s consumer population
- $130b what brands will spend to market to Gen Z consumers
- $44b in personal spending power
- Influence up to $600b in spending power
Some Bad News about marketing to Gen Z
But we have bad news:
Gen Z Thinks Your Marketing Is Bad (Sorry!)

Whether Gen Z has been on your radar for years or you're just becoming familiar with them, you've probably been on theirs for longer than you think. Gen Z has a unique relationship with brands and their marketing – one that skews skeptical and defies the strategies that have dominated the past decade and generations prior.

In fact, according to the very consumer base you're here for and hoping to connect with, most brands are missing it by a mile. And guess, what? Gen Z has some notes for ya. So we gathered their direct feedback and to put it simply, it's not looking good.

Gen Z’s Opinion: I think brands can do a better job marketing to me.
Well that's not a good sign...
But tell us the “why”

A whopping 72% of Gen Z think brands can be doing a better job marketing to their generation. But a standalone quant stat isn’t all that helpful now, is it? I mean there’s a reason Knit is an on-demand quant + qual research provider, right? 😏

So to quote Lebron, “we took our talents” down a different track and asked the generation of the hour why brands’ Gen Z-focused marketing is so, well, bad.

“Most ads, I feel, are very one-sided”

“Most [brands] are doing the same thing over and over which makes it boring and untrustworthy”

“I think a lot of gen z-focused ads are stereotypical and not based on real people.”

“They don’t speak to me.”

Gen Z’s Opinion:
What about Gen Z marketing are brands getting wrong?
Top 4 Reasons
brands are getting it wrong
Reason 1: Youth slang, fam

Every generation brings — or brings back — a unique vocabulary for describing and interacting with the world around them. In other words? Slang. Their elders (and unfortunately brands as well) inevitably adopt this slang in an attempt to convey that they’re invested in the conversation and are making an effort to actually understand the next generation.

Welp, according to Gen Z, it’s probably time to strike the use of slang completely from your marketing strategies. What does the data say? It’s not really helping most brands speak to this next generation, as over half of Gen Z believes brands don’t know how to talk to them. You don’t need youth slang to be understood, and Gen Z doesn’t need it to understand you.

Gen Z’s Opinion: Most brands don’t understand how to talk like me or my generation.
Reason 2: Manufactured authenticity
(Which is an oxymoron, right?)

Among the better directives for brands when it comes to marketing to Gen Z is to cater to how the cohort craves and rewards “authentic” interactions and content. Unfortunately, among the worst directives are when brands attempt to “manufacture” authenticity through the use of dank memes, current slang, and (poorly attended to) influencer marketing.

Gen Z won’t hold back when they smell the lack of authenticity in your marketing either (hence the title of this report). They’ll venture as far as to call you out on Twitter. Or better yet, burn you on TikTok for the rest of their generation to discover your faults through the pitless algorithm.

And their read on your efforts extends through those you partner with. 44% of Gen Z go as far as to say they’ll no longer consider a brand who inauthentically partners with a celebrity or influencer to promote their products.

Gen Z’s Opinion: Have you ever experienced a brand partnership with a celebrity or influencer that caused you to no longer consider purchasing from that brand?
Reason 3: Wacktivism

Something that sounds good but suffers from a serious execution problem is the widespread attempt to tap into Gen Z's enthusiastic dedication to social causes – like climate change and an acceptance of LGBTQ+ and fringe communities.

A lot of what sounds like “wokeness” to older generations is mere “common sense” to Gen Z. Unfortunately, attempts to tap into this particular set of values in order to sell a product tend to result in marketing missteps that feel to their audience like what they are: gross. That’s not to say that organizations shouldn’t strive for better diversity and inclusion initiatives, we just recommend opting in for a bit of caution if you think a 15-second TikTok on your D&I initiatives alone will win over an entire generation.

Because, the fact is, only 25% of Gen Z think brands are genuine in their efforts to actually make the world a better place. That’s a pretty tough hurdle to overcome.

Gen Z’s Opinion: Brands are genuine in their efforts to make the world a better place.
Reason 4: Your memes, probably

For a generation that was born in the 9/11 era, hit puberty during a major recession, and graduated into a global pandemic, **Gen Z has a healthy sense of humor.** So, a sure way to connect with young consumers is to make them laugh, right?

Easier said than done. If you were born into a world before ubiquitous internet access and smartphones, nailing the delivery may not come as easily as it used to. For Gen Z, it’s not all 30 Rock gifs and philosoraptor memes. In fact, it’s neither of those things, because memes have a shelf life, and those are well past theirs.

That’s likely why a measly **12.4% of Gen Z believe that brands understand their sense of humor.** So put away the rubber chickens and ventriloquist routines, they’re not working for this generation.

