

Marketing to millennials



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Introduction

It seems everyone is trying to understand the [Millennials](#), even the [Millennials themselves](#).

The term “Millennial” was coined by authors William Strauss and Neil Howe, but the media is largely credited for adopting the term and further helping to define it. Prior to that, the term “Generation Y” (as in, following Generation X, with a play on “Why?”), “Generation Me,” as well as some other terms were floated around. In the end, Millennial stuck.

Even the age range for Millennials is a center of debate. Generally, anyone born between 1984 and 2004 can be lumped into the Millennial category. But many argue that it’s not so much the dates that are important but rather behavioral characteristics. This would mean that a Gen Xer could be called a Millennial by virtue of his affinity for SnapChat, craft coffee, and tight jeans (especially if he had a tidy handlebar mustache). Needless to say, not everyone is in agreement with that definition, either.

But it does raise an important point for marketers: “Millennial” is a very complicated concept that they need to understand in order to connect with their clients. The people in this bracket are quickly becoming the key buyers and decision makers of today. On a daily basis, [they spend more than any other age group](#).

A particular set of behaviors and interests define “Millennial” (which we’ll explore in this guide). Some historical context helps, too:

- They grew up with the internet, and are used to a world where every answer is at their fingertips.
- In 2007, when the iPhone was introduced, the oldest Millennials were freshly out of college, and the youngest of them were still in diapers.
- The ones born in 1988 or later were able to have a Facebook account in high school.
- Half of Millennials have never lived in a world without Amazon (founded 1994).

Let’s talk about how to reach them.

Small businesses have an advantage with Millennials

The Millennial generation shares common interests and perspectives worldwide, thanks to the internet creating global communities online (not to mention the international impact of the Great Recession). For businesses using digital marketing, this emphasizes just how important it is to understand them.

But it can be a little difficult. This is a generation that grew up immersed in cutting edge digital culture but also has a strong nostalgic streak. For example, digital music continues to gain popularity, and yet, Millennials love [vinyl records and cassette tapes](#).

While outsiders see them as overly preoccupied with taking selfies, they are actually quite motivated by humanitarian causes, like protecting the environment or human rights issues.

They're drawn to products that exude human craft and care, but rather than exit mainstream culture like the hippies of the 1970s, they're quite content to balance that interest with mass-produced technologies.

And they love to champion small business.

This is where you have a very distinct advantage. And yet, [only about 15 percent of small businesses actually market directly to Millennials](#).

Small businesses are in a great position to grab their attention. Three qualities of small business that resonate with Millennials can be summed up as “craft,” “quirk,” and “pluck.”

- **Craft:** Millennials love products that have a beautiful design and are handmade or made with high quality. They especially love to discover the people behind the work—the real people working for the brand, investing creative energy and sweat equity.
- **Quirk:** Millennials are drawn especially to unique brands, and they really get into niche businesses. For them, the business' location and its investment in the surrounding community (both physically and online) matter. Nostalgic and fashion-conscious brands catch their eye.

- **Pluck:** Brands that get noticed are the ones that have a little (healthy) attitude or that have the audacity to take on the world or big business. Most importantly, a brand that stands up for humanitarian causes can be nearly as attractive to a Millennial as the product or service they sell. To them, patronizing the brand becomes a matter of joining a cause, or “[stickin’ it to the man](#).”

Brands that demonstrate these three qualities in their company culture, their products and services, and especially their marketing, tend to attract Millennials.

We had the opportunity to sit with Brandon, a co-founder of [Sand Cloud](#), a beach lifestyle brand that primarily provides stylish beach towels. His small business is growing at a rocket pace, and his prime client base are Millennials. Brandon—himself a Millennial—gave us a peek under the hood to see how his brand was able to connect with his clients, and what follows is an expansion of that conversation.

Have a cause, attract ambassadors

The first thing you'll notice about Sand Cloud's website—even before you see their product—is a call to protect the ocean: “Live to give.” Scroll down a few inches and you'll see an initiative to #savethefishies and a declaration that 10 percent of their proceeds are donated back to the company's marine life partners.

