

YOUTH



Gen Z & Offline Marketing

A Case Study by Smart Distribution Solutions





Gen Z & Offline Marketing

A Case Study by Smart Distribution Solutions

As marketers, we've all been trained to chase the elusive golden goose that is the youth market.

18-34 year olds have often been the preferred audience for advertisers, chosen for their higher than average disposable income, willingness to try new products and services and for their perceived susceptibility to advertising but as time has passed and our industry has evolved, these once receptive consumers have begun to become a more and more difficult group to reach and convert than ever.

As digital methods have started to see a slowdown with diminishing returns, more traditional means of advertising such as OOH, Direct Mail and Doordrop have made substantial increases in effectiveness when marketing to Millennials and Gen Z's.

In this Whitepaper we'll look at the causes in these shifts, the triggers that have lead to habit changes, how to position your brand to appeal to these younger demographics and what it means for marketing agencies and advertisers in 2025 and 2026.



Smart Distribution Solutions

Written by Rich O'brien, Marketing Manager - Smart Distribution Solutions

The State Of Play in 2025

Marketing, in 2025, is experiencing an interesting wave of innovation, challenge and opportunity.

As a whole, Nielsen reports that the Marketing industry has remained robust despite a climate of market and financial uncertainty as the world continues to recover from Covid, although 54% of agencies and brands polled said they are looking to reduce their ad spend over 2025 / 2026. While this sounds ominous, AI lead creative and campaign targeting is likely a big driver in this reduction in spend.

The rise and rapid evolution of AI has changed everything from targeting to creative strategies, forging new ways for businesses to manage, curate and delegate their marketing strategies but this has created new problems for marketers with consumers already becoming wary of inauthentic AI content.

As much as AI has changed things, Social Media is still the industry's favoured platform with around 30% of UK ad spend going to socials alone, with around 25% going to PPC, SEO and other web based channels.

One area that has seen an increase in both spend and effectiveness are the so called "Traditional" marketing channels such as print, doordrop, mail and OOH.

On average, ad spend on traditional methods grew by 10.2% — the fifth consecutive year of growth in the sector — making it, while smaller, one of the only sectors showing consistent growth

One of the largest divides in Marketing has come from measuring campaign success. As the changing demands of consumers play out, reach and frequency has become just as important as ROI as a performance metric with 62% of European agencies now measuring campaign success based on ROI and reach as their main goals vs only 4% on ROI alone.

As marketers in 2025, our job is to navigate a landscape that empowers consumers more than ever and to create compelling opportunities to promote products and services.

54%
Of Marketers
Look To
Reduce Their
Ad Spend*

88%
Of Marketers
Now Use AI
Across Their
Daily Work**

Average
"Traditional"
Ad Spend Is
Increasing By
10.2%***

53%
Of Consumers
Find AI Content
To Be
Inauthentic

* Nielsen 2025 report

** SEO.com study

*** Harvard Business Review

**** Quirks.com



Gen Z & Millennials - The Changing Tide

As discussed, younger generations have traditionally been a prime target for marketers, but in recent years, according to reports from from Medium, Matrix Point and several other agencies, the old playbook for attracting them, The Consumer Funnel, has become less and less effective.

That's not to say that these strategies don't work, but Gen Z have created their own rules for consumption. Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action may have become a less reliable approach.

Millennials, while somewhat more receptive, are still a difficult proposition using traditional funnels. Indeed, it's clear that both Gen Z and Millennials both disrupt the classic marketing formula but in vastly different ways.

Stephen Hinde of Oliver Agency explains “**Millennials grew up during the technological advancements of social media and advertising platforms. They know what it was like before.**” He continues... “**A large percentage of Gen Z have only ever known skippable ads, being able to just swipe to the next thing until they find something they want to see.**”

While Gen Z are curators, Millennials have a deeper understanding and cynicism of being sold to which makes them both complex demographics to reach.

These generational shifts have often been blamed on shortening attention spans and the need for “fast” content, content which Instagram and TikTok are seemingly built around but the truth is somewhat more nuanced. Attention spans aren't shortening, but the tolerance for irrelevant or uninteresting content has diminished.

Both Gen Z and Millennials are now so used to the algorithm constantly feeding them content, advertisements and entertainment, often under the same guise, that they've effectively began to tune out of or curate away, the digital noise.

While, as Marketers, our job has always been to shape preference, something which won't change, we now have a need to also cater to a set of generations who are more keen to create noise than just listen to it.

Rather than look to the lineal approach of Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action Gen Z and Millennials are far more responsive to a cyclical pattern of inspiration, exploration, community and loyalty.

Our aim now, should be to create content that provokes conversation, nurtures brand advocacy and constantly either entertains or educates.