**Gen Z’s Opinion: Most brands don’t understand my sense of humor.**

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<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
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over 1/2
follow comedians or comedy accounts on social

72% of the content Gen Z shares online are **memes**

only 12.4% think brands understand their sense of humor
What it takes to be Gen Z Famous

Cringe
Cancelled
Killing It
What it takes to be Gen Z famous (and the brands that already are)

For a generation that everyone knows is “brand-averse,” Gen Z sure seems to have a developed roster of favorite brands. Then again, everyone knew that Crocs were comeback-proof, so time makes fools of us all. It’s actually pretty easy for brands’ marketing efforts to get onto Gen Z’s radar – both on their good sides and bad – and the brands that do so fall into three main categories:
Cringe can be a noun, a verb, and a state of being, depending on its cause. It’s the sense of vicarious embarrassment someone experiences after they’ve witnessed something extremely awkward, obnoxious, shameful, or deeply unfunny. Marketing that’s “cringe” is pretty common, but there’s a hierarchy in place that elicits a range of responses from an unpleasant full-body cringe to light eyerolling.

If that sounds nebulous, it’s only because there are so many ways for marketing to be cringe, especially when it’s Gen Z critiquing your work.

In fact, it’s a phrase they throw around fairly loosely, whether it be through the stream of TikToks on #cringeworthy or when 65% of the generation refer to your marketing campaigns as such (per our data).

[Queue the figure to the right.]

[Queue a big “yikes” from us.]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct quotes from Gen Z</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;They <strong>misinterpret</strong> how the group of people I identify as really act like&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;<strong>Old people</strong> trying to be young&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Too specifically trying to market to teens but <strong>not understanding</strong> up-to-date trends&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;<strong>Stereotypes</strong>&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;<strong>How corny</strong> the ad was&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;<strong>Trying to be funny</strong> when it truly wasn’t&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;It was <strong>overdone</strong>&quot;</td>
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Cringe isn’t great, obviously, but there are worse things your brand can be. Like cancelled. There are a lot of definitions floating around out there, running the gamut from blatantly disingenuous to academically dense.

We’ll keep it simple: if a Gen Z consumer finds some aspect of your brand to be fundamentally incompatible with their personal values, they will simply stop giving you money, probably forever. Depending on the degree of mismatch, they will be publicly explicit as to why they made that choice and encourage others to do the same.

And if anyone is ever going to go as far as to never do business with a brand again due to a disagreement on value alignment, it’s Gen Z. **Nearly a third of this generation have cancelled a brand** due to a recent marketing campaign, ad, or brand affiliation. That’s a third of the world’s largest consumer population. Scared yet?

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**Gen Z’s Top Cancelled Brands:**

- Chick-fil-A
- Gillette
- Gucci
- Starbucks

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**Gen Z’s Opinion:**

Have you ever “cancelled” a brand for their marketing campaign or advertisement?

- Yes: 59.8%
- No: 28.2%
- Unsure: 11.8%
Why Gen Z has cancelled a brand

Direct quotes from Gen Z

“They donate to conversion therapy”

“For funneling money into anti-LGBT organizations”

“Their use of blackface”

“Because they were actively against [Black Lives Matter]”

“Treatment of marginalized groups”

“Testing on animals”

“Toxic masculinity [in commercials]”
Cancellation gets all of the coverage, but the reality is that a higher percentage of Gen Z thinks that, for the most part, **brands get it right** more often than they get it wrong — **52% vs 14%**. And the brands that kill it tend to keep killing it, hitting all of the right notes with their young audience.

When it comes to the marketing that actually resonates with Gen Z, there are a few commonalities worth paying attention to. Brands that do their homework on social media platform mechanics rise to the top, as does content that demonstrates an understanding of its intended audience. More than anything else, though, Gen Z’s favorite marketing is **actually funny**.

**Gen Z’s Opinion: I think most brands are nailing it with their marketing.**

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<tr>
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<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
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Love for Nike among Gen Z is nothing new

Nike consistently dominates Gen Z’s “Top Brands” lists for product and presentation. They were the most name-dropped brand in Knit’s Apparel Report and snagged the #1 spot for “best content” and “best paid ads” in Knit’s Social Media Report.
Direct quotes from Gen Z

“Powerful messages and engaging ads”
“Very genuine and offers marketing for a mixed crowd.”

“Has a witty sense of humor”

“They don’t try too hard. It’s all about their product.”

“Inspiring ads from real people”

“Inclusive in the right way.”
“Their drag and LGBTQ ads make me genuinely smile and feel heard.”

“I always find their ads amusing.”

“They use TikTok effectively to talk to my generation.”
Some Good News about marketing to Gen Z
The Good News:
Gen Z wants you to nail it
(and they want to help)

The idea that Gen Z is brand-averse and allergic to marketing should feel a lot less true by this point. We want to also address the idea that these young consumers are so uninterested in being marketed to, that brands have to go out of their way to trick them into it. In fact, it’s hard to think of anything more tone deaf when evidence of the exact opposite is readily available and backed by data.

