

MARKETING

Generational Marketing in Bars & Restaurants

By **Elyse Glickman** · Sep 8, 2025 1:02pm

Bar marketing

Restaurant marketing

Generation X

Generation Z

It is often said that an age may be “just a number,” but there’s more to the equation when determining how to market your bar or restaurant to customers falling into four major generational categories—Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z—with differing food preferences, dining habits, and outlooks on how and where their money is best spent.

There are common generalizations associated with each generational group. The “Brand Love + Demand” conducted by the Zeno Group reveals Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and Millennials (born 1981-1996) are tech-savvy, open to more adventurous flavor profiles, and more cost conscious than their elders. The Boomers (born 1945-1964) and Gen Xers (born 1965-1980), in contrast, are thought to be more set in their culinary ways, prefer more hands-on service on-premise, and are open to spending more money for high-quality dining experiences.

The survey, which interviewed 3,000 U.S. consumers across the four key generations, had a few standout statistics extended across all age groups:

- 72% will stay loyal to loved brands even when it costs more
- 52% will rely on word-of-mouth for their buying decisions, more than any other information source-
- 38% will break up with a brand the moment they lose shared values, emotional connection, or reputation.

The results also confirmed that, regardless of age, loyalty, authenticity, reliability, and trust are the top traits that consumers associate with the brands they love. However, the Zeno Group's study also reflected the younger generations' embrace of technical influence in the industry.

- Nearly 45% of Gen Z and 36% of Millennials (vs. just 11% of Boomers) rely on social media to discover and validate brands, including restaurants.
- 20% of Gen Z trust *influencers*, five times more likely than Boomers.
- 24% of Gen Z also rely on online forums and reviews, four times more than Boomers.

While social media plays a big role in the younger generations' decisions, picking the most popular platforms among the target demographic is key. YouTube leads (83%), followed by Facebook (78%), Instagram (57%), and TikTok (55%). Among their communications preferences, text messages (61%) is the favorite, closely followed by email (59%). Mobile apps are used by only 48% of the audience.

Multi-Unit Master: The Gen Z Investment Strategy

However, savvy restaurateurs and managers should remember that within these groups, there will always be outliers, from the well-traveled Boomer craving specific flavors from around the globe to a Millennial who will spend whatever it takes to experience the best bourbon available in his area. This means that even with clear generational guidelines, promotions, and menu planning, outreach specific to each group may be a little more complicated than things seem on the surface.

Although no restaurant or bar can be all things to all people, some restaurants have something to offer different age groups based on the time of day, week, or season. If a restaurant offers private dining and special event services, from business luncheons to milestone family gatherings, this necessitates a multi-generational approach to outreach and marketing.

Alexander Schwartz, marketing director at point-of-sale technology solutions provider Signature Systems Inc., predicts more operators will make decisions to leave certain promotions and dishes in the past, thanks in part to ongoing cultural shifts. "If your restaurant is in an area where you are pretty much appealing exclusively to retirees, keep that early bird special on the menu," he says. "But if you are in an area where you are going to be appealing to multi-generational diners, an early bird special may feel like a

punishment for people who get out of work at 5:00 or those who want to dine later but want access to a more affordable meal.”

Whether an operator explores POS data or goes directly to the source—desired customers—for direction on customer outreach, they can also learn from studies conducted by hospitality and restaurant-focused marketing companies. A look at successful restaurateurs with multiple locations or a solid track record of keeping customers in different demographics happy and well-fed can also be helpful.

Universal Truths

Among those surveyed in December 2024 (12/6-12/24/24) by the Zeno Group, 87%, regardless of age, will support the brands they love with their wallets. However, according to Allison McClamroch, Zeno’s U.S. head of brand, earning the consumers’ continued trust varies by generation. Her colleague Sarah Rosanova, Zeno’s restaurant and retail brand expert, added that while generational values will dictate how those in different groups express their opinions, wants, and needs, restaurateurs and bar owners have to be careful of straying too far from their origins in the name of staying relevant. The necessity to be mindful of this underscores a constant: Know your strengths and elevate them; don’t replace them.

“As restaurants evolve to appeal to new generations, our research shows a clear risk: When a brand strays too far from what originally made it lovable, whether it is the menu, service, or restaurant design,” says Rosanova. “Even the most modern upgrade can backfire if it undermines the core identity of the brand.”

