The Perspective

AUDIENCE STRATEGY

They Know You're Marketing To Them. Now What?

Being familiar with an audience's culture is only the beginning. The harder question is whether your brand deserves a place in their lives.

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Founder & CEO

Imagine watching a creator explain a product. You know it is an advertisement. You keep watching anyway.

Later, a different brand uses the right slang, the right soundtrack and a familiar joke. You scroll past.

You spotted the sales pitch both times. In the first, there was something you wanted to know. In the second, recognizing the joke was as far as your interest went.

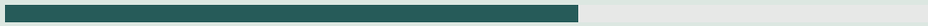
This is a useful distinction for businesses trying to reach younger audiences. Cultural references can make creative work enjoyable and relevant. They still need to connect with a reason for someone to care about the offer.

Ogilvy Consulting's 2026 Gen Z PULSE offers several findings worth thinking about here. Read together, they invite a more interesting question than “How do we get Gen Z's attention?” What role are we actually asking a brand to play in someone's life?

01 Being Seen Is Different From Being Defined

62%

Placed high importance on expressing their identity publicly



54%

Said they adapt their presentation to different audiences



Separate Findings / US, UK & Australia

Ogilvy Consulting, Gen Z PULSE, 2026, p. 13.

These are separate findings, but the juxtaposition is revealing.

It is easy for a marketer to see an expressive public profile and believe they have found a complete person. Here is the aesthetic. Here are the interests. Here is the type of customer.

But a public profile is a selection. It does not tell us how someone speaks at work, what they worry about privately, or which parts of themselves they prefer to keep among friends. A person can genuinely enjoy something without wanting it to become their defining characteristic.

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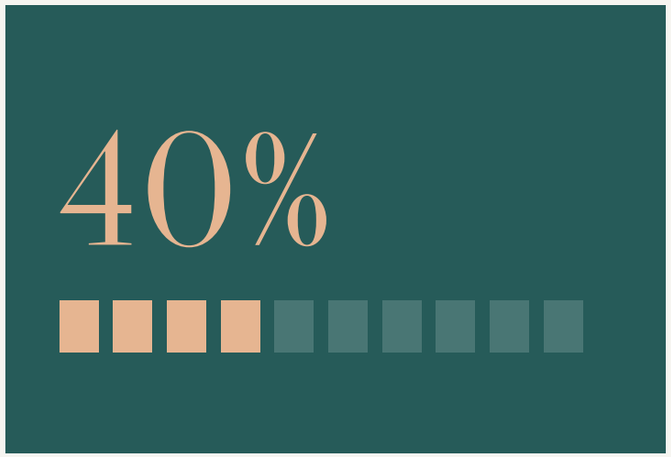
That matters when a brand tries too hard to announce, “We understand people like you.” The closer it gets to categorizing someone, the more room it leaves to get them wrong.

We would rather start with the moment than the label. There is a difference between selling clothes “for ambitious young professionals” and showing a piece that works for the interview, the first day and the evening afterwards. One names a type of person. The other lets the person recognize something useful for themselves.

A brand can be distinctive without insisting that its customer adopt an entire identity along with the purchase. Sometimes the most respectful invitation leaves space for people to decide what the product means to them.



02 Advice Can Be Welcome. The Sales Script May Not Be.



Wanted input from others while keeping the final say on important life decisions.

Ogilvy Consulting, Gen Z PULSE, 2026, p. 10.

Wanting control does not require knowing everything already. Asking a question can be an exercise of judgement rather than a surrender of it.

This gives businesses something worth examining in their own communications. Does the campaign help someone assess the offer, or does every explanation lead to the same predetermined answer: buy now?

A product demonstration that shows a limitation can be more useful than another declaration of excellence. A creator who explains who an item suits gives the audience a way to judge the recommendation. A business willing to answer a difficult question in public gives people something more substantial than its own assurance that it can be trusted.

None of this requires pretending there is no commercial intention. That pretence can make the exchange feel more awkward. The brand wants a sale; the customer wants to decide whether the sale makes sense. Good marketing can serve both purposes.

The creative challenge is to make that assessment interesting. Show the product doing something. Let an informed person examine it. Give the audience a detail they would not otherwise have known. Entertainment and explanation can occupy the same film.

03 A Place In The Feed Is Not A Place In Someone's Life

Nearly

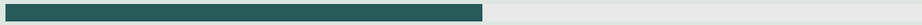
75%

Described belonging as requiring intentional effort or substantial work.

Ogilvy Consulting, Gen Z PULSE, 2026, p. 13.

52%

Wanted more in-person social time.



Ogilvy Consulting, Gen Z PULSE, 2026, p. 17.

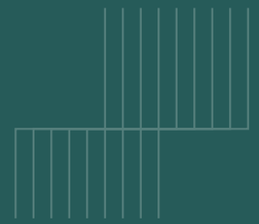
Separate Findings / US, UK & Australia

For an agency, those findings raise a question about the kind of participation we design. We might count a tagged photograph as engagement. The person attending may judge the same event by whether they enjoyed themselves, met someone or felt comfortable staying.

Those are different measures of success. A campaign needs to accommodate both.

Picture an activation where every interaction ends with a request to post, scan, tag or register. Now picture one where the product is available to try, the host makes introductions and the best conversation happens away from the branded photo wall. The second can still generate excellent content. It also has a reason to exist beyond generating content.

Give Them A Reason To Stay Anyway.



The same principle applies online. A useful account, an enjoyable series or a well-run customer service channel does not always need to become a “community”. People may value a business without wanting a relationship with it. Asking for less can be a sensible expression of confidence in what you offer.

For us, that is the more interesting challenge in marketing to younger audiences. How much are we asking of people, and what are we giving them in return?

A brand does not need to disguise its ambition. It needs to make the exchange worthwhile. The audience may recognize the marketing immediately. Give them a reason to stay anyway.

Research

Ogilvy Consulting’s 2026 Gen Z PULSE, powered by Ideally; 2,100 respondents across the US, UK and Australia. EME’s scenarios and interpretation are editorial analysis.

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