What Gen Z has managed to do better than any other generation so far is determine for themselves how social media and online communities will serve them. They do have places they go to avoid marketing content, but they’re also the first generation of consumers to essentially carve out places to engage with it specifically. If brands let them, Gen Z can provide a valuable assist to modern marketing strategies.
Don’t Try So Hard. Please.

The slang, cringe, and cliches that make up so much of Gen Z-focused marketing is a result of trying a whole lot something from a group of people you know a whole lot of nothing. When you find yourself whiteboarding flashy tactics to convince anyone that you understand and can relate to them, you are already trying too hard. Consider the brands that Gen Z explicitly cites as “killing it”. Three of them didn’t need to use humor, wacktivism, or unironic slang to get there. Their product and the straightforward way that product was presented was enough.

That’s why one of the number one gripes that Gen Z has with brands’ marketing is that it simply tries to hard. Over 2/3 of this generation thinks that’s actually the case with brands. So reel it in a bit, guys. Act natural, talk natural and win with Gen Z.

Gen Z’s Opinion: Brands try too hard to market to my generation.

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<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>27.1%</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
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<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
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Talk To ME

If you’re going to zero-in on what you hope will appeal to consumers because it aligns with their generational identity, that can’t be the whole message. There’s a reason marketers don’t stop refining their message once they’ve found their target audience. Yet when it comes to Gen Z, brands can fall into the trap of seeing the entire cohort as an amorphous collection of identical needs, values, and incomes. The tools exist to speak to the individual consumer. Why recycle irrelevant messaging instead of using them?

A heavy majority of Gen Z feel that most brands tend to group them and their peers together when marketing to them. They note that marketing has become repetitive and tiresome. Not exactly the best way to win the heart of a consumer, is it?

Gen Z’s Opinion: Most brands think they can market to my generation in general, versus market to me as an individual.

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<th>Strongly agree</th>
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<tr>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
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Talk TO Me

To get the information they need to forge personalized, authentic connections with Gen Z, brands and individuals have a lot of options. There’s no shortage of marketing gurus both inside and outside of the organization that conflate being loud with being correct, for instance. And trust us, they have plenty to say.

Or you could grill your nieces, nephews, and coworkers’ kids who – you’re pretty sure – are Gen Z’ers, and then apply that narrow (and inevitably biased) feedback universally.

And if all else fails, you can always just A/B test your best guess, and record the results of what is essentially a shot in the dark. Sometimes, you’ll even be pleasantly surprised, and as long as that happens often enough to balance out ad spend that’s wasted on content that’s cringe-inducing, easily ignored, or gets you canceled, you’re good.

A much more straightforward way that will yield far better results, though, is to stop seeking middlemen and go directly to the people that actually have skin in the game. Because in the end, it’s actually what over 2/3 of Gen Z wants – to have a seat at the table, too.

Gen Z’s Opinion:
Would you be more likely to purchase from a brand that asks for your input on their marketing or product decisions?

- Yes: 67.2%
- No: 16.4%
- Unsure: 16.4%

Hear from real Gen Zers on why brands should get their feedback on their marketing...

Click to watch on Youtube
It’s no surprise that brands feel underprepared when it comes to marketing to Gen Z, or are so oversaturated with conflicting and inactionable information to do it effectively. By comparison, the solution – make Gen Z your go-to subject matter experts and allow their feedback to shape your strategy – feels alarmingly simple. That doesn’t make it any less true.

Knit can help connect you to the very consumer group you need to reach, empowering your brand to collect diverse feedback, facilitate data-backed decisions, and de-risk your marketing concepts and campaigns. We’ll help you access the “what” and “why” behind all your decisions through our extensive quant, qual, and video research solutions, and ensure you talk to your exact audience through our robust segmentation capabilities.

Get the data to refine your Gen Z marketing. Contact Our Team
Gen Z's Opinion: Most brands don’t “get me” or understand my generation.

19.2% 45.1% 28.2% 6.2%
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Gen Z’s Opinion: Brands’ marketing killing it with Gen Z (expanded list)

12.4% name Nike as the brand whose marketing delights them most (unaided)

- Amazon
- Doritos
- Duluth Trading
- Kellogg's
- McDonald's
- Taco Bell
- Target
- Wendy's
Study Methodology

**Type of Research**
Custom, quick-turn quantitative and qualitative research

**Level of Confidence**
The total population size is 30,000,000. The total sample size was 375 with gender and ethnicity representative of US Census data, giving us a 95% Confidence Level with a 5% margin of error.

**Timing**
The entire survey was fielded over a cumulative 2 day period - Tuesday, May 10 through Wednesday, May 11, 2022.

**The Methodology**
An online survey used a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions to collect feedback from a panel using a method that is PC, mobile, and tablet-friendly. The online survey focused on qualified US-based Gen Z respondents (aged 18-25) to understand their current social media usage and preferences.

Want access to all the data not included in this report? [Contact our team](#)