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#talkrealtome
INTRODUCTION

The world of brands is a complex playground that is in constant flux. It is influenced by the changes that happen in society and the altering values and opinions of people. The introduction of the millennials as the largest generation in the workforce has changed the dynamics of brand building, demanding brands to alter their way of doing business.

Brands can no longer just survive by propelling their ideas and identity into the world. Social media has given the consumer a voice that especially the millennial generation feels very at ease with. As a consequence they are now wanting to engage with brands instead of being talked at.

Not only are millennials reshaping the way business is done, their behaviour is also changing how previous generations are choosing to spend their income. The boomers and generation X are getting used to this different attitude and now expect brands to approach them in the same, personal, manner that millennials have introduced (Business of Fashion, 2017).

Seeing that the influence the millennial generation has on the full spectrum of brands and other generations is so far-reaching, it is the right time to learn how to speak the language of millennials. This guide aims to help brands in the process of adjusting to the changing needs of this generation that doesn't accept stagnation.

INDUSTRY RELEVANCE

Seen the fact that so many established players from the fashion and beauty industry are being outpaced by newcomer brands, there seems to be a latent demand for a trade handbook that brings together all brand successfactors tailored to the millennial generation. A new era of brand building has been driven by the converging effects of the rapid development of communication technologies and transition to a new generation - the millennials - who have brought their own set of values. Since they have become the largest generation in the workforce (Pew Research, 2018), the brands that seem to have lost their allure according to the millennials are in need for some change to withstand the tough competition. This advise report hopes to do that by issuing information on the Millennial consumer and the routes brands can take to give it another shot.
MEET GENERATION NEXT: THE MILLENNIAL CONSUMER
A quick introduction into the generation that makes marketers all over the world scratch their heads in an attempt to figure out why their efforts to make contact do not generate the desired effects.

The generation of the millennials covers a huge range of the population, ranging from people born between 1980s and 2000. This currently makes the oldest millennial around 38 and the youngest 18. As a natural consequence, the oldest and youngest of this group are in different life stages and in general thus care for different things. This advice focuses on the youngest group of the millennials who are up until 25 years old; the Digital Natives (Ipsos MORI, 2017). They are the most online connected group and therefore the crowd that established brands have a hard time satisfying.

What makes the lives of the millennials so different from their predecessors is the influence of two major forces; the digital revolution and the economy. The digital revolution has completely reshaped what communication is, today it means being able to access information from anywhere at any time. Millennials know no better and thus have built their lives with one foot in the digital world. Digital feels as real as offline does. Social media has faded the emotional distance between people and has made in real life unknown people feel familiar. Millennials trust recommendations of vloggers and bloggers almost as much as their close circle of friends and family (Adweek, 2016). The reason these online influencers have such an attraction to the Millennial generation is their attainability and relatability; the millennials enjoy that these people are authentic and not part of some PR strategy (The Guardian, 2016).

Communication and meaningful relations play a huge role the lives of Millennials. They grew up with the Internet and only know an overabundance of information. Because of this they are much more in touch with news all over the world which has made this generation very socially active. They care for diversity, freedom of speech and the empowerment of women. And they don't have to go to the streets to show that they disagree. They can just share their opinion online through their own social channels.

On the other side, the economy has also showed itself to be a large influence on the lives of millennials. They are believed to be the first generation that is worse off than the previous one due to lower employment levels and incomes. For that reason, millennials are postponing commitments such as buying a house, which used to be milestones for the boomers (Goldman Sachs, n.d.). It has made them re-evaluate the worth of money and what can be done with it. They now often turn to the sharing economy that satisfies their needs without the burdens of ownership.
In Relation To Brands
When zooming in on their relation towards brands, a combination of research and the interviews I held with millennials gave the following results.

Brand values are extremely important to millennials. Values don’t all have to be super ethically correct; for millennials it comes down to feeling attracted to a certain kind of vibe or social group. Since expressing yourself largely happens through the brands one surrounds oneself with in the age of social media, millennials use brand values to identify with a brand. That is the basis of a personal connection and if all well translated throughout the mood and designs of a brand, decides if a millennial will consider a brand.

