

7

ways to connect with millennial shoppers

Millennials—young adults ages 18 to 34—have quite the reputation. Some say they’re fickle, brand obsessed or self-absorbed. Other market data show the opposite: that they’re mindful, logical and frugal. Spurring this confusion is the fact that this demographic spans various stages of life, from college to marriage to parenthood. The good news is that wherever they happen to fall on the spectrum, millennials are highly receptive to the values and products offered by natural food stores and brands. The trick is learning to distinguish how different millennials approach the idea of healthy eating.

Here’s some help. New Hope Natural Media’s Market Innovation Consumer Segmentation study surveyed 5,500 U.S. consumers in July 2013; the findings are reflective of 90 percent of the U.S. population. The survey found that millennials fall squarely into three different shopper profiles:



They’re mothers. Chief Health Officers, as defined by the study, are parents (often mothers) of young children, and they are willing to test out and pay more for health products backed by science. They take their role as health guardian seriously and do the research to prove it.

They’re convenience seekers.

Dubbed Guilty and Defeated shoppers by researchers, this group is time strapped and cash conscious. So while they value health, they don’t always have the time or budget to shop for and cook healthy foods. Although this makes them feel guilty, their stressful lives make it difficult for them to take control of their and their families’ wellness.



They’re fad focused. The #Young4Ever shopper will do whatever it takes to stay feeling and looking young. They are early trend adopters and trust the opinions of their peers. In the end, because they value the longevity that healthy foods bring them, they’re not as concerned with price as other groups.

So how do retailers win over these very different shoppers? *Natural Foods Merchandiser* spoke with Carlotta Mast, executive director of content and insights at New Hope Natural Media, and Eric Pierce, director of strategy and insights for New Hope’s NEXT platform, to gather seven practical tips.

- 1 Promote research in-store.** “Staff must be prepared to answer questions in a way that creates confidence in a store’s authority,” Pierce says. “It is key to be able to communicate that you’ve made intentional choices of the brands you carry and to create a sense of confidence that your store is an expert source.” Indeed, Chief Health Officers respond powerfully to research, and education will set retailers apart from the competition. So it’s critical that staff are equipped with knowledge in this area, Mast says. She suggests having weekly meetings to keep employees informed.
- 2 Extend online.** Providing information online is an easy and effective way to prove your competence to Chief Health Officers. “Being able to tell shoppers that you’ve curated articles and information on your website, or providing them with a list of resources online, is a great way to offer the expert opinions they value,” Pierce says.
- 3 Educate.** Hectic and overwhelmed, Guilty and Defeated Shoppers are difficult—but not impossible—to win over. “Any way to make cooking easier for this group is a way to reach them,” Mast says. “These shoppers know they’re not making the best choices, and they feel guilty about it. So retailers need to make cooking and healthy eating as approachable as possible, and never judgmental.” Easy-to-emulate cooking demonstrations work well, Mast adds, and partnering with local practitioners or wellness-oriented service providers can drive these shoppers to your store. ➔

4 Consider convenience. The products that resonate most with Guilty and Defeated shoppers are those that are convenient and satisfy their sense of guilt. “If you can offer something that’s really easy and sounds healthy, they can feel good about their choice, and you haven’t made their lives more complex,” Pierce says. “Make small steps. What are the easy choices you can help them step into?” Convenient frozen and fresh meals, as well as affordable grab-and-go options, are a good place to start.

5 Engage and interact. Whether it’s online, on social media or in person at community events, young shoppers want to be communicated with—not marketed to. And because #Young4Ever shoppers care deeply about and learn through the opinions of their peers, positive word of mouth is critical to a store’s reputation with this group. “Find ways to engage your loyal shoppers so that they’re sharing or promoting your business more,” Pierce says. This could mean Pinterest contests, Twitter surveys or Facebook photo inquiries. “#Young4Ever shoppers are likely to see these and respond,” he adds.

6 Merchandise mindfully. To reach Guilty and Defeated shoppers, the most compelling merchandising will focus on convenience and cost effectiveness. “Some retailers do a nice job of being competitively priced on staples like dairy and produce,” Mast says. “Merchandise some of those items together so you can show how a shopper can actually prepare a really healthy meal affordably and easily, so it’s not overwhelming.”

7 Keep on top of trends. Reaching the #Young4Ever shopper through merchandising warrants a very different approach. Because they’re interested in trends, these shoppers will respond to merchandising plans that show that your store is up on fads. “They’re looking for the latest and greatest way to look and feel better,” Mast says. “Think about a paleo diet endcap, for example, or run a paleo challenge. Find ways to support the people who want to adopt this lifestyle. This gets people excited about what your store carries, but also shows you’re supporting something that is really trendy and popular right now.”

Raising awareness for a safer future

Big changes start with small actions, including what you put on your face and body. That’s the fundamental principle behind Protect Our Breasts (POB, protectourbreasts.org), a nonprofit educational initiative based at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Protect Our Breasts’ young women ambassadors, clad in the organization’s signature green scarves and led by Executive Director Cynthia Barstow, personify a singular mission: to reduce rates of breast cancer and other diseases linked to toxin exposure from everyday products and choices. “There isn’t a lot of messaging like this around,” says Keely Griffin, a UMass student and Protect Our Breasts executive board member. “It’s short and sweet and to the point. Usually people come back to us and want to know more.”

Knowing that early-life habits lead to lasting patterns, the Protect Our Breasts organization spreads its message through college and community outreach events and social campaigns, arming others—especially

young women and men—with the information they need to choose safe products for every aspect of their lives. What may be the most powerful thing of all is how POB makes often-heavy information accessible and social. “We are bombarded with ads; we are skeptical and kind of tune it out. When it’s peer-to-peer communication, it stops people in their tracks,” Griffin adds.

At Protect Our Breasts, Griffin organizes educational and fun social campaigns such as Toxic Talk Tuesdays and Phase Out Fridays, which highlight certain toxic ingredients to eliminate from food and personal care products; such events often turn into ongoing dialogue. “Millennials in general are pretty informed. They research a lot more. The biggest question that people ask us is: ‘Which types of products do you use?’” Though social media is a good entry point to providing answers to these kinds of questions, Griffin notes that the most powerful conversations still happen face to face.

“We want to highlight that we are the next generation and want to see a safer future.” And the Protect Our Breasts team feels confident that changes students make during college are there to stay for the “real world.” One key reason: When the messaging is right, students don’t make these changes out of guilt or fear, but rather because they want to live healthier—and enjoy themselves doing it. Buying a nontoxic mascara equals bragging rights, Griffin says.