It is because of this cyclicity, more traditional methods of marketing such as doordrop, mail and OOH are becoming excellent drivers to help marketers cut through the digital noise and amplify digital brand advocacy.

According to a 2025 Harris Poll, 72% of Gen Z and Millennials say they wish more brands would communicate with them via mail and 78% of Gen Z and Millennials say that receiving physical mail has prompted them to visit a physical store.

As Marketers, we need to accept that these younger generations demand a more complete and rounded marketing mix to build, grow and reinvigorate these communities of buyers and brand advocates.

“

GEN Z HAVE CREATED THEIR OWN RULES FOR CONSUMPTION

”

54% Of
Millennials
Choose Brands
That Offer A Sense
Of Community**

Less than 50%
Of Gen Z's
will Loyally Stick
To The Same
Brands*

80%
Of UK Millennials
prefer brands that
offer personalised
experiences***

Only 22% Of
Gen Z's have
purchased directly
through social
media ads****



Gen Z, Millennials and Physical Media

Despite these generations being fully fledged digital natives who predominantly spend their time online, Traditional methods such as Doordrop and Direct Mail are making significant inroads with younger generations.

Traditional Media has made a noticeable impact to both reach and conversions in the past 5 years and this isn't happening in isolation.

It's fuelled by their new found appreciation for the tangible, physical and the desire to step away, however briefly, from an all digital life.

Millennials and Gen Z are far more attuned to their mental wellbeing than previous generations and the need to "switch off" has become an important factor in their lifestyle. Practicing digital minimalism and mindfulness has gone from a fringe practice to a daily essential for younger generations, particularly post Covid, and this has directly influenced their buying and consuming habits.

With homes rented, music and movies streamed, games paywalled and apps dependant on subscriptions there is little this generation physically owns and it's created a serious desire for tangible products, physical media and personalised interactions.

In a world filled with "fake news" and AI content, they crave and aspire to be seen as the real, the genuine and the authentic.

There's a nostalgia and curiosity about the tangible and for ownership that has fast become a huge commercial driver in areas such as music, art, cinema and fashion and this is bleeding into people's marketing preferences.

Catalogues, brochures, flyers and letters lend themselves naturally to a generation who appreciate the tangibility of vinyl, film photography and paperbacks over their digital counterparts.

In a Harris poll 71% of Millennials and Gen Z's felt that print catalogues and magazines conveyed a stronger sense of authenticity than digital adverts alone, which married with the JICMail reporting that 53% of Direct Mail conversions occurred online, only goes to show the strength of a considered mix of physical and digital advertising when trying to meet the demands of younger audiences.



“

THERE'S A NOSTALGIA FOR THE TANGIBLE, FOR OWNERSHIP

”

71% of Gen Z's
Feel Print Material
Gives A Stronger
Sense Of
Authenticity*

67%
Of Gen Z's
Practice Digital
Detoxing**

52%
Of Conversions
From Physical
Marketing Occur
Online***

UK Vinyl Sales
Increased By
2000%
Since 2007****

62%
Of 16 - 24 Y/O
Prefer Print To
E-Books*****



* Harris Poll
** HP.com
*** DBS Data Solutions
**** MusicWeek
***** VoxBurner

The Crossover

There's no denying that despite all the appreciation for physical media and growing reception for traditional marketing methods, we live in an online first world, online book sales still account for two thirds of all physical book sales in the UK, for example - but full mix marketing is arguably the best option to reach Gen Z's and Millennials.

Physically supplemented digital marketing can benefit campaigns to Gen Z's and Millennials in the following ways:

Brand Recall: Consistent messaging across multiple channels is an excellent driver of brand recall, with studies showing 75% of people who received direct mail remembered the brand, compared to just 44% who recalled a brand from a digital ad.

With better brand recall due to print, subsequent digital ads see a substantial increase in responses with Gen Z's producing an additional 39% in responses after being exposed to print adverts, according to reports by Nutshell Creative.

Perceived Legitimacy: While the creation of social media adverts is largely accessible to almost anyone with a social media account, print has a slight barrier to entry due to logistics and cost. Gen Z and Millennials are wise to the high potential for scams, phishing and data theft through digital ads and are therefore less likely to trust them than Gen X, Boomers etc. Print, however, carries a positive perception and promotes brand and product trust in consumers with Rory Sutherland stating that "direct mail creates a decisive moment through its perceived scarcity" when compared to the over abundance of digital adverts.

Triggering Conversation: A 2024 YouGov poll discovered that 48% of Gen Z and Millennials would discuss products and services that they'd seen on OOH advertising with their immediate circle while surveys carried out by JICMail also suggest that 15% of direct mail sent prompted a discussion with friends or family.