Brandon informed us that their cause is at the heart of their business and pervades every area of their marketing strategy. This kind of strategy is called [cause marketing](#). Millennials love to “shop to support,” the idea that their purchase supports a cause, and that by supporting a brand, they can be socially responsible.

In fact, Deloitte's 2016 Millennial survey, “[Winning Over the Next Generation of Leaders](#),” found that **87 percent of Millennials around the world believe that business should be measured in terms of more than just financial performance.**

Consumers are looking for brands that demonstrate social responsibility. Brands that fail to demonstrate that they back a cause will fall behind the brands that do. And in the long run, [supporting a cause is good for small businesses for a number of reasons](#) beyond marketing to Millennials.

Your business's cause should align with what you do

We asked Sand Cloud's Brandon Leibel how he came up with a cause for his brand. He told us that it was an obvious fit. They were selling beach towels on the beaches of Southern California. He knew their business needed a cause, so they chose to save the oceans.

They picked a cause that was quite natural to their brand, but it doesn't always have to be so closely linked. [TOMS](#), for example, began with founder Blake Mycoskie's vision for delivering a quality shoe while also providing shoes to children in underdeveloped countries. TOMS began by donating one pair of shoes for every pair they sold. The cause was a natural fit with their product. Over time as the business grew, they added apparel and clothing accessories—even a specialty coffee package—to their product offering. At the

same time, the mission for their philanthropic effort evolved to “Improving Lives,” which includes better access to water, safer births, eye care in developing nations, and more.

While cause marketing is powerful, it isn’t without controversy. Some have argued that cause marketing is exploitative because the brand profits from its efforts to give; however, advocates say that cause marketing is a great way for businesses to do philanthropic work in a sustainable way. **TOMS was able to take the criticism it received for its efforts and use it constructively to evolve their efforts toward their cause, growing their business while widening their philanthropic impact.**

The TOMS cause is no longer limited to shoes, but that doesn’t matter to their customers. What matters is that every purchase supports a brand that’s willing to share some of its profit to make the world a better place. And most convincing of all, the brand shows passion and commitment to the cause.

What’s most important is that you show passion and commitment to the cause.

Your cause should align with your ideal client’s passions

Brandon told us that the Millennial demographic is most interested in the “why” of a brand. Why are they doing what they’re doing? How do they impact the world?

Simon Sinek calls this the “Golden Circle,” in which he describes what sets brands like Apple apart from others, or why the Wright Brothers first achieved powered flight. Essentially there’s a pattern to the success of businesses and individual, which he calls the “Golden Circle.” Every organization knows “what” they do; some know “how” they do it. But very few know “why” they do it, the belief behind what they do. [He gives a masterful TED Talk on this topic.](#)

Millennial consumers want to know “why” you’re doing what you’re doing because they tend to support brands whose values align with their own. A cause helps these consumers have an impact on the world via the brands they support.

If your business is looking for a great cause to get behind, consider your clients’ values. [Customer avatars](#) are great tools to help you think through what kinds of causes your clients would get behind. The more your ideal client can resonate with your cause, the more powerful it will be for your brand.

Ambassador marketing

One of the most powerful ways that cause marketing can work for you is by creating a rallypoint for your biggest fans. With a cause behind your brand, they’ll have an altruistic reason to advocate for your brand or to become an ambassador for your cause on their social media networks.

Consider Sand Cloud’s ambassador program. “Ambassadors create a community around your brand,” says Brandon. Sand Cloud engages with ambassadors in a number of ways, which in turn provides tons of opportunities for their ambassadors to announce their participation with the brand as they advocate for saving the world’s oceans. The result is to extend Sand Cloud’s social reach far beyond what they could do on their own. Ambassadors have a distinct role to play at Sand Cloud:

- They have to apply to be ambassadors, which gives them a sense of responsibility and privilege
- They get discounts on products
- They are featured on Sand Cloud’s social channels
- Sand Cloud hosts beach cleanups as part of their cause, and ambassadors get a specific invitation to participate (although anyone can participate)

The fact that there's a cause behind the ambassador program increases the excitement around the brand. The ambassadors love that there's a powerful social dimension to the brand they can boast about.

