the millenial world

creating experiences for the
millenial generation

by Georgina Parfitt

I was born in 1990. I was ten years old when I watched the Millennium fireworks from the Thames' bank. This means that, to the industries that market and deliver their products and experiences to me, I'm known as a Millennial.

A Millennial is defined as someone born in the years 1980 through 2000. By the year 2015, Millennials will make up about 36 percent of the US population. That's over a third of the electoral vote. We bite at the bait of brands and advertising campaigns every day. We pursue trends (though we claim to despise it) and we are notoriously cynical and elusive customers.

When it comes to attractions and museums, there is a fine line when it comes to exciting or alienating a Millennial. Getting it right is all about understanding where we come from.

A new generation is born

Parenting styles since 1980 have had a major effect on Millennials' leisure behavior. The frequency of divorce and the popularity of day care have made it one of the most independent and self-seeking generations ever. Yet, the tendency of 'active' parenting to overindulge and focus on the child as the center of the family has made it vulnerable to criticism and given it a need to be constantly recognized and praised. Our environment has protected and indulged the Millennials in their childhood years. Now, we are growing up into a fast-paced, insensitive world, and desperately trying to find that it still revolves around us.

Trends that allow the Millennial to feel both independent and acknowledged will be the most successful. The urban environment seems to be changing, becoming more and more adaptable to our impulses, with companies like I Feel London introducing mood navigation to our cities. We tell an application on our cell phone how we're feeling and instantly receive a list of activities that we are in the mood for. Superior geographical mapping is now accessible on-the-go and can interact with online business information to make cities personal for the first time. This is perfect for the Millennial, and I see the trend growing as technology advances.

Engineers in the UK are already developing 'fear detector' technology that is able to feed back an individual's emotions throughout the journey of an amusement park ride and adjust the speed or motion. It suggests that the ride of the future will be able to adapt to each rider, providing a unique experience. The implications for attractions are that they will be able to give each visitor a custom-made journey. This will mean that the Millennial can feel independent and cared-for at the same time.

Our education has also shaped the way Millennials learn and respond to new experiences. In the last decade, curricula have become less about creativity and enterprise, and all about memory. Most Millennials believe that their classes 'teach to the test', rather than giving them the interpretational and analytical tools they need, and attractions are having to bear this in mind when trying to appeal to us with new ideas.

There are contrasting ways that an attraction might engage the mind of a Millennial; the first is by creating exhibits that appeal to the memory-based learning style that we have mastered; the second is by encouraging us to think in new ways, offering us what we have missed in school.

The current trend with cutting-edge attractions is to invite visitors to collaborate in the design of new exhibits or experiences. Drawing on the controversy that surrounds modern art, Tate Modern is giving visitors the chance to critique the paintings for themselves. A selection of abstract pieces will be displayed in the gallery and on the gallery's website and visitors will be able to write their own labels to describe them. The most interesting interpretations will be placed next to the paintings with the curators' labels. With this new kind of exhibit, the Tate has picked up on a sure-fire way of engaging Millennials. Give us a role and we become productive and involved, and this makes us feel that we are valued.

Staying in touch with the Facebook Generation

The way to talk to Millennials is through online social networks; 75 percent of us now have a Facebook account. Our world is completely media-saturated and digitally dependant. This has made us impatient. Information is instant, as is our response to it. American Millennials are 'in touch' with President Obama, their president, because he has crafted a multi-channel media campaign that allows them to be interactive. He has personal Twitter profiles and iphone applications; he is able to appear to them as a man, and not an institution.

Many museums are now using social media to get to know their target Millennial visitors. Search 'museum' in the Twitter engine and about 250 museums will appear, ranging from the Smithsonian museums to the lesser-known Mustard Museum of Wisconsin. The typical museum on Twitter will announce their activity more than once a day; some attractions, like Six Flags Theme Parks, even have full-time, salaried social networkers who manage outposts on Twitter, Facebook and other sites.

The Millennials' main point of touch with the outside world is social media, so attractions that use viral marketing as well as, or instead of, traditional broadcasting methods will be much more able to tap into their collective consciousness and make them curious. Paying attention to trends is typical of Millennials. If a group of young people decide to visit

an attraction and enjoy it, the subsequent number of young people that visit is likely to increase tenfold.

Statistics suggest that Millennials' use of social media is starting to plateau, but I think the future will see it remain at the forefront of our interaction with the world.

