

Generation C

The new generation of consumers



The Generation C consumer has more control than any other generation. They are commonly characterised by words beginning with 'C':

One: **customer creation**

In our new world, customers co-create products and services. For example, the Procter & Gamble Connect and Develop programme now produces more than 35% of the company's innovations (P&G has launched more than 100 new products for which some aspect of development came from outside the company).

Consumers can also create their own enterprises. Sony PlayStation2's Noiseupthesuburbs.com invites the emerging generation of DIY music pioneers, from bedroom DJs to pirate radio and independent label founders, to make use of its music-making software.

Generation C will also expect customisation. With consumers disclosing their most intimate secrets online via blogs, Google has essentially created a 'domestic database', i.e. a world-wide database loaded with customers' details and profiles. So companies are Googling customers for instant personal information. For example, The Bel Air Hotel in LA Googles first-time guests upon arrival, based on their reservation details. This can lead to personalised services like assigning guests a room with morning sun if Googling shows the guest enjoys jogging early in the day etc

Two: **from comment to control**

The new generation takes stakeholder involvement to a new level. Customers are invited to comment but they are then involved in designing and implementing their recommendations. Sure we can seek people's opinion on laws, for example, but what if we could design our own laws? In NY, for example, assembly member Jimmy Meng is sponsoring a "Make Your Own Law" contest, inviting his constituents to write legislation with the promise that the best proposal will be introduced as a bill.

Meanwhile, in Lewisham residents are helping to keep the southeast borough of London clean – after installing special software on their cameraphone, observant townspeople can snap a picture of graffiti or overflowing litter bins, enter location details, and send it to the local council. The picture is then posted on the council's website, and cleaning crews are sent to resolve the issue.

Three: **from content to coaching**

The new generation are phenomenally well informed. We should never presume ignorance. They receive their information from a huge array of sources, from personal experience to digital TV and the web. We all personalise information into our own lives. The big difference today is a willingness to share what we do with our knowledge and experience. We share it with anyone who wants to listen.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that 44% of US adult internet users (53 million people aged 18 and over) have created content for the online world through building or contributing to web sites, creating blogs, and sharing files. 21% of internet users have posted photos on web sites, 20% say they have allowed others to download video or music files from their computers.

But information and knowledge are not enough, we now want the skills to do something with it. There has been a huge increase in courses aimed at improving creative skills. One of the most popular offerings is "The Theatre" events at Apple Stores, where visitors can participate in one-hour workshops every day, free of charge. Also check out Sony 101, which offers free online courses to consumers on a variety of technology and industry topics. UK training organisation The Brefi Group has created Bytesize coaching for clients. With the right knowledge and tools and techniques, we filter these learnings through our own experience to create new connections.

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Four: **citizen journalism**

This is spreading rapidly as technology turns customers into 'reporters'. Check out OhMyNews, the South Korean 'citizen participatory journalism' showcase, which boasts 700,000 daily readers and 41,000 citizen journalists, who receive USD 20 for a newsworthy piece. It is now going international, with a helpful USD 11 million investment from Softbank. Or NowPublic.com where you can assign a story and get files back to match your request by citizen journalists on location. Also Google Video Upload where anyone can upload and promote videos for free.

Major news organisations are also following the format. The BBC encourages customers to submit pictures and videos, which may then be used immediately on any BBC News outlet. In addition to an e-mail address for content, the BBC also has a phone number so camera phone pics can be sent instantly. The trend is also apparent on TV networks. On Al Gore's new Youth TV network, Current, programming will include viewer submissions uploaded to the network's website.

The trend continues into other forms of communication like advertising. Advertisers are increasingly comfortable sacrificing some element of control. American Express commissioned leading directors to tell their 2-minute stories of their experience of American Express – giving them full control over content. But it doesn't go far enough. The Dutch comedy TV show 6Pack champions the best customer made commercials, resulting in one million downloads for the most popular submission.

Five: **from conversations to communities of interest**

Once we are informed (and increasingly coached-up) we talk. And when we talk, we tell stories. And because we know that word of mouth is the most powerful form of persuasion, consumers are taking control over the destination of companies. On hundreds of thousands of blogs, community sites, forums, viral emails and bulletin boards, consumers relentlessly exchange views, brilliant experiences, complaints and comments about products and services.

The www.niketalk.com site is the non-affiliated Nike community. It has received over 200 million visits and www.ipodlounge.com gets more than 5 million hits a day from users talking about what they would like the next iPod to do or sharing adaptations they've already created in their basement or garage. Honda UK is sponsoring a new independent blog network, 2TalkAbout.com. Also check out 'How Would You Change or Improve' blogs that cover everything from MySpace to Skype to iPods.

People connect by their interests and by their passions. It can be done by sharing information, stories or skills. It can involve ambassadors, advocates or distribution lists. It can lead to meetings, conversations across any type of device, spur of the moment events or planned events. It can even involve virtual worlds.

Funky platforms exist like Cyworld – a South Korean community which now provides more than 17 million citizens (1/3 of the S Korean population) with their own cyber-outlet, where self made poems, stories, songs, photos, videos and whatever can be shown off to other members. Cyworld has its own currency and this is bringing in about 150 million won (USD 160,000 / EUR 116,000) a day.

Generation C create their own playgrounds, their own comfort zones, their own universe. Check out the huge success of YouTube, MySpace and the burgeoning number of social networking sites.

In some sites or metaverses such as Second Life, users create truly alternate worlds, in which brands are sometimes welcome, and sometimes not. The Habbo service allows Chinese users to purchase items that will be both virtual and physical. Users can purchase items such as flowers, clothes and movie tickets online in the virtual community, while the physical items are delivered to their homes the next day. These virtual universes can host real-world product launches and events and there are examples of metaverses being used for social good – StageCoach island is a digital environment intended to help young people learn financial responsibility (now moved from Second Life to its own domain) and the American Cancer Society ran a Relay For Life within Second Life.

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Six: **convictions and beliefs lead to actions**

With their new power, Generation C have increasing confidence in their own convictions. They are less dependent on companies, politicians, journalists and religions. That doesn't mean they don't believe. They do believe. But they make their own call about the meaning of life – which tends to be: "find out what you want to do in life and do it."

UK campaigning company Corporate Culture identified six key belief systems held by consumers through research into customer trust. Some people want to improve the world, some want to improve their world. Some want to live now; some want to plan for a secure future. It's these beliefs that drive who people talk to, what they do and what they buy. Welcome to the new world.

Here's how it all hangs together:

Convictions and beliefs drive interests and action....so people become increasingly informed....creating their own content....coach each other to build their skills....hold conversations....which lead to communities of interest....virtual and real....which can lead to commentary, citizen journalism, customisation, campaigning and the creation of new products and services. Generation C is here. And each year they will give birth to something new that we cannot yet see. But we'll keep our eyes open.

Generation C is a term initially coined by trendwatching.com