Shannon O’Shields, VP of marketing at Rubix Foods (helping restaurant brands translate cultural shifts into consistent or growing sales), says the economic backdrop also shapes behavior across all age groups. “With 46% of consumers fearing a recession, there’s a strong desire for affordable indulgences,” she says. “Smart restaurant marketers are adapting by delivering bold flavor and perceived value. ‘Comfort food’ is well-received among people of all ages because of its emotional and nostalgic appeal. They seek flavors that soothe, excite, and transport. However, it needs to be redefined across generations.”

“The atmosphere can easily appeal across generations without the appearance of management pandering,” says Brooks Kirchheimer, co-founder of [Hill Top Hospitality](#). “An example of this is having a modern and inviting space across our restaurants and at the

same time having subtle differences in different parts of the layout that allows those areas to be more inviting for certain guests. At our 'Urban Hill' restaurant, we have the main part of the dining room where more of the action is and the open kitchen, which could be more welcoming for those looking for a lively experience, and then we have smaller rooms that can be quieter and more wanted by others."

Despite headlines focusing on generational divides, Shikatani LaCroix Design's analysis of nearly 2,000 restaurant ratings reveals four drivers of customer loyalty that transcend age: delivering the outcome customers seek, empowering employees to resolve problems, serving fantastic food, and providing excellent value.

"Smart operators are learning to communicate value differently to different generations while maintaining consistent delivery," details Founder/President Jean-Pierre Lacroix. "A Baby Boomer might appreciate a phone call about a delayed order, while Gen Z prefers a text update. Yet both want proactive communication about issues affecting their experience. Meeting their needs suggests that while delivery methods may vary by generation, the fundamental desires remain remarkably consistent. Every generation wants their food to taste great, their problems solved quickly, and to feel they received fair value for their money. In addition, patrons put a greater importance on operators who create memorable, shareable dining experiences."

There's a caveat in North America's hospitality industry, however: How do you create dining experiences that resonate across four distinct generations, each with vastly different expectations, communication preferences, and definitions of value? LaCroix theorizes that the most complex challenge lies in defining "value" across generations. While his Gen Z data shows strong price sensitivity, the broader industry study reveals that "value" encompasses far more than price. It includes service quality, ambiance, portion sizes, and overall experience.

"The smart money is on running layered, micro-targeted campaigns rather than banking on one age group," says Mike Bausch, owner of Andolini's Pizzeria in Tulsa and a nationally recognized voice on restaurant operations, branding, and multi-generational marketing. "Gen Z might follow you on TikTok because of your menu hacks and vibe, while Boomers are coming in because your bartender remembered their drink order and you offer a calm, classy spot for conversation. The best operators play chess, not checkers, customizing experiences without alienating anyone. It's about having different on-ramps to the same great product."

Looking at the whole generational picture, LaCroix says the most successful restaurants in the future won't choose between generational targeting and broad appeal – they'll master both. They'll build experiences rooted in universal human desires for quality, value, and respect, while creating multiple pathways for customers to engage based on their preferences.

“At Lotus of Siam, we believe that creating a meaningful dining experience means being inclusive while also recognizing how different generations connect in unique ways,” says Managing Partner Penny Chutima, who believes the cross-generational success of the Las Vegas restaurant specializing in Northern Thai fare comes from doing the fundamentals—food, hospitality, and thoughtful design—exceptionally well. “It’s not about choosing one audience over another, but about building a strong foundation rooted in authenticity, then layering in thoughtful touchpoints that resonate across age groups. We embrace opportunities to engage guests where they are. Younger diners may discover us through content on social media, while longtime regulars often connect through wine pairing dinners or personal recommendations. Both experiences are valid and intentional.”

“I challenge our teams to think a little bit more outside the box,” says Karl McElligott, director of Food & Beverage at Olympia Hotel Management, who explains how some restaurants in the properties apply modern twists to dishes that may have been on the menus for years to keep things interesting for people of all ages. “We encourage our culinary teams to think about how they can offer a shared experience. When they think about menus, they consider how they can cover most generational gaps and what each one is looking for. We've definitely seen progression towards shared elements, where pairs or groups of customers in different age groups will choose a few appetizers or share a bit of their entrees with one another.”

Across the board, service, consistency, cleanliness, and value never go out of style, and people in all generations notice when they feel cared for by someone who believes what they say. “You don’t need to chase trends to stay relevant,” Bausch says. “A warm welcome, a solid playlist that’s audible but not annoying, and a menu that nails execution...those are ageless. It's only when restaurants try to be everything to everyone that it feels like they're trying too hard and not being themselves.”

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