

Who Are We Designing For?


The Generational Dilemma

Susan Weinschenk, PhD, CUA / Chief of Technical Staff
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The background is a solid teal color. It features several thin, white, curved lines that sweep across the page. Two small, white, starburst-like decorative elements are placed on the lines: one near the bottom center and another on the right side.

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Executive Summary

Who are you designing your website for?

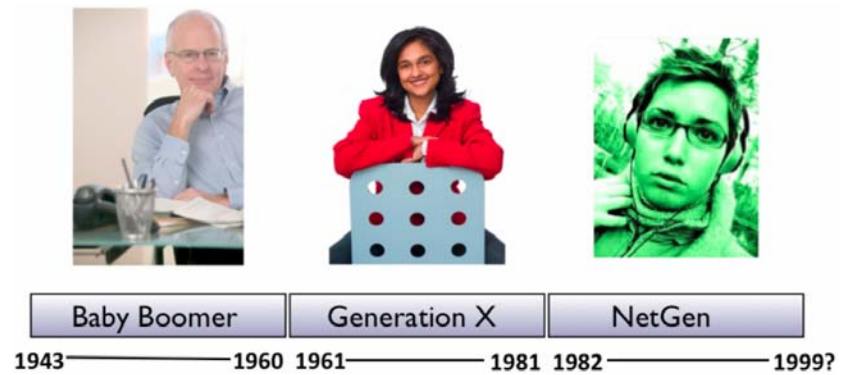
User experience practitioners are often challenged with designing for at least three demographics with different needs, different interests, and *very* different ways of interacting with technology:

- › *Baby Boomers*: grew up with television and have more or less transitioned to the Internet Age
- › *Generation X*: the practical, savvy, first “Web Generation” of online users, have also dominated the Web design community
- › *Net Generation* (a.k.a. Millennials, Generation Y): using technology since they could use a mouse—it’s as natural as breathing

It is rare to have the luxury of focusing on only one age group. User experience designers must learn to *recognize* and *reconcile* the needs of their main user demographics. Designing for generational differences is a critical component of creating websites that are usable, persuasive, and engaging.

This paper examines each group’s tendencies, attitudes, and expectations toward technology. We’ll conclude by highlighting the implications for Web design. For purposes of discussion, we’re admittedly stereotyping, along with taking a Western-centric cultural viewpoint.

Age demographics – the crowded Web



The number of Americans born between 1943 and 1960 exceeds 78 million. As a group, they have exercised the greatest influence on marketing and culture over the last 40 years, and their considerable purchasing power is not going away any-time soon.

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Baby Boomers have been in the spotlight so long, it's easy to forget they are no longer the largest age demographic. In fact, they haven't been for years—now it's their kids' turn. Known as the Net Generation, there are more than 80 million people in the US born between 1982 and 1999 (we use a question mark in the picture above, since generational historians like Strauss and Howe believe it's a 20-year generation). Like most generations, “Net Gens” are very different from their parents, particularly when it comes to the way they interact with technology.

With these two colossal population segments on either side of them, Generation X looks fairly small. Born after Baby Boomers and before Net Gens, there are only 55 million Americans born between 1961 and 1981. Ironically, they are usually the ones designing most websites—not just for themselves, but for Baby Boomers, Net Gens, seniors, and kids, too.

Any designer brings his or her own interests, biases, and orientation to the job. A Gen-Xer will naturally be driven by Gen X concerns. The challenge for designers in the next decade and beyond will be to create websites and devices that a target population—any particular generation or several of them—*can* and *will* want to use. Getting it right requires an understanding of how all three age groups think, how they perceive and process information, and what they expect from technology.

The Boomer way — a utilitarian approach

Baby Boomers think of technology as a tool. They use computers and the Internet to get specific tasks done. Boomers prefer simple, predictable, step-by-step designs that help them save time.

Boomers' online activity does not include as much entertainment or social networking as younger generations. My initial studies show that Boomers are not downloading as much music, watching as many videos, or pursuing as many hobbies on the Internet as Generation X, and particularly NetGen users. Boomers tend to stick to more familiar technologies like television and DVDs to entertain themselves. By and large, they have already established their social networks and maintain them over the phone and in person, rather than through social networking sites.

