

# The Attitude of Generation X Toward Impaired Motorcycle Riding

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## Abstract

“Generation X” refers to the 52 million Americans born between 1965 and 1978. This paper will look at who comprises Generation X, what their values are, what forces have impacted them, how for-profit marketers reach them, and how all of this influences their attitude toward anti-impaired-riding messages and campaigns.

## Introduction

Generation X is comprised of:

...people born between 1965 and 1978, too young to be called Baby Boomers and too old to be called children.<sup>1</sup>

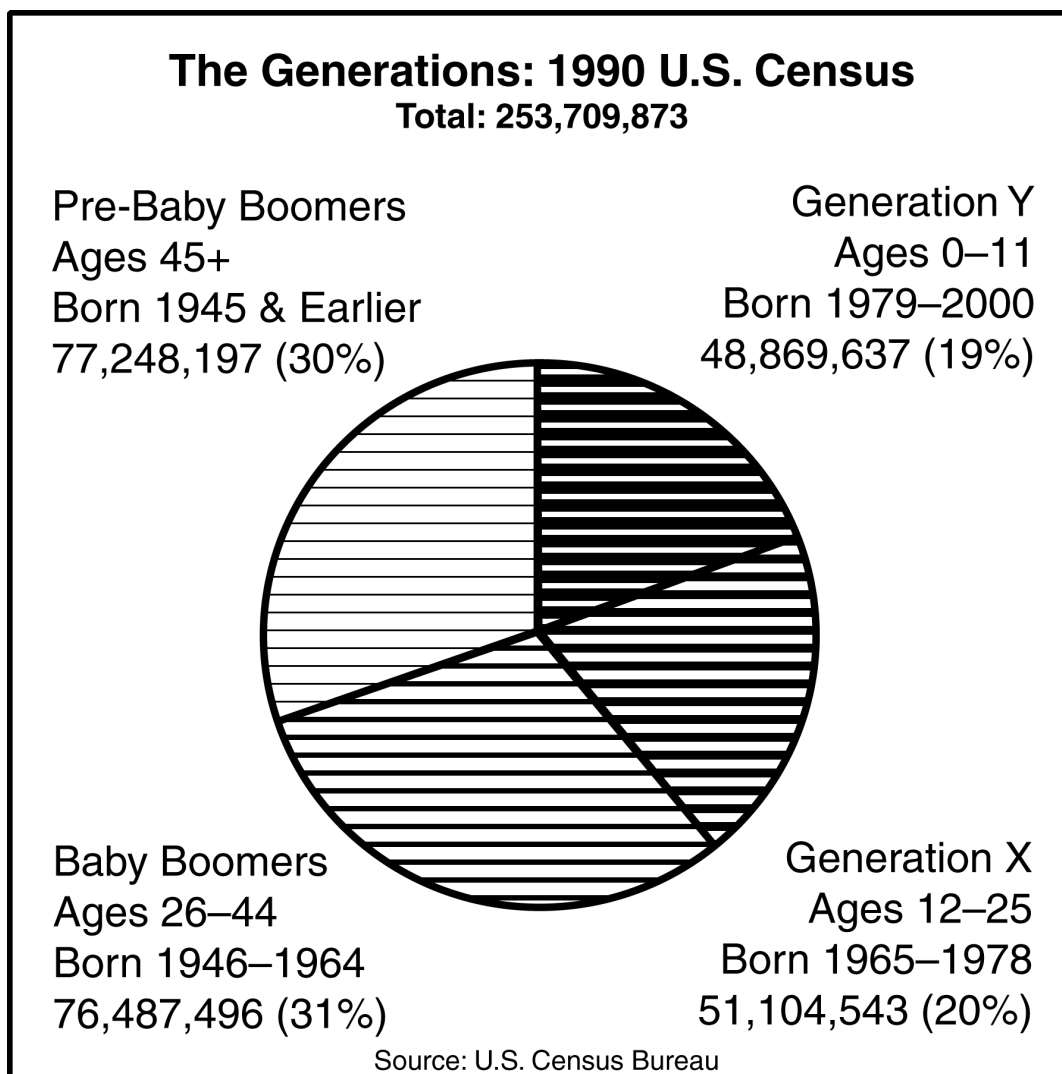


Figure 1: The generations as per the 1990 U.S. Census.