"I think a brand says a lot about how you want to show yourself"
- Jules, 24

Millennials really appreciate authenticity and transparency. Since millennials use brands as a way to show themselves to the world, they align themselves with the brands they buy. So the values are, as said above, of great value. Most important for millennials is that the brand itself is also living up to its promise. Many interviewees gave the example of quality; if that isn’t in line with what they had expected from the brand they won’t even consider returning.

Millennial Myths

**Millennials are not brand loyal**
Funnily, there is this misconception about millennials and brand loyalty; everyone believes it’s dead. Yet all interviewees said they believed to be brand loyal, but to several brands at the same time. This is a more realistic translation of the part that brands take up in people’s lives; people are more complex than just the personification of one brand, right?

**Millennials only care about themselves**
We might see this era of brand-building as the age of you, despite the fact that it means that brands have to put the identity of the consumer central it does not mean that millennials are only busy with themselves. They heavily contribute to social activism and they also try to align their values to brands that campaign for the same ideals in life. They care about committing to brands that are good for people and the planet.

**Millennials are superficial**
Millennials are the generation who most of all generations look for meaning and purpose in brands. They enjoy change and speed, but that doesn’t make them superficial.
Through the research I have conducted on workings of successful Millennial brands, five directions have been singled out that seem to play a crucial role in the creation of an impactful brand in relation to the millennial generation. One or more of these brand building techniques can be chosen by brands in their effort to re-establish their value in the eyes of the consumer.
Identity Is King

Brand identity is the building block of everything in a brand. The best identities in the 21st century are twofold. They are distinctive and show clear values, but are also built around the customer. That means that the identity of a brand adapts to who they want to connect with. The identity should give the consumer the feeling that the brand understands him or her. Millennials attach great value to being able to identify themselves with the purpose and personality of a brand; they believe that the meaning of a brand is endowed upon the products they buy (Ipsos, 2017). If a brand doesn't have something 'extra' to offer next to their product, it doesn't speak to Millennials. The era of innovations in products is over. The brands that now stand out are able to endow their products with meaning.

The results I got from my in-depth interviews with Millennials showed that identity today is much more than a logo and a set of campaign images; it is transmitting a mood into every possible touchpoint with the brand. Many said this could be done by sharing inspirational imagery, behind the scenes photos and influencers who wear the clothing in real life. It has to be accessible, yet appealing at the same time, it should fill the gap between the actual and ideal self. Beside that, the tone of voice is also of importance as this embodies the personality the brand is transmitting. Depending on the kind of brand this could be somewhat ironic like Vetements and Off-White are known for, it could be inclusive and real such as Jacquemus does or it could be the way friends speak to each other; this is what The Reformation and Glossier do.

A brand of today should most of all open up a dialogue with the consumer and let the consumer in on the development of its identity. Because brands have become cultural products that are being used to transfer the values a person wants to show to the world. User generated content makes the brand come alive in the physical world and simultaneously gives the consumer a feeling of being part of the brand.

Example | Off-White

Where normally brands are taught to create a most distinctive logo and brand story, Virgil Abloh did the exact opposite with Off-White (which made him stand out as a result). He took a few diagonal lines that can be spotted anywhere - from traffic signs to crossovers – and made this the signature image of his brand. By taking such a general image it was possible to make it recognisable in such a short time. As Complex (2016) showed, it even evoked user generated content in the form of spotting the Off-White logo 'in the wild', proving the effectiveness of the image. Yet Off-White is more than just its logo. The brand stands for youth, has an opinionated character and is concerned with the current times. This identity is conveyed in many ways; the brand organises university talks and collaborations with other brands and people recognize these values by the brands visual image.
Cultural Relevance

Connected to identity is the cultural relevance of a brand. Following my research, I have found that all lucrative Millennial brands were the answer to an ongoing friction in society which made the brands relevant. In 2017 the Enso's World Value Index researched how American’s from all different generations - boomers to millennials - felt aligned with 150 brands in terms of purpose. The brands millennials highly valued were driven by purpose and meaning (Fast Company, 2017). For a brand to resonate with a millennial, it should carve out a specific place in the broader cultural context of their lives. Brands that succeed in doing so have a "certain significance and meaning with youth culture that is collectively understood" (Warc, 2016, para. 11).