Thanks to social media and technology, our virtual and real identities are becoming more and more integrated. ShotCode is an example of a company that is championing this integration. Its product is a 2D barcode, which can be printed onto fabric (like t-shirts), allowing passers-by with a mobile phone to scan online profiles. In an attraction, the ShotCode could be used in many ways, from creating a virtual tour, to a virtual competition between visitors as they journey through the attraction. I can see companies like ShotCode gaining momentum in the attractions industry, until visitors are no longer strangers but become part of a unique network.

Appealing to our inner exhibition-ist

So, the Millennials have grown up with the internet, are completely comfortable with it and we look set to grow into the technology of the future with ease. But what about our relationship with the past? The word 'history' represents another set of contradictions in the Millennial mindset.

On one hand, history as it is taught in schools can seem alien and distant; students are increasingly interested in more proximate history, events that they can relate to. For example, The Danish Museum of Cartoon Art is reportedly trying to acquire the 12 controversial Muhammad cartoons that made the international headlines two years ago; history is coming of exhibition-age sooner and sooner. The artist that uses radiology art in a project called 'The Inner Beauty of a McNugget' to create neon profiles of McDonald's chicken nuggets, is likely to be more popular with more Millennials than the depictions of historic battles in Tate Britain for example. Looking at 'artifacts' of contemporary life fulfils our egocentrism and our need to feel like experts.

Millennials also seem to have a love affair with all things 'retro'. Despite having no memory of fashion, music and design of the sixties and seventies, we are buying into these recurring trends in greater numbers than the Boomers or Generation Xers, for whom they are genuinely nostalgic. Activities that allow the Millennial to 'try-on' a retro identity could be highly successful.

Green is the new Goth

Millennials are products of the post-millennium environment. The world has reached the crux of problems like climate change, and tells us that it is time to act. So, there is a growing pressure to be the generation that steps up. Though eager to make a difference, the Millennials are unrealistic; we want to save the world, and we want to do it single-handedly. Throughout our adolescence, the media has encouraged us to admire and aspire to heroism. We ask: what would Bond do?

Unsurprisingly, the action we are deciding to take is strongly integrated with technology and social media. An online utility called Climate Culture has launched the 'America's Greenest Campus Contest', in which students compete against other students for the greatest reductions to their school's carbon footprint. Users can log in to their social media portals, like YouTube and Facebook, to check their progress and to communicate with like-minded students.

Climate Culture was created by recent graduates from Yale, Harvard and NYU; it is in effect run by Millennials for the Millennial community and picks up on some key needs of the typical Millennial; competition, individuality and recognition. Its main tool is a virtual environment; the visitor gets to create an avatar, who collects points every time they do something to save energy in real life. The concept of virtual reality is an alluring one for Millennials. It combines creativity and autonomy but within the safety of a virtual arena.

In its quest to emerge a 'hero' of the environmental crises of our time, the Millennial generation will become more and more involved in philanthropy as part of their leisure activities. A campaign by Zoom advertising (South Africa's fi rst carbon-neutral agency) called 'My Tree in Africa' represents young tourists' growing desire to offset the carbon impact of their travel. For an extra few dollars, Zoom can collect an 'R80', a certificate from the Food and Trees in Africa program, which pays for the planting of a tree in Africa. This is the kind of tangible reward that Millennials need if they are to make a philanthropic effort. We are not interested in anonymity.

Both charities and for-profit software companies are capitalizing on this philanthropic trend. 'Extreme fundraising' is a new way for individuals to support charity, combining endurance sports and other high-adrenalin activities, and using the communicative power of personal blogs to chart their journey, raise awareness and funds. It gives Millennials the chance to give back, but is far from altruistic; it offers the recognition we crave and the feeling that we are making a difference. If a museum is going to attract Millennials with its charitable ethics, it has to make sure that we are celebrated too, as part of the effort.

Attractions should be looking to be obvious when showing visitors that they are environmentally friendly. The Smithsonian, for example, has created 'living architecture': walls and roofs covered in greenery.

The future for your attraction

The Millennials, though a mass of contradictions, are far from the complex animals we are perceived to be. We are determined by our intensely stimulating digital environment but also our passive role in education. We are fragile without guidance but want to feel like we are leading the way.

Our need for attention and recognition means that we will not be offended by being treated as a separate consumer breed; in fact most Millennials love being part of a 'difficult' niche and would enjoy research that asks them to explain what makes them tick.

If attractions want to draw in the Millennial crowd, they must take the time to understand our generational personality. Where we have come from, and the environment we are growing into, make us who we are.

We are the future. Create an experience that catches our attention, and we will be flocking through the doors of your attraction. **ipm**

Georgina Parfitt works in the research department with A Different View. As a millennial herself, she has personal interest in how experiences are delivered and how millennia's respond.