They were named after the 1991 novel *Generation X* by Douglas Coupland.<sup>2</sup>

...their resistance to being labeled is one of the prime characteristics of Generation X, whose members are media-savvy and hate the prospect of becoming anyone's target market. They may not like it, but this defining segment that shuns labels will continue to be labeled. They are the emerging adult population.

I prefer to call them "Alternative Adults." You have to know them to understand why.<sup>3</sup>

But is Generation X a cohesive entity?

...[they] constitute the most ethnically diverse group of young folks in U.S. history. They are unshaped by grand defining events—like the Vietnam War—that forged a certain cultural unity in previous generations.<sup>4</sup>

Mary Connelly, a reporter for *Automotive News*, disagrees:

Defining influences for this group include: the Challenger space shuttle explosion, space travel, TV, computers, divorced and single-parent families, environmental crises and the Gulf War.<sup>5</sup>

James Yetter, manager of marketing plans and merchandising for Dodge cars, says, "One of the important lessons we learned is there is no stereotypical Generation X person."<sup>6</sup>

## Economic Outlook

What is the economic outlook like for Generation X?

Even before the recession started in 1990, these young people's economic horizons were limited by a sluggish job market, stagnant wages, and the high costs of real estate, higher education, and health insurance. At the same time, social conditions were far calmer in the 1980s than in the two preceding decades.

The ethos of the 1980s was an expectation of prosperity at little cost to government, business, or individuals. As a result, the expectations of those who make up Generation X grew dramatically—much faster, in fact, than their ability to realize their dreams. This led to a huge letdown in the 1990s.

In other words, members of Generation X expect much more than their predecessors did, but have achieved far less at the same stage in their lives.<sup>7</sup>

But the reality may be better than the perception.

Twentysomethings generally have high discretionary incomes because they are delaying marriage and childbearing. Half of Generation Xers who have never been married still live with their parents.<sup>8</sup>

## Generation X Values

Bearing in mind that it is difficult to pin specific psychographic characteristics on an entire generation, several marketers have strong ideas about what Gen Xers value.

"They're kind of a 'Me Generation' in terms of denying themselves nothing," observes Howard Cogan, associate professor of communications and advisor to AAF's [American Advertising Federation] Ithaca College student chapter.

"This generation shows every indication that they will not become 'real' adults until they have to," concurs Elizabeth Silver, advertising director

for AAF-member VISA International. “They can continue the single person lifestyle without the financial commitments that cut into discretionary spending.”<sup>9</sup>

Yetter of Dodge notes, “They are very selective with what they do with their money,” and cites top-of-the-line stereos in inexpensive or older cars.<sup>10</sup>

Lest that sounds too hedonistic:

“Let’s not call them anarchic,” says Graham Hutton, director of research at CIA Media UK. “They are at the leading edge: highly critical of mainstream values and with the confidence to say so.”<sup>11</sup>

David Rheins, associate publisher of *Spin* magazine, has a similar view:

“It’s their drive for independence and individuality which, in fact, gives them a shared characteristic among peers.”<sup>12</sup>

Many marketers believe there is little, if any, true difference between the Baby Boomers and the “Baby Busters,” pointing to blue jeans as a uniform for both generations. Others disagree:

But an important generation gap exists even today. When it comes to really speaking to today’s twentysomethings as a group, the most important thing for a marketer or advertiser to understand is the level of frustration that comes from wanting so much more than they have or can easily attain.

Whether or not Generation X becomes the first cohort in America to do less well than their parents, they expect it to be so. And this expectation affects everything from the way these people go about shopping to the way they perform on the job. Living for today is an unquestioned way of life when long-term goals appear to be out of reach. This is the story of Generation X.<sup>13</sup>

Gen Xers came of age in the just-say-no, safe-sex era of limitations.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Gen Xers are: ...sophisticated, shrewd, technologically precocious and unpredictable as hell.<sup>15</sup>

...younger than boomers were when factors such as media consumption, sexual and social awareness start to matter.<sup>16</sup>

...interested in simplicity, efficiency, and maintaining and protecting what they have.<sup>17</sup>

...not high on glamour and gimmicks.<sup>18</sup>

...not callous about the environment.<sup>19</sup>

...and able to see quite clearly how they are being manipulated by marketers.<sup>20</sup>

According to Ben Eason, editor and co-publisher of *Creative Loafing*, music to the Baby Boomers (and, by extension, Generation X) “remained the dominant carrier of cultural messages and themes...This was more than just entertainment...this was a search for meaning.”<sup>21</sup>

Natalie Perkins, vice president and account supervisor, Trone Advertising, believes:

“Busters want to be recognized for their own beliefs and values...Desiring security, they seek products that have lasting value with tangible benefits.”<sup>22</sup>

## Reaching Generation X

When considering how best to reach Generation X with a public-information and education message, we might do well to look at what for-profit organizations have done. In 1993, American Honda Motor Co.’s Acura division—in an attempt to stop a year-and-a-half sales slide—adopted an unconventional advertising approach. It began running two campaigns. The first, aimed at Baby Boomers, recalled the days of playing with Hot Wheels. The second, featuring a cartoon dog, targeted Generation X. Both campaigns were designed to convey how much fun the Integra is to drive, rather than emphasizing luxury and craftsmanship.<sup>23</sup>

American Advertising noted that the latter campaign had an “off-beat, aloof tone.”

The TV spot, featuring an animated talking dog named Leonard (voice supplied by comic Dennis Miller), provided an artful mix of insolence and honesty—both characteristics Xers respect and identify with.<sup>24</sup>

Honda is not the only automotive advertiser to use straight talk on Generation X.

In introducing Chrysler’s Neon model, [advertising agency] BBDO put prestige claims in the back seat, favoring instead a witty, straightforward print and television campaign emphasizing value. “[Neon is] not presenting frills or hype,” comments Tony Hoyt, publisher of *Cosmopolitan*, whose readers are generally in their 20s. “It’s a very down-to-earth, honest kind of campaign.”<sup>25</sup>

BBDO’s research convinced them to “tone down any hype in favor of straight talk, since X-ers allegedly have unusually acute hype radar,”<sup>26</sup> and to list the price of the car fully loaded in its ads.

Aaron Shapiro, publisher/editorial director of *Inside Edge*, a magazine for twentysomethings, says that directness is important.

“This age group values authenticity...If you give them a campaign that’s down-to-earth, honest and forthright, they will respond to it.”<sup>27</sup>

Christina Murray, a graduate student at New York University—who last year served as CEO of Ithaca College’s winning team in AAF’s National Student Advertising Competition—concur.

“We’re a generation weary of people trying to scam us...I think a lot of the anti-advertising, anti-marketing attitude comes from feeling that someone is trying to take you for something.”<sup>28</sup>

Adds Renee Frengut in *Marketing News*:

If you’re truly after those thought leaders who constitute Generation X—or whatever else they don’t like to be called—honesty, humor, and subtlety should rule your strategy and message.<sup>29</sup>

The companies behind the advertising have their work cut out for them, too.

...businesses that market to the generation of tomorrow must place emphasis on internal training, database technology, superior product knowledge and “service plus.” They will build bridges to a customer base that may not have individual buying power, but will have great collective volume as populations continue to increase.<sup>30</sup>

## The Impact of Television

Many marketers consider television to be the medium of choice among Gen Xers, a habit that began early:

With lots of latchkey kids among its ranks, Generation X grew up watching more TV, and, often left unattended, Xers frequently tuned to whatever their little hearts desired. At the same time, the number of channels also was increasing.<sup>31</sup>

What about television’s role in reaching twentysomethings?

Undoubtedly...[it] has been crucial and will magnify in the future. Many look upon the promise of the 500-channel universe with some trepidation, but not Xers. They welcome it gladly. They feel the proliferation of choices will force advertisers’ presentations to become more substantive.<sup>32</sup>

Rheins of *Spin* concurs:

...they are not apathetic to media...On the contrary, “they are media

junkies,” he contends. “It’s just that they’re so skilled at processing information, it takes them a much shorter amount of time. Marshall McLuhan said the media is the message, and now it’s never been truer.”

The argument that twenty-somethings disdain advertising is also slightly askew, says Cogan [of Ithaca College]. Xers are just more demanding than previous audiences. “I think they trust advertising,” he says. “They’re just saying, ‘Talk sense to us. Tell us how your company treats the environment. Talk to us about guarantees.’ They want quality and truth. They want the people they buy from to be socially responsible.”<sup>33</sup>

Many clues to Gen Xers’ program preference can be gleaned from an interview with David Primuth, vice president of advertising and research for E! Entertainment, that appeared in *Marketing News*.

In general, Xers like their programs to have quick pacing, a realistic attitude, and “some biting edge that sets it apart from the norm,” Primuth said. They like their humor low-key and a bit offbeat. They also groove on high-tech special effects and animation. That latter preference might seem to mimic boomers watching *The Flintstones*, but Xers prefer their cartoons a little less wholesome, a la *The Simpsons* and *Beavis and Butt-head*.