It is advised for brands to stand up for something that people consider important. It is important that this value is aligned to the brand’s identity (Brandingmag, 2016), just tapping into marketing trends won’t lead to the desired result of establishing a meaningful bond between brand and consumer. What interests people can resonate world wide or only locally. The brand should clearly choose its target audience and dive into the things that impact the lives of these people.

Many brands are competing on product innovations, neglecting the fact that brands are intangible. They consist of values and associations that attract people to a brand. The best way to stand out is to try to establish the emotional relationship that millennials long for by advocating for social issues, instead of focusing on product innovations.
Example | Under Armour

In 2014 sportswear brand Under Armour unveiled their campaign ‘I Will What I Want’. Since the focus of sport advertisement is regularly aimed at men, Under Armour recognized the importance that women empowerment is taking up in society and used this moment to open up the conversation with women. The campaign addressed those women who refuse to accept the limits put on them by society. The video that shows ballerina Misty Copeland dancing while a voiceover reads her rejection letter conveys a powerful image because she currently is one of the best ballerinas of the U.S. It is an example of what determination can do. With this campaign Under Armour stood up for something society cares for. Now people associate Under Armour with being able to do anything one puts their mind to. For women this is still a very liberating and new feeling that evokes much emotion. So women are probably more inclined to buy from Under Armour because they share the same hopes that the brand conveys.
Millennial Perspective

According to Levato (2017) Millennials are the first generation to have fundamental different attitudes and values in relation to consumption and lifestyle than previous generations (cited in Business of Fashion, 2017). They value experiences, social activism and a meaningful connection. A meaningful relationship is the breeding ground for all other activities a brand undertakes. Therefore the advice for brands is to change their perspective and start looking through the eyes of millennials. See what interests them, identify where they hang out, and whom they interact with. Only then can a brand relocate itself relevantly in the conversation where millennials are naturally active already.

Millennials are at ease with the online environment. It is here that they compose their lives through blog posts, vlogs and images. They enjoy taking photos, uploading them on social media and following others via these channels. YouTube and Instagram in particular are used a lot by the millennial generation. This may be due to its visual attractiveness and instant gratification. Successful newcomer brands have understood this shift; online networks are there for people to talk about themselves. Just pushing advertisements will not work, but making a brand part of the conversation through earned media certainly will. In practical words this means that everything should be made as ‘Insta grammable’ and interesting as possible: from packaging to the brand experiences. It should be attractive to share.

Social media has had an effect on the group of people one is influenced by in purchasing decisions. It used to be the case that people were mostly influenced by their inner circle consisting of friends and family. But the proliferation of the use of social media has extended the ‘trustees’ to online personalities and reviewers. This has become a well-known business known as influencer marketing. Brands can collaborate with these popular ‘trustees’ to increase brand awareness in a more authentic manner. Influencers fulfill the role of that friend one can rely on to bring the newest insider knowledge and therefore boasts many positive associations that are projected on the brand if executed well.
Example | Glossier
Glossier is a much adored brand under millennial girls. They know how and where to grab their consumers attention without coming off as pushy. Glossier is very well adapted to the world of the millennial. They understand the power of online sharing; the online-first brand launched their products with 'millennial pink' packaging pouches that could be used as a pencil case or clutch or just as a nice prop in Instagram photos. Their stores are designed from the same perspective; they are full of mirrors with quotes on them in which girls can take selfies and share their location. Nothing explicitly screams 'share me', but the consumer is encouraged in the way they feel most comfortable.

"I feel a connection with Glossier because I like their tone of voice"
- Violette, 24
People with the same interest and values crowd together around a brand. However, having consumers who strongly identify with your brand is just the first step: once the attraction is there it becomes about how to keep the consumers there. This is where investing in your community comes into play.