Ultimately, your cause can be the central point for how you interact with your Millennial audience. The fans of your brand may love to spread the word about you, but there's only so much they can say about your brand alone. When you support a meaningful effort outside of your own brand, you provide a way to make your fans feel good about their association with you. You give them a richer reason for preaching the good news of your brand.

Experiential marketing

There's a funny acronym that might very well be the perfect nutshell descriptor for the Millennial demographic: FOMO. Fear Of Missing Out.

We can all identify—no matter what generation we fall into—with the disappointment that comes from missing out on an exciting event that our peers experienced. But the social media generation has a dilemma of its own: Their entire peer network is constantly online posting about the latest experience, and the constant social buzz creates a paranoia that exciting events could pass them by. FOMO.

Eventbrite produced a report on the subject of Millennials, experiences, and the fear of missing out. They found that a strong majority of Millennials (69 percent) experience FOMO; moreover:

“More than 8 in 10 Millennials (82%) attended or participated in a variety of live experiences in the past year, ranging from parties, concerts, festivals, performing arts and races and themed sports—and more so than other older generations (70%). But Millennials can't get enough. 72% say they would like to increase their spending on experiences rather than physical things in the next year, pointing to a move away from materialism and a growing demand for real-life experiences.”

Experiential marketing, aka engagement marketing, has been defined a number of ways, but [Agency 451 describes it best](#): Experiential marketing is about “creating unique, face-to-face branded experiences.” Everyone loves fun experiences, but this aspect of marketing capitalizes on the Millennial appetite for them and provides opportunities to immerse people in memorable, entertaining, even rewarding ones around the brand.

Some [big brands take this to a high level](#), even to the verge of guerilla marketing or jumbo-sized PR stunts, like Adidas having a public slam dunk contest with NBA superstar Derrick Rose or the Disney Channel creating a pop-up teddy bear clinic for kids to promote their show “Doc McStuffins.” The essence of the concept is to create a specific moment of experience that is exciting enough that the ones participating will feel compelled to share it online.

To be clear, experiential marketing includes participatory interaction online as well as offline. Let's turn to Sand Cloud for some examples. Their business relies on Instagram and SnapChat to amplify the experiences they create (which we'll discuss in the next chapter), but these experiences are the core of the interactions. Following are two experiences they create for their audience, one offline and one online:

Offline: Sand Cloud's cause—preserving the ocean—is at the core of the experience. Sand Cloud organizes beach cleanups, where participants volunteer to collect trash. The experience is fully branded with product giveaways to add to the fun and energy. This is an opportunity for the Sand Cloud community to join in an event. The shared experience, the giveaways, and the beach setting provide tons of photo and video opportunities, lighting up social media with their brand, building a titillating feeling of FOMO on the wider social network, and causing them to look into how they can get onboard with the next event.

Online: Sand Cloud invites their customers to participate directly in the development of their products by polling them on new designs before they launch. This creates a simple online experience that produces feelings of personal ownership and investment in the brand. Of course this kind of experience, too, encourages a little bragging on social media, which, in turn, creates a fear of missing out in the participants' wider networks. The FOMO can inspire people to sign up to follow the brand so they, too, can vote in the next round.

The power of taking offline experiences online (and vice versa)

If the Millennial generation has taught us anything about life in the internet age, it's that humans are capable of experiencing life online and offline simultaneously. To keep up, brands need to find a way to [seamlessly bridge the gap between online and offline](#). In the world of marketing lingo, this is affectionately known as "Online To Offline" (O2O). It's the act of finding clients online and bringing them to physical buying experiences.

It can be flipped the other way, too, to mean taking offline, physical experiences and turning them into online moments worth sharing.