Baby Boomers prefer:

- › navigation bars in predictable places
- › hierarchies of information
- › not too much info on a screen
- › things that don't move and change without being asked to, such as scrolling images, or videos that play automatically

Generation X – tech-savvy but pragmatic

Gen Xers, being in between the other two generations, fall into a continuum—some exhibit behaviors closer to Boomers, while others fall nearer the Net Generation. Technology is more woven into their lifestyle, but it still tends to be used for practical tasks. Interestingly, most mainstream websites have been designed by Gen Xers.

As the first demographic to use the Internet widely, Gen Xers are more familiar with the Web than Boomers. This familiarity gives many Gen Xers a “do it yourself” mindset online. They want to get information on their own and take advantage of self-service functionality. ASP-model sites like TurboTax are designed for people who are used to taking care of their own business on the Web.

Gen Xers’ approach to the Web is more sophisticated than the Baby Boomer generation’s. Generation Xers often like to customize and personalize when possible, especially if it gives them the ability to have everything they need in one place. Excite.com and other major players in the 1990s “Internet Portal” fad emphasized customizability features to compete for Gen X users. Gen Xers also made “themes” and “skins” popular features of websites and software UIs.

While they are comfortable with social networking, Gen Xers are more likely to use LinkedIn and other career-focused sites, rather than personal/social sites such as Facebook. They have a fairly practical, businesslike relationship with the Web. In the book *Generations*, William Strauss and Neil Howe turn the “slacker” Gen X image on its head. Strauss and Howe characterize Gen Xers as pragmatic and perceptive, more focused on business realities than big ideas. They contrast the “Reactive” Generation X with their “Prophet/Idealist” Baby Boomer counterparts.

But the pragmatic, Gen X approach to technology is very different from the Net Generation.¹

The Net Generation – we are the interface

The Net Generation is the largest demographic of technology users, with more than two billion across the world. Most significantly, they are the first generation to have grown up with computers and the Internet. The way NetGens interact with technology is fundamentally different from either their Boomer parents or their Gen X siblings/aunts/uncles.

If the Web is a tool to Baby Boomers and an interface to Generation X, then Net Generation has transcended the interface altogether. Net Geners don’t think about

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“going on the Internet” to “look something up.” They don’t have to think about it at all. Telephones are so much a part of everyone’s life... no one thinks about connecting to the telephone network to make a call. You just pick up the phone and do it. To the Net Generation, going online is like picking up a phone or a pencil. It’s more transparent than to Gen Xers or Baby Boomers.

Online connections are deeply woven into Net Gen work, play, and social communication. Net Geners are extraordinarily comfortable in Web environments and naturally oriented toward online communities. The social lives of many young people between the ages of 16 and 22 play out within the milieu of Facebook, in particular.

The Net Gen network effect also has a strong viral element. Social networks are so pervasive among the Net Generation that information is processed and evaluated with amazing speed. Networks govern the process like the group mind of an insect colony. And only the best, most valuable, *coolest* stuff makes the cut. Content, features and other online information has to be attractive, innovative, and possibly quirky enough to register in Net Gen consciousness.

Net Gen users are a paradox. They are impatient, notorious for their short attention spans both online and offline. [One Generation X writer entitled a blog entry, “*More Ritalin Please... Generation Y is here*”²] And yet they will “waste”—a favored Net Gen term—an enormous amount of time on sites that are sufficiently quirky and interactive.

Net Gen users will not only tolerate changing information on a web page, they like it. They want information to change, they expect video and audio to be there, they do not rely on navigation bars to find information or to get a flavor for a site. They are sensitive to pictures and visuals. Flash a picture of an older person on the home page and they will likely decide in a heartbeat that the site is not for them.

Zeitgeist or artifact?

User experience concerns make it worth asking a fundamental question about the Net Generation.

Are their unique online behaviors and attitudes toward technology purely a result of their youth—implying they’ll grow out of them with time? One could argue their short attention spans and obsessions with the quirky and unusual are just artifacts of post-adolescence. Some critics feel that the Net Generation is being faulted—or credited—with traits that other generations have shared, as well.