There is no definite manner by which a brand can grow a community. The community is in the hands of the consumers who want to come together around the same values. But a brand can facilitate a setting in which people are encouraged to interact with each other, through the brand. For example; organising events around brand relevant themes is a great way for like minded people to meet each other and the brand. A strong community increases customer retention (Business of Fashion, 2017) and places the brand in the physical lives of its consumers.

Brands can take it one step further and invite their most 'hardcore' fans to bring in their opinion on the brand and its product. Often, programs such as Slack (an online communications tool than enables people to interact directly in a chatroom-like environment) are used for this aim. In the dedicated 'chatrooms' consumers can chat among each other as well as with real brand employees. This makes the customers not only feel like they are part of the community, but also the company's team. To sustain a community is hard work, but it creates substantial competitive advantages in the form of first-hand customer insights and involved brand advocates who feel loyal to the brand.

Communities could be the answer to the exodus of physical stores. Stores could become a hub for offline meetings. The offered activities should be in line with the brand and add value to the lives of the consumers. So it could be a place for free yoga lessons like Lululemon does or a place to get free workshops as Apple has started doing. The days in which prospective customers learn about a company through conventional marketing are behind us. They learn about new brands through their peers, so not only does a community have a positive impact on current clients, it also increases the chances of positive peer influence (Harvard Business Review, 2013).

"If you build a strong brand identity, you also create this community. And I definitely like to belong to a few brand communities" - Viola, 24
Example | Man Repeller

The Man Repeller is a media platform that started off as a fashion blog. It was the founder’s, Leandra Medine, funny and nothing to hide attitude that prompted a dialogue between the platform and readers in the comments and on social media. Soon many readers followed by replying on each other's comments as well, creating a mutual bond.

The program through which the comments are shared, Disqus, shares who the top commenters are, and there these people have 'profile' pages that show their involvement. This feature seems to boost the reason for actively engaging in the community. As the platform developed, Medine used the community to gauge customer insights and as she shared with Business of Fashion (2017) all of the secondary products of Man Repeller such as events and branded merchandise are a direct response to preserve the community. It seems to work: the 200 tickets to MR’s camp sold out in 48 hours. uniting like minded people through a brand’s network seems to give the millennials the feeling of connectedness they value, while strengthening the loyalty to the brand.
Practice What You Preach

The last ‘rule’ is a dealbreaker when it comes to the execution of the previous directions and should thus always be combined with one of the other brand building strategies. Authenticity can be seen as the overarching value that gathers everything that millennials find meaningful. They see right through advertisements without a heart and marketing tactics that are just for the sake of publicity. Without showing commitment to the vision and mission set out for the brand in every touchpoint with the customer, all efforts will be for nothing. Currently many brands try to tap into the ‘spirit of authenticity’ by too obviously creating campaigns around transparency and matters as such. Yet this is the opposite of what is meant with behaving in an authentic manner. Being authentic for millennials means not campaigning around the word ‘authenticity’, but living up to your promise without shouting it from the rooftops.

The conducted in-depth interviews with millennials for this research (see appendix research report) showed how important being real is to them. In a world full of fake news, honesty seems hard to find for millennials. The interviews showed that millennials denounced brands that try too hard to show that they have great quality, while in fact they don’t. As a result, there is really something out there for brands that are honest about their business and try to keep their customers close in the process. This doesn't mean that every brand should become sustainable or completely ethically driven, but it means that there should be made no concessions when it comes to carrying out the purpose and promise of a brand.

Example | Everlane

Everlane is a great example as to why authenticity works. From the moment Everlane got into business, the owner was very clear about with which purpose he had started his company: "radical transparency" (Everlane, 2018). Fed up with the dynamics of retail in which high markups are the norm, he wanted to give customers insight into the goings on in fashion and give customers the possibility to not partake in this any longer. Because Everlane showed a singular vision through which all decisions and products were made, the concept stayed genuine and uncomplicated. For the first time a company was completely honest to the consumer on how much the production of an item cost and for how much they were selling it. And not only were they transparent about their prices, they also showed which factories they were working with to produce the apparel. In doing so, Everlane kept the consumer close and involved without falling into the trap of being transparent for the sake of being transparent - it was in line with their brand promise.
How do you like to be approached by a brand?

