



## The marketing gens aren't the genuine article

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***On their own, terms like gen X and gen Y are just smoke and mirrors, writes Ross Honeywill.***

EVERY day we are assaulted by reductions of our rich social landscape through the use of terms like "baby boomer" and "generation X" or "gen Y".

However, these crude life-stage descriptors, so loved by demographers and social commentators, are all part of a smoke-and-mirrors hoax.

Richard Dawkins, scientist and author of *The Selfish Gene*, famously said: "If something is true, no amount of wishing can make it untrue."

Dawkins applauds the reduction of complex subjects into simplified forms, explaining what is otherwise inexplicable in ways that are easily understood - unless, of course, that simplification transforms it from the rich and insightful to the simplistic and banal.

In Dawkins' terms, the world is a more complex place than gen Y advocates would have us believe, and no amount of wishing can make that untrue.

Life-stage labels like gen Y are based on only one factor - age. They're great at telling us how old someone is.

How can anyone seriously imagine, however, that age alone determines our values, attitudes, behaviour and work choices?

Take gen Y, which includes all Australians in the 14-to-28 age group.

This group includes priests, alcoholics, politicians, police officers, musicians, unemployed labourers, doctors, lovers, haters, lesbians, liberals, believers, heretics, scientologists, rich, poor, spenders, savers, technophiles, technophobes . . .

Yet gen Y is simplistically described as teens and 20-somethings who are techno savvy, in control of their lives, demanding of the work-life balance, upwardly mobile and time poor.

This is, the story goes, what makes them a force to be reckoned with; a generation to be attracted by employers and a rich vein of consumers to be mined by marketers.

But what about the poorly educated 26-year-old single mother with two children, on welfare, who is trying to find some casual work just to pay the bills?

She is a gen Y, and is certainly time poor - but she has no money, or energy, to learn about new technology, and she lives a life almost completely out of her control.

What age alone fails to provide is any insight into why or how choices will be made, or who within a particular age range is most likely to behave one way or the other.

Something miraculous happens, however, when we combine NEOs with gen Y.

NEO, an acronym for "new economic order", is that band of 4 million Australians who read more newspapers, dominate the internet, spend more, earn more and demand more from just about everyone.

Identified using the Roy Morgan Single Source database that collects data from 120,000 respondents each year around the world, NEOs add an ingredient to gen Y that both explains and explodes the myth.

More than a million gen Ys are also NEOs, and this is who the demographers have had in their observational sights all along.

For example, almost 90 per cent of the gen Y NEOs are in the top third of spenders in the economy, compared with only a quarter of gen Ys.

Despite all the hype, only one in 25 gen Ys is actually in a managerial or professional occupation. But proportion this jumps to one in four when we take NEOs who are in the gen Y age range - and, remarkably, that's 50 per cent more than the Australian population as a whole.

When compared with gen Ys purely as an age group, gen Y NEOs are six times more likely to earn in excess of \$70,000 a year.

They are urban dwellers, these gen Y NEOs, with three-quarters living in Australia's capital cities - almost half of them live in Melbourne and Sydney alone.

And, in another poke in the eye to the gen Y hype, two-thirds of gen Ys live at home with their parents, while two-thirds of gen Y NEOs live away from their parents in either rented or purchased accommodation.

Let's look at the hot topic of climate change: gen Ys are 60 per cent less likely than the general population to buy a Prius, Toyota's hybrid car; whereas gen Y NEOs are 428 per cent more likely than the average Australian to put their money where their green credentials are and buy a Prius.

Terms like gen Y and baby boomer are undoubtedly useful when they help demographers predict how much health care will be needed over the next decade, or what the workforce age profile will look like as the population matures.

It's only when those demographers stray into the realms of behaviour and attitudes

that we see all the smoke and mirrors and guesswork for what it is.

Age is useful, but it's just one demographic factor, and it's not until age is combined with something more sophisticated that it gets very sexy.

Combine it with the 194 factors that define NEOs and it becomes a bellwether; evidence-based rather than just the product of an overhyped imagination.

Age on its own might fascinate some, but it really is just a statistic. And, as Dawkins would say: "If something is true, no amount of wishing can make it untrue."

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