Or rather, does their singular approach to technology mean they have a distinct identity that will carry through the years? Are they really representatives of the *Zeitgeist* (a German term for “spirit of the age”)—the intellectual and cultural climate of the new era? Strauss and Howe feel they are. In their cyclical model, the Millennial Generation (i.e. Net Gen) is a *Hero/Civic* generation in the mold of the G.I. Generation, born 1901-1924, with heroic leaders and aggressive advocates of technological progress and social harmony. In their study of the Net Generation, *Millennials Rising*, Strauss and Howe conclude that Net Gens are already the best community builders since their “greatest Generation” grandparents.³ Whether zeitgeist or artifact, however, Net Gen use patterns have profound implications for the user experience practice.

Multi-generational design

Though it's important to know how each of these demographics process information and interact with technology, few businesses have only one age group coming to their sites. Best practices for multiple age groups are important for every designer to have in his or her toolkit. And when the site is visited by all three age groups, designers must reach and not push away a variety of age group users on each page.

For instance, visual elements that flash, move or change rapidly are annoying to most Baby Boomers. And while it might sound ageist, it is a fact that pictures of older people—seniors and, yes, Baby Boomers—will drive younger users away. Gray hair is fine if a site deals with retirement benefits and the audience is exclusively older. To appeal to users of all age groups, however, images of younger people should be used.

Sites for all age groups should also have straightforward, easy-to-use functionality—and of course good usability (though people may learn to work around poor usability if the subject matter is important enough to them). Interestingly, all ages dislike fonts that are too small, so don't be fooled into thinking you can use small fonts if the site isn't for Baby Boomers.

If you need to appeal to all three generations, try to build a site that has basic easy functionality at its heart (Boomers) but that can be customized (Gen Xers) and has added plug-ins for more complex features (Net Gens). Shutterfly is a positive example, with its simple method of uploading photos and making calendars or cards, yet it has built in more powerful and complex capabilities. *All* generations have

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become biased by the “Google Effect”—people expect to navigate sites via search and become frustrated if it doesn’t work like Google—so make sure you’ve got a good strong search on your site.

That said, there are some features that may have outlived their usefulness for *every* age group. Case in point: the one-size-fits-all home page. We are now familiar enough with our generational target groups to know they have particular interests, goals, and patience levels. We also know those usually aren’t the same as another group’s. So a generalized home page doesn’t seem to serve anybody’s interest, particularly if the users are returning visitors. Instead, users could be:

- › given a log-in and then presented with targeted content
- › taken to a landing page designed around their interests
- › offered targeted content on the page where they already are

Generation-specific design does not change fundamental concepts of user experience. Usability principles still hold true. Techniques to design for persuasion, emotion, and trust (PET design™) remain the same. But now that we understand the different drivers of these three age demographics, we may have to employ different approaches for each group. And what is effective for all three may not be the most *efficient* solution. So defining your target personas precisely and conducting interviews with representative users remains paramount.

Only by designing sites consciously can you be sure of reaching and holding your target audience with smart features that reach across generations.

Footnotes

1. Strauss, William and Howe, Neil., 1992. *Generations: The History of America’s Future*. New York: Harper Perennial
2. “More Ritalin Please, Generation Y is here” April 15, 2008, Space Cynics from <http://spacecynic.wordpress.com/2008/04/15/more-ritalin-please-generation-y-is-here/>
3. Strauss, William & Howe, Neil., 2000. *Millennials Rising*. New York: Vintage.

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About the author



Susan Weinschenk, PhD, CUA
Chief of Technical Staff
Director of Training
Human Factors International

With a PhD in psychology and 30 years of experience as a human factors consultant, Susan has built her career around applying insights on human behavior to the design of technology. Susan was chosen one of the “Top 100 Women in Computing” by *Open Computing* magazine. She is a sought after speaker and author of several books. Her newest book, *Neuro Web Design: What makes them click?*, published by PeachPit Press, will be released in January 2009.

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Human Factors
International

410 West Lowe, P.O. Box 2020
Fairfield, IA 52556
Phone: 800.242.4480
Fax: 641.472.5412
hfi@humanfactors.com
www.humanfactors.com