Ten Trends of 20-Somethings

By Marian Salzman
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With the inaugural One Young World summit kicking off this week in London (my company, Euro RSCG Worldwide, organized it), my thoughts have been focused on the biggest trends among 20-somethings, an increasingly powerful group. In one of my earlier posts, I explained why adults born after 1980 are the Real-Time Generation -- meaning they don’t wait to find out about things, or to make things happen themselves.

But that’s just the beginning. There are many features that set this generation apart from its predecessors. They’re important not only to marketers like me, who are trying to reach this demographic as consumers, but also to anyone who cares about the future.

Herewith, my top 10 trends of 20-somethings:

1. Real-time expectations

Virtually no one in his or her 20s in a developed country has known life without instant communication. Twenty-somethings connect with friends in real time -- no waiting for snail mail or even e-mail. They get the latest news (whether world events or their friends’ status) as it happens, with a live feed of texts, tweets and Facebook updates from where it’s happening. Whenever they need information, it’s online in abundance. Reference books? What are those?

2. More intensely local lives

A paradox of borderless real-time technology is the way it reinforces local connections. With mobile devices, young adults make plans on the fly. With location-based apps on their phones, they find friends who happen to be nearby and get alerts from companies in the vicinity offering deals. Local is the new global, as I explained in my most recent post here, and nowhere is that more true than among 20-somethings.

3. Radical transparency

Twenty-somethings grew up with reality TV and radical celebrity culture -- media poking into every corner of people’s lives, from Hollywood A-listers to Nadya Suleman, Tareq and Michaele Salahi, and Richard “Balloon Boy’s Dad” Heene. They’ve lived their whole lives in a culture of information “leaks” at the highest level, a world where even the great confess mistakes and show emotion to millions. They constantly use technologies that let them bare all -- sometimes literally -- to their friends. They’re aware that nothing online is confidential, but so what? This generation is more transparent about its thoughts, feelings and actions than any generation before it.

4. Expecting cheap or free everything

Globalization has made many essentials very cheap. Twenty-somethings can fill their stomachs and clothe themselves at unbelievably low cost. Budget air travel is normal. The Internet brings music, software, TV shows and all sorts of content for free. One of the biggest, most powerful brands on the planet, Google, offers a huge range of powerful services at no cost to the user.
5. Demanding entertainment

In some parts of the world, particularly the West, entertainment has long been an essential part of education. Young adults grew up with Sesame Street and edutainment based on fun, interactive graphics in the classroom and museums, an approach that has been endorsed by researchers. Even in places where more traditional education models prevail, fun and games have become a staple activity of young people. In the recent Global Youth Study, 59 percent of respondents said they regularly play video or computer games in their spare time; gaming is the second-most popular activity after socializing.

6. Worrying about the planet

Twenty-somethings came of age amid increasingly troubling reports about what’s going wrong with the planet. Inconvenient truths about climate change, disappearing species, habitat destruction and water shortages have been daily fare for them. In the survey, 64 percent of respondents saw climate change affecting them seriously, and 82 percent saw it affecting future generations seriously; 64 percent said only immediate radical changes can prevent the most serious impacts of climate change.

7. Seeing luxuries as standard

The basic tools of 20-something life are actually luxuries by historical standards. Whether they pay for them themselves or have help from their parents, most young adults in developed countries have:

- A smartphone costing well above $100, plus monthly fees
- A computer costing at least $300, with monthly broadband fees on top
- A wide-screen TV costing at least $300, plus cable or satellite fees
- Higher education as far as they can go

8. Pro-business, anti-multinational stance

Today’s 20-somethings don’t share the countercultural ideologies that fired up young baby boomers. They were raised in an environment in which free markets were revered and delivered plenty of consumer goodies. People in their 20s aren’t anti-business; some of them even founded megabrands (Google again). But they aren’t so fond of multinational corporations. In the survey, two-thirds of respondents said global corporations have too much power. But instead of trying to take down corporate giants by force like earlier generations did, now 20-somethings aspire to out-business them.

9. Wanting to regulate the heck out of media bias

Media in 2010 is vastly bigger than it was in 2000. Increasingly diverse news sources are available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. No wonder 70 percent of survey respondents get their news over the Internet. All this choice, plus growing educational levels and media savvy, makes 20-somethings acutely aware of media bias; 70 percent of respondents said all news media should be regulated so that they’re clearly independent of state and corporate bias.

10. Naturally Me but aspiring to We

Young adults are used to self-expression, self-esteem, personal computers, personal profiles, personalized settings and personal branding. Whether the culture is highly individualistic (e.g., the United States) or more collectivist (e.g., China), businesses have thrived by enabling people to express themselves, to be more Me. Culturally and commercially, 20-somethings have been encouraged to be more selfish than their predecessors. Yet they’re all too aware that everyone pursuing selfish interests creates planetary problems. Members of this generation are caught between the impulse to do their own thing and the desire to do the right thing together. Or as the pithy observation has it, “Everybody wants to save the earth; nobody wants to help Mom do the dishes.”