Think about it: You have a mobile phone on your person all the time; you wear a Fitbit, or an Apple watch. Your car instantly connects to your devices. Millennials have no problem taking the physical world into the digital. In fact rather than being wowed by tech innovation like older generations, they just expect it.

Small businesses aren't somehow at a disadvantage when it comes to merging online and offline experiences. It's not about having a big budget or a super high-tech product integration. In fact, as a small business, you're in a position to make your O2O experience more authentic and personalized.

Some things to keep in mind:

Remember to plan out cohesive campaigns and brand experiences that have defined offline and online components

Keep your offline audience interacting with you online. Use branded hashtags to encourage social sharing of the offline experience. Use QR codes to take offline print directly to a digitally enhanced online experience. (Sidenote on QR codes: These little square tags were invented in Japan, and have been much more popular abroad than in the U.S. Until recently, QR reader apps have been a bit clunky, which hurt their popularity. But SnapChat began using them, and suddenly, they're cool again.)

Use online interactions to drive to offline events or storefronts. This can be as simple as a coupon valid for a specific location or event, or a social whisper campaign that builds buzz and capitalizes on FOMO.

Think like Sand Cloud: they promoted their offline beach cleanup online via social chat with their network, email invites to ambassadors, and alerts about the opportunity to participate as well as get free stuff. While at the event, participants were encouraged to share their experience with their social network in the form of photos and videos as well as the use of hashtags.

Social media behavior

While social media has changed the world, the Millennials are the early adopters who vetted new platforms as they emerged. Social media has defined Millennials as much as they've influenced the evolution of social media.

“Of course, social media isn't solely for Millennials. Gen Z, the post-Millennial generation, has already started to use social media in their own unique way. Gen-Xers and Baby Boomers have adopted social in their own ways, too.

In fact, of all the spaces where the term “Millennial” tends to refer more to a particular set of behaviors rather than simply an age bracket, it's social media.

Your choice of social channels matters

As we've been discussing, Millennial social use is a reflection of the fear of missing out and experience-sharing lifestyle.

When Millennials interact with brands, they look for the experience. The experience can be related to the craft aspect of the brand (the human interactions or the beauty of the product), or it can relate to the quirk aspect (the nostalgia or local community connection), or even the pluck of the brand (the audacity to take on the world or champion a cause).

Fact: [One-third \(33 percent\) of Millennials](#) identify social media as one of their preferred channels for communicating with businesses. Less than 5 percent of those 55 and older agree.

It's important to keep in mind where Millennials hang out and how they use social. We think of Millennials as simply flocking to the latest and greatest social media platform. After all, they are the ones who popularized the phrase, "I was doing X before it was cool." And it's true that in some cases, as Gen Xers and older Millennials caught on to popular platforms, like Facebook, some Millennials moved on because "My parents are on here." Heck, they've already begun to complain about SnapChat for the same reason.

But that's not the whole story. Yes, Millennials tend to follow trends, but that doesn't mean that they've all abandoned older social media platforms. [As SocialMediaToday points out](#), it's more complicated than you'd think.

Right now, SnapChat is the boisterous newbie in the social media space, but Instagram, which has been around for years, remains popular among Millennials. In fact, it has [continued to compete](#) strongly with SnapChat for Millennials' attention with the addition of their own version of stories and live broadcasting.

Sure, we generally think of them as young and free, but the truth is, a large percentage of Millennials are in their thirties. As Millennials age, they'll more readily settle on social platforms that they've been using and less likely to move on. Look, 41 percent of Millennials are still on Facebook. So yes, you can count on Millennials being very interested in the next social fad, but you can also count on reaching Millennials in platforms that have been around for awhile, too.

All this should come as good news for you. It means you can pair where your brand naturally hangs out with your interest in connecting with Millennials.

When developing your social media strategy for reaching Millennials, keep in mind the purpose of the platform and the way it's used. This may sound obvious, but your interactions should follow community standards, especially as Millennials are using it. For example, the Instagram community responds to photos that are well rendered and original. Many brands bumble their way through Instagram by making the mistake of sharing stock content or resharing the same images over and over again. You can't build an engaged audience that way.

