

Describing Generations

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BEFORE YOU READ: Write about three or four generations that you are familiar with. They can be older or younger than you. Fill out the chart. In the first column, write “me,” “my parents,” “my children,” “my grandparents,” or “my grandchildren.” In the second column, write the approximate years that this generation was born. In the third column, write some characteristics that you think describe this generation. Share and discuss your answers.

NOTE THAT THE AUTHOR is intentionally offering generalizations. They won't hold true 100% of the time. Is it valuable to make generalizations? Why or why not?

Generation	Year Born (approximately)	Characteristics

Silent Generation (born 1920s - 1945)

They were influenced in their youth by the Great Depression and World War Two. They grew up in serious times, when everyone had to do their duty (whether you liked it or not), and when children “should be seen and not heard.” They are conservative, hard working, and structured, preferring rules, order, and formal hierarchies. They have a “waste not, want not” mentality, and hate getting into debt. Their idea of progress is slow, incremental advancement, while minimizing risk. They also believe that it's “good” and “normal” to work hard. In fact, they believe they can achieve anything by sheer hard work.

Defining and guiding values:

* Dedication * Duty before pleasure * Adherence to rules * Hard work * Law and order * Respect for position * Cautious * Self sufficient * Delayed reward * Sacrifice * Conformity * Modesty * Patience * Reticent to express emotion * Waste not want not

Baby Boomers (1946 - early 1960s)

Baby Boomers are the postwar generation—the drugs, sex, and rock n’ roll set—who grew up during a time of grand visions. They initiated anti-Vietnam war rallies and were the foot soldiers of the “information technology” revolution. The 1960s and 70s were a turbulent time as young

adult Boomers went to university and into the workplace, rebelling against the Silent Generation-dominated institutions they found there. Their moralistic outlook spurred them on to activism against the establishment. They love to shop, and they have created more wealth (and accumulated more debt) than any other generation, ever. They are a workaholic generation, driven, goal oriented, and bottom line focused.

Defining and guiding values:

* Idealism * Optimism * Team orientation * Personal growth * Personal gratification * Group together by similarity of belief * Self-expressive * Media savvy * Excellence * Big talkers * Youth * Work * Involvement * Health/wellness

Xers (late 1960s - 1989)

Generation Xers grew up as "latchkey kids," children of divorce, experiencing an era of crises. From Watergate and Vietnam, to the energy crisis and the collapse of communism, it was clear the adults didn't know what was going on. They're skeptical of corporations, realizing that long-term commitment is unlikely to pay the dividends it did to their parents and grandparents.

They are, therefore, opposed to paying their dues the way their Silent Generation grandparents did. They look for quick, short-term rewards, are prepared to embrace risks, and work hard for themselves. This entrepreneurial, selfish, and individualistic attitude is often mistaken for rebelliousness. However, Xers are not rebelling against authority, the way Boomers did. They're simply asserting their individuality, one of their defining characteristics.

Defining and guiding values:

* Change * Choice * Global awareness * Techno-literacy * Individualism * Lifelong learning * Immediate gratification * Diversity * Survivors * Informality * Whiners * Thrill seekers * Pragmatism * Not scared of failure * Self-reliance

Generation Y (1989 - 2000s)

Generation Y is defined as the generation growing up in the new era of globalization, communication technology, and wireless connectivity. They are living in an age of diversity and exposure to other cultures. They are growing up quickly, too quickly, some would say. One commentator wrote that Generation Y has, more than any other young generation, an ability to "filter out every command, every request and every instruction that is not bundled with acceptable rationale – they demand reasons and rationale, so the traditional 'because I said so' isn't going to cut it with them." They are growing up in a world that is creaking under the strain of western lifestyles. So, it is no surprise that they are emerging as ethical consumers who want to change the world.

Defining and guiding values:

* Optimism * Confidence * High self-esteem * Media & entertainment overloaded * Street smart * Diversity * Conservative * Networkers * Civic duty * Ethical consumption * Achievement * Morality * Naivete * Change * Techno-savvy * Global citizens, with a multi-everything view

Graeme Codrington is the founder of TomorrowToday. This article was excerpted and adapted from "Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory" <www.tomorrowtoday.uk.com>.

AFTER YOU READ: Go back and look at the chart. Do your descriptions of the generations you are familiar with match those described in this article? If not, what is different?

GO DEEPER INTO THE TOPIC: What is the point of generational theory? Is it helpful to try to describe generations? Why/why not?

USE YOUR IMAGINATION: What should the next generation be called? How do you think they will be described someday?