"Definitely personal, in a real and honest way."

- Demi, 21
1. Research target group to re-evaluate the brand identity.
As shared in the golden rules, to be a successful brand in the millennial era it means to embody the identity of the consumer fully. Research the consumer the brand wants to attract; what is his/her interest, what kind of tone of voice and imagery speak to this group of people and in which context? Try to get a 360° analysis. Get as close to the target group as possible. This can be done via focus groups or interviews, but also netnography and observations are great tools to examine the chosen demographic. Also do the research the other way around; how is the brand perceived by consumers? Is there, after the thorough analysis, a gap between the actual brand identity and who you want to engage with? This is the starting point to fill in the gap. It might mean updating the tone of voice or working on creating new associations. Use the customer insights you captured to lead your improvements.

2. Add a layer of cultural relevance
In extension to the target group research already carried out it is recommendable to carve out cultural relevance. Many brands try to differentiate themselves by their product, but millennials are emotional consumers that seek a connection on a higher level than the product. Therefore, now you know who you want to engage with and understand their universe, you should try to pinpoint a sociocultural tension that is relevant for your target group. Find out who your competitors are in the context of the millennial you want to reach. How does this category traditionally position itself? Find your sweet spot by comparing what the category is doing and what the millennials are missing. Carry this statement out in every decision you make; from campaigns to product development. Everything should be aligned.

3. Adjust your perspective
Through their internet connected mobile phones, millennials seamlessly manage their online and offline lives at every moment. Therefore it is imperative to see everything through the (digital) lens of millennials. This starts off by examining on which social channels your target audience is active; be it YouTube, Instagram or other social networks. Each social network has its own 'language' and particular elements to take into account. Wisely select the channels to be active on, each platform has its own audience and should be taken care of full time for it to be genuine. These are social channels, so try to create a balance between unstaged and staged material. Millennials enjoy sharing their personality through brands, try to take every decision with the question in mind: what will help the brand spread? It means adapting to the language of social media and making products, store environments etc. worth sharing.

4. Facilitate the emergence of a community
It is the job of the brand to facilitate the organic growth of a community. An accessible way of beginning is by opening up the conversation through social media. The conversation should invite people to interact mutually. This can be done by being honest and human; either shown visually or by telling stories and asking questions. Later offline events can be organized where like-minded people can enjoy talks, workshops, camps etc. that fit the brand identity and further the audience in talking about themselves through the brand. A step further is inviting your community in on (product) decisions by arranging online or offline meet-ups to test ideas. Either make it an ongoing conversation by creating a chat room or set up real-life meetings in a relax focus group manner.

5. Repeat
Always remain attentive and keep on frequently researching your consumer and their world. This cohort is used to having numerous choices, so if a brand falls out of sync with what millennials are interested in or how they like to be approached, the once so good relation can be traded out for an alternative in the blink of an eye. So to remain competitive, it is advised to keep your consumer close.
Research target group & re-evaluate brand identity

Establish cultural relevance

Adopt millennial perspective

Create right setting for community growth

Repeat
CONCLUSION

The information provided on Millennials and the 'golden brand building rules' should be used as guidance to (re-)establish a connection with Millennials, but bear in mind that brands are a product of society. There is no way to completely control the outcome of a brand. As noted in this advise report, one of the fundamentally different approaches in branding to millennials is their wish to be part of a brand story. This means a brand should let go of complete control and instill the right cues for consumers to pick up on in order to develop the narrative further. Millennials are a smart and engaged generation. They value integrity and see through inauthenticity. This created the demand for a new brand tactic that is based on narrative and authenticity. It is an exciting time for the development of brands and many opportunities lay ahead of us. Hopefully the guidelines presented here may be of some use for brands that are engaged with this inspiring generation.
REFERENCE LIST


“Modern brand building is designed for networks and communities, where people talk much less about brands and much more about themselves.”

- Ana Andjelic, 2018