For every social platform, you must first understand how the platform works, then consider how you could use it. Brands that churn out new, interesting, meaningful content on a regular basis are the ones killing it.

Relate to people

Brandon at Sand Cloud agrees that the key to social media—and in fact all aspects of marketing to Millennials—is authenticity. OK, so “authenticity” has definitely achieved buzzword status, but the essence of the concept remains important: Your brand must have a genuine, approachable personality that shines through all your interactions. See, Millennials have what has popularly been called a “B.S. meter” when it comes to digital marketing tactics. [Chris Woodard, a Millennial, describes it best:](#)

“We’ve been bombarded our whole lives by the same standards of advertising and can smell a sales pitch from a mile away.

We’re being sold something every step of the way: before we can watch a YouTube video, before we can watch a TV episode on Hulu (I’m still too stubborn to pay the extra couple bucks a month on Hulu for no commercials), before we can even finish scrolling our Facebook news feed.”

The Millennial “B.S. meter” can identify a sales effort a mile away, and if it’s not welcome, they tune it out. They don’t respond to digital marketing like that. Instead, they prefer to relate to brands and buy when they’re ready. This means that brands must remember that they are interacting with a social network rather than a whole lot of prospects.

To do it right, every interaction should feel natural to your audience. Brandon defined the authenticity of the Sand Cloud brand in this way: “We don’t try to be cool; we just try to relate to people.” This is what social is all about. You can be cool, just don’t spend your efforts trying to be cool. That’s inauthentic. Instead, spend your efforts relating to your audience. Your followers will totally think that’s cool... and authentic.

Some practical tips on relating to your audience:

- Identify why your clients would want to relate to you.
- Your cause is a powerful connection that enables you to have a multidimensional conversation with your audience.
- Remember that they're interested in the human element of your small business. Video with the real people behind the scenes will make your business come alive to your audience.
- Creating and sharing your own original content feels way more authentic than barraging your audience with recycled memes and quotable quotes. (Yes, people do respond to these, but in moderation. Sprinkle them into your mix rather than making them your mainstay.)
- Great example from Sand Cloud: they know that their followers care about saving beaches, so they may walk along the beach, see a piece of trash, and take a quick snap of them picking it up and saying something like, "Change happens one moment at a time."

Ephemeral content

Ephemeral content simply means content that exists for a period of time and then disappears. Millennials have latched onto ephemeral content, and it's quickly become a powerful way for marketers to connect with Millennial audiences.

Think for a second about how Generation X and prior interacted with photos: it was an analog process—you had to shoot the whole roll of film (generally 24 shots/roll) and have it developed before you could ever see what you'd captured. Images were about past experiences.

Along comes digital and now you can take a nearly unlimited number of shots, and you can share them with as many people as you'd like in real time. Image sharing on social is about what's happening now. From a behavior standpoint, ephemeral photos reflect the way we normally share on social media. But disappearing media add some advantages that Millennials want.

Privacy is one. If a photo is a little embarrassing, it won't resurface in an uncomfortable setting. A potential employer won't find it when they search your name during the hiring process. This means people are freer to create ephemeral content, they can be more spontaneous and less inhibited with consequences.

Second, it adds urgency. Be there, or you'll miss it. Check it out before it's gone. It's what keeps Millennials glued to their phones.

Ephemeral content for brand transparency

Disappearing content emphasizes the moment, making it feel more natural and off the cuff. Millennials see this kind of content as offering **transparency** in their experience.

Transparency refers to having a sincere, visible, and accessible online presence for the person's social following to engage with. People trust their peers to deliver the most honest information because, in a relational context, they are "transparent." That is, they don't hide true feelings or knowledge from one another.

Consider: in 2013, [Nielsen ran a poll asking what forms of advertising people trusted](#). The majority (84 percent) said they trusted a recommendation from a friend. As a brand, you can create the perception that you are a member of a network of friends, transparent, and trustworthy. Ephemeral content is a powerful tool to create that impression.

- Platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Periscope (Twitter), [and more](#) provide ephemeral content
- Authentic interactions work best with ephemeral content—short engaging bursts do very well
- You can [create customized geotags](#) (special filters that appear to people in a specific geographic area) to enhance your events or local promotions
- Ephemeral content works really well for creating the feeling that your followers are insiders, getting sneak peeks at new products, special deals, and exclusive events

Recorded and Live Video

Internet video encompasses a wide variety of applications, from live streaming videos on social to webinars and other recorded videos. It can be embedded in an email, shared on social, or found in search. It can be created by a 7-year-old on a smartphone, a Fortune 500 company with a big budget, and anyone in between. In fact, Millennials are used to discovering video that competes for their attention against a wide variety of content in a number of contexts.

As a result, Millennials tend to lean toward video that is easily and quickly consumed. The best video:

- Gets right to the point.
- Entertains. Whether it's funny, or visually beautiful, or emotionally moving, it should capture the imagination.
- Targets the right audience. (Millennials get annoyed with irrelevant content.)
- Must be compatible with mobile devices. Eighty-five percent of Millennials have a smartphone, and they consume most digital content through that device. Some ways to create mobile-ready video:
 - Caption the spoken parts so the video can be watched without sound.
 - Keep it short. (Imagine they're watching this in between meetings or in a subway station: distractions abound, and they'll scroll past lengthy content.)

Live video

In a way, live video streaming was always inevitable, given the Millennial interest in authentic social media interactions. With live video, users can stream an event and interact with the audience as they post comments and other kinds of responses. This type of video provides immediacy, spontaneity, and instant feedback.

The big, familiar platforms offer live video streaming: Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, and Periscope for Twitter. But they're not the only ones that offer it. [You may want to explore the field to see which platform would work best for going live with your audience.](#)

Instagram and SnapChat offer ephemeral video, which gives users an even stronger authentic feel, because they can behave freer on the video knowing that it won't last forever. It promotes more emotion, more edgy content, and especially a sense of exclusivity that contributes to FOMO, since your audience could miss out on the video event.

It's really about immediacy and being able to share real experiences with your network in real time. This appeals to people who are used to experiencing the world through phones—and through other people's interpretations of their experiences. Being live works exceptionally well when there's an event associated with it, though live interviews can also be fun.

Following are some helpful tips for successfully running a live video:

- Tell people ahead of time you'll be going live. Pump up your event and capitalize on FOMO—it doesn't even need to be an epic event. When you announce your upcoming live video, it will inevitably trigger interest among your fans.
- Be certain you have a solid Wi-Fi connection when you go live. Yes, this is a super practical tip, but it's also really easy to overlook. There's nothing worse than a broken connection.
- Stay live long enough to give people opportunity to engage with you. Facebook and Periscope live videos get archived, but Instagram and SnapChat don't, so anyone who missed it, missed it. Longer live video gives your audience an opportunity to catch what you're doing.
- Be sure to shout out to commenters in real time. This will increase the perception that you're engaged.
- Be creative! The more interesting and fun your live moments are, the more your audience will want to be available to catch you next time. Just remember, authenticity rules the day. Don't try to be cool—try to relate.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, marketing to Millennials is really about staying current with the trends in a personalized and authentic way. If you want to market to Millennials, you have to market like a Millennial. Take a page out of Sand Cloud's book: "Millennials like simplicity; they don't want your brand in their face," Brandon said. They aren't into gimmicks or kitschy offers. They want to be involved with a brand that makes them feel good, that syncs with the social media streams they've carefully crafted. They don't want to follow brands that produce uninteresting content any more than they would want to follow a stranger with vastly different political views.

Despite the cliché, Millennials aren't kids anymore. They're making buying decisions. They run businesses. They're the ones that make or break social media platforms. It's OK not fully understand them. But it's not OK to ignore them. The longer you go, the more outdated your business will look.

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