On cable, MTV remains popular, but Primuth noted that some of the older Xers are starting to grow out of the network, a trend MTV has wisely responded to by introducing long-format programming such as *The Real World*.

Primuth called Comedy Central one of the premier networks for Generation X. Even the network’s tagline, “Nothing is sacred,” is just right for this generation. “I would kill for a tagline like that right now,” he said.

On Primuth’s own E! Entertainment, *Talk Soup* and *The Howard Stern Show* are the big winners. Stern “is one of the most politically incorrect people around, yet it’s very popular with Generation X, surprisingly with both females and males.” Primuth chalked it up to Xers’ love of talking about sex.<sup>34</sup>

When Ford set out to reach under-30 buyers, the usually-conservative advertisers’ spots featured hard-rock music, quick cuts, humorous moments, and direct appeals to Generation X.<sup>35</sup> (59)

## Relationship to DWI Campaigns

This snapshot of Generation X presents both challenges and opportunities to us as we reach out to them as motorcyclists with anti-DWI messages. The challenges include the Xers’ being:

- **Pessimistic.** As noted above, “Living for today is an unquestioned way of life when long-term goals appear to be out of reach.” Thus, the short-term pleasures of alcohol consumption may outweigh the long-term one of a long, healthy life.
- **Techno-Wizards.** Thanks to a steady, lifelong diet of MTV and video games, Xers may have a shorter attention span than previous generations. Thus, they’re more apt to “tune out” if a message isn’t reaching them quickly and entertainingly.
- **Delayers of marriage/childbearing.** If insurance companies are any indication, married men are a better risk. Xers with no formal ties may feel that they aren’t hurting anyone except themselves if they participate in risky behavior.
- **Hedonists.** According to some marketing experts, Xers deny themselves nothing, if at all possible. Why not have that second (third, fourth, fifth) drink?
- **Critics of mainstream values.** In the last 20 years, drinking and driving have become much more

socially unacceptable. Xers might be turned off by this now-mainstream view of DWI.

- **Individualists.** The group that embraced the late Kurt Cobain's life and work are less likely than young people of previous generations to "go along with the crowd." Thus the stigma of peer pressure may be less effective in keeping them from drinking and riding.
- **Accurate BS meters.** The Xers know from hype. A non-authentic message may be a turn-off.
- **Sardonic.** Think Dennis Miller, Denis Leary, Howard Stern, Chris Rock. Gentle or silly humor that was popular a generation ago won't wash today.  
But opportunities also exist because the Xers are:
- **Environmentally conscious.** Not since the Summer of Love has there been such a feeling of caring for one's fellow man (and woman). Operating a vehicle while under the influence hurts the operator, his victims, even society at large.
- **Economically disadvantaged.** They may drink more expensive alcohol—but less. And they don't want to smash up a bike, knowing how much it will cost to fix it.
- **Security lovers.** They're what former Motorcycle Safety Foundation Vice President Peter Fassnacht called the "Safe Generation." Perhaps the thought of risking life and limb will weigh more heavily on the conscience of Xers than the participants in a NHTSA focus group,<sup>36</sup> many of whom had DWI convictions.
- **Thrill seekers.** Conversely, "Xers have developed a tolerance to the remarkable events of today's fast-paced world. The resulting inability to feel excitement prompts the search for bigger thrills, even the ultimate thrill—risking one's life (through adventure travel)."<sup>37</sup>
- **Media junkies.** They're used to getting information from television and the World Wide Web more than from the printed page (although personal "zines" are very popular). And music moves them.
- **Willing to speak out.** This will be an asset when trying to convince the Xers to intervene on behalf of friends who want to ride impaired.

## Conclusion

As journalist Renee Frengut has admonished us, "honesty, humor, and subtlety should rule your strategy and message." The Motorcycle Safety Foundation updated its *Riding Straight* video, which is used both in the *Motorcycle RiderCourse* and as a stand-alone program, in 1995. It took into account much of the foregoing. The video certainly contains humor—popular comedic actor Chip Eston is featured—yet is honest, as witnessed by the unforgettable scene of a motorcycle being "hooked" to a tow truck after its DWI operator was stopped by law-enforcement personnel. In 1996, *Riding Straight* won a Questar Grand Award in the Security/Safety Category, presented by the International Academy of Communications Arts and Sciences.

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