**Generations X, Y and Z**

We often use phrases or words that we don’t fully understand. Sometimes we

even use words or phrases the meanings of which we are totally clueless. As

people with a passion for words and language, that is generally not viewed as a

desirable trait. Yet, the plain fact is we can’t have a detailed understanding

of every word or phrase…particularly when the word belongs to the jargon of a

larger body of knowledge.

However, when that jargon is in use as often and frequently as the phrases

“Gen X” or “Baby Boomer”, it seems especially important we have some

reasonably good idea of what these terms actually mean. Although these phrases,

as jargon, stem from the larger discipline of demographics, and are used most

frequently by market researchers, the fact is everybody uses these words and

phrases. In effect, these cue words or phrases for the subcomponents of society

demarcated by age are not only useful, but are generally the language used by

non-demographers and society as a whole when discussing the current spectrum of

population cohorts.

Our goal, this month, then, is to provide a primer on the identification and

description of the population cohorts in America as currently widely (but not

universally) agreed upon by demographers and market researchers.

**The Depression Era**

Born: 1912-1921

Coming of Age: 1930-1939

Age in 2004: 83 to 92

Current Population: 11-12 million (and declining rapidly)

Depression era individuals tend to be conservative, compulsive savers,

maintain low debt and use more secure financial products like CDs versus stocks.

These individuals tend to feel a responsibility to leave a legacy to their

children. Tend to be patriotic, oriented toward work before pleasure, respect

for authority, have a sense of moral obligation.

**World War II**

Born: 1922 to 1927

Coming of Age: 1940-1945

Age in 2004: 77-82

Current Population: 11 million (in quickening decline)

People in this cohort shared in a common goal of defeating the Axis

powers. There was an accepted sense of “deferment” among this group,

contrasted with the emphasis on “me” in more recent (i.e. Gen X)

cohorts.

**Post-War Cohort**

Born: 1928-1945

Coming of Age: 1946-1963

Age in 2004: 59 to 76

Current Population: 41 million (declining)

This generation had significant opportunities in jobs and education as the War ended and a

post-war economic boom struck America. However, the growth in Cold War tensions,

the potential for nuclear war and other never before seen threats led to levels

of discomfort and uncertainty throughout the generation. Members of this group

value security, comfort, and familiar, known activities and environments.

**Boomers I or The Baby Boomers**

Born: 1946-1954

Coming of Age: 1963-1972

Age in 2004: 50-58

Current Population: 33 million

For a long time the Baby Boomers were defined as those born between 1945 and

1964. That would make the generation huge (71 million) and encompass people who

were 20 years apart in age. It didn’t compute to have those born in 1964

compared with those born in 1946. Life experiences were completely different.

Attitudes, behaviors and society were vastly different. In effect, all the

elements that help to define a cohort were violated by the broad span of years

originally included in the concept of the Baby Boomers. The first Boomer segment

is bounded by the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the Civil

Rights movements and the Vietnam War. Boomers I were in or protested the War.

Boomers 2 or the Jones Generation missed the whole thing.

Boomers I had good economic opportunities and were largely optimistic about the

potential for America and their own lives, the Vietnam War notwithstanding.

**Boomers II or Generation Jones**

Born: 1955-1965

Coming of Age: 1973-1983

Age in 2004: 39 to 49

Current Population: 49 million

This first post-Watergate generation lost much of its trust in government and

optimistic views the Boomers I maintained. Economic struggles including the oil

embargo of 1979 reinforced a sense of “I’m out for me” and narcissism and

a focus on self-help and skepticism over media and institutions is

representative of attitudes of this cohort. While Boomers I had Vietnam, Boomers

II had AIDS as part of their rites of passage. The youngest members of the

Boomer II generation in fact did not have the benefits of the Boomer I class as

many of the best jobs, opportunities, housing etc. were taken by the larger and

earlier group. Both Gen X and Boomer II s suffer from this long shadow cast by

Boomers I.

**Generation X**

Born: 1966-1976

Coming of Age: 1988-1994

Age in 2004: 28 to 38

Current Population: 41 million

Sometimes referred to as the “lost” generation, this was the first

generation of “latchkey” kids, exposed to lots of daycare and divorce. Known

as the generation with the lowest voting participation rate of any generation,

Gen Xers were quoted by Newsweek as “the generation that dropped out without

ever turning on the news or tuning in to the social issues around them.”

Gen X is often characterized by high levels of skepticism, “what’s in it for

me” attitudes and a reputation for some of the worst music to ever gain

popularity. Now, moving into adulthood William Morrow (Generations) cited the

childhood divorce of many Gen Xers as “one of the most decisive experiences

influencing how Gen Xers will shape their own families”.

Gen Xers are arguably the best educated generation with 29% obtaining a

bachelor’s degree or higher (6% higher than the previous cohort). And, with

that education and a growing maturity they are starting to form families with a

higher level of caution and pragmatism than their parents demonstrated. Concerns

run high over avoiding broken homes, kids growing up without a parent around and

financial planning.

Generation Y, Echo Boomers or Millenniums

Born: 1977-1994

Coming of Age: 1998-2006

Age in 2004: 10 to 22

Current Population: 71 million

The largest cohort since the Baby Boomers, their high numbers reflect their

births as that of their parent generation. The last of the Boomer Is and most of

the Boomer II s. Gen Y kids are known as incredibly sophisticated, technology

wise, immune to most traditional marketing and sales pitches…as they not only

grew up with it all, they’ve seen it all and been exposed to it all since

early childhood.

Gen Y members are much more racially and ethnically diverse and they are much

more segmented as an audience aided by the rapid expansion in Cable TV channels,

satellite radio, the Internet, e-zines, etc.

Gen Y are less brand loyal and the speed of the Internet has led the cohort to

be similarly flexible and changing in its fashion, style consciousness and where

and how it is communicated with.

Gen Y kids often raised in dual income or single parent families have been more

involved in family purchases…everything from groceries to new cars. One in

nine Gen Yers has a credit card co-signed by a parent.

Generation Z

Born: 1995-2012

Coming of Age: 2013-2020

Age in 2004: 0-9

Current Population: 23 million and growing rapidly

While we don’t know much about Gen Z yet…we know a lot about the environment

they are growing up in. This highly diverse environment will make the grade

schools of the next generation the most diverse ever. Higher levels of

technology will make significant inroads in academics allowing for customized

instruction, data mining of student histories to enable pinpoint diagnostics and

remediation or accelerated achievement opportunities.

Gen Z kids will grow up with a highly sophisticated media and computer

environment and will be more Internet savvy and expert than their Gen Y

forerunners. More to come on Gen Z…stay tuned.