

The 'Offline' Connection: Brands' Moment Of Truth In Reaching Gen Zs Online

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Understandably, **brands** have been growing their **digital** media spends and getting on board with the latest **social** media platforms to reach today's **digital**-centric audiences. With that have come expectations of existing programs for reaching and influencing the up-and-coming post-Millennial, or Gen Z audience. Yet, taking a closer look at this demographic, **brands** may find themselves sorely disappointed in their digital results by giving short shrift to the old “tried and true” real-world experiences.

A moment of truth occurs when **brands** take the leap to connect with 17-20 year olds in their offline worlds to cement relevant and memorable experiences that run deep with this group, which in turn compel them to share on **social** platforms. Once they take this important step, brands find a synergy that makes their online connections with Gen Zs that much stronger.

Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean brands should forego the time and money spent on digital engagement strategies and loyalty programs, especially considering it's these platforms where younger consumers are spending the majority of their time with friends and family and gathering/sharing information. However, if **brands** don't invest the time up front to get to know this audience and build credibility in a more three-dimensional and personal way, they risk coming across as an awkward stranger at the “online” party.

The New Age of Brand Advocates: “Creators”

Gen Zs have been shaped by a number of significant events in their lifetime (i.e., 9/11, the Recession, Super Storm Sandy) affecting their outlook; they care about causes, have a true entrepreneurial spirit and very much want to be a part of the conversation and formation of ideas. These digital natives are using multiple technology platforms, but their lust for engagement is at the heart of their existence. According to one of our recent studies, 61% of 1,310 college students said they prefer real conversations in person over **social** networks, texting, FaceTime and e-mail.

This audience marks the beginning of a switch from consumers to “creators” who dive into a **brand's** personality and naturally promote that image based on their own personal interests. This type of engagement is a huge opportunity for brands to truly and authentically connect with

Gen Zs, enabling that consumer to co-create their **brand** image.

A great example of this is **Nestle** Coffee-mate's experiential campaign on Ohio State University's campus this past winter. The brand saw record results on **Twitter** and other social networks after serving up complimentary coffee to sleep-deprived students during finals week via a 20-foot Coffee Mug Café and by on-demand delivery as students texted or tweeted out to @Coffee-mate.

The Coffee-mate **marketing** team capitalized on a time and event in Gen Zs' lives when its product would be most relevant — when these college students were tired and stressed-out with exams — and created a unique and fun experience that spoke directly to this audience's world.

Not only did this personalized café experience have free coffee with Coffee-mate flavor samplings, but it was also equipped with portable heaters, smartphone charging stations, massage chairs, games, music, and emoji props and selfie sticks for photo opportunities, while it served as base camp for the social media-driven delivery service. The OSU students were captured by the “surprise and delight” approach Coffee-mate took with this campaign and enthusiastically immersed themselves into **social** engagement beyond tweeting and texting @Coffee-mate, to an entire flurry of posts across multiple **social** platforms: **Twitter**, **Instagram**, and **Facebook**, tagging #coffeemateatosu.

This case study proves how rich offline experiences can foster brand loyalties that instinctively build and reinforce online engagements for deeper and more rewarding relationships. By combining a personal understanding of what matters to the Gen Z audience with a physical connection through smart experiential **marketing** events and campaigns, and corresponding **digital** element, **brands** can hit Gen Zs' sweet spot. The importance of this approach extends far beyond one or two campaigns; this enables brands to gain this audience's trust and loyalty early on when their preferences are first being formed, driving better business success for the near and long term. And there's nothing “offline” about that.

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