Marketreach research has shown that items are more likely to be kept in the kitchen/kitchen table where conversations are started and decisions made

Positioning & Timing: Digital advertising can be exceptional at targeting and audience discovery but while the ad may hit the perfect audience, it's not always going to hit them at the right time or where they have the time or focus to read, process and convert. With Gen Z's and Millennials, that time is ever fleeting due to the frequency of advertisements they're exposed to and the place at which they live.

Mail and doordrop are delivered directly to the home and are only read when the recipient is ready & The average piece of doordrop marketing has a lifespan of 6 days in the home, offering convenience to the recipient and multiple conversion opportunities for advertisers.



“
**DIRECT MAIL CREATES A
DECISIVE MOMENT THROUGH
ITS PERCEIVED SCARCITY**

RORY SUTHERLAND

”

The Crossover

Geographical targeting: Physical marketing, when considered through the lens of place, offers unique opportunities to anchor digital campaigns within the lived realities of an audience.

Place is more than a location on a map. It is the intersection of culture, behaviour, and mood - a spatial context that informs and can occasionally control a reaction.

When executed thoughtfully, physical marketing is the promise of a coffee when you're already on the high street, the spark of a new career when you're on the bus to work, the important family decision around the kitchen table. The reach of portable digital campaigns extending into the fixed geographies and routes of the streets, cafes, transport links and homes that Gen Z inhabits when offline.

Physical touchpoints act as catalysts for digital interactions. They are by their very nature shared resources – they start conversations and encourage debate; they influence search or more direct online engagement. By understanding where and how Gen Z encounters these moments, marketers can create a dialogue that flows seamlessly between the physical and the digital, enriching the overall experience rather than separating channels into silos.

Crucially, attention to place signals care, thought and relevance. Gen Z responds to brands that acknowledge their environments, reflecting cultural cues and shared experiences rather than simply broadcasting generic messages.

For marketers seeking to engage a generation that navigates the world both on and offline with fluidity, the environment of the recipient is not a backdrop—it is an active ingredient in every campaign.



Closing Thoughts

RICH O'BRIEN - MARKETING MANAGER

As an industry, we're hitting an interesting collision of ideals with human driven authenticity clashing with AI lead efficiency.

While marketers are often guilty of chasing the next new hyped platform, in the case of reaching Millennials, Gen Z and the newly emerging Gen Alpha, it seems that the traditional methods might hold the key to building lasting and profitable brands.

While AI and digital are paving the way for quick and cost effective campaign building, if we wish to create meaningful connections and forge lasting trust in our brands, we need to look at and explore the human element of our marketing.

Digital campaigns can only benefit from a human first approach and the tangibility and authenticity that physical marketing offers is exactly what our customers for the next 50 years, are craving.



MARK GRAHAM - MANAGING DIRECTOR

As a, slightly dog-eared, card-carrying member of Gen X, I'm astonished at Gen Z's ability to absorb, filter and curate vast waves of online content at breakneck speed. Marketers have had to evolve just as fast to keep pace with shifting digital tides.

Yet even this hyperconnected generation is coming to appreciate the value of stepping away from the screen to touch the grass from time to time.

Print media can provide the equivalent of a single message, handheld device with almost infinite battery life and free from the distractions of on-line comments, agenda and competition. The channel's physical presence demands attention and interrupts digital flows, delivering rare one to one time between brand and recipient.

Gen Z and Millennials are not unreachable - the opposite, in fact - they are simply asking us to show up with intent. At Smart Distribution Solutions, our role is to help make the physical connections between attention, engagement and action, ensuring your campaigns find a genuine anchor in the real world as well as the digital one.



PHIL MORRISON - CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

As we move forward into 2026 and beyond, one truth remains clear: younger audiences cannot be reached through habit alone. They are rewriting the rules of engagement, pushing both brands and their agencies alike to be more thoughtful, more authentic, and more creative.

There is no single formula—only the willingness to be brave, to experiment, to listen, and to blend old and new in ways that feel genuine. Traditional and digital media are not rivals but partners in a landscape where meaning matters more than message frequency.

The real challenge as marketers is not simply how to reach Gen Z and Millennials, but how to be remembered once we do. Those who are brave enough to step outside the noise, to combine tangible presence with digital agility, will not only capture attention but also build trust that lasts.

Perhaps that is the most important insight: marketing is no longer about being everywhere—it's about being where it matters.





“

**MARKETING IS NO LONGER ABOUT
BEING EVERYWHERE, IT'S ABOUT
BEING WHERE IT MATTERS**

PHIL MORRISON - SMART DISTRIBUTION SOLUTIONS

”

SMART DISTRIBUTION SOLUTIONS

Smart Distribution Solutions are one of the UK's leading doordrop and direct marketing agencies.

Established for over 13 years, Smart have built a reputation for reliability, ingenuity and insight.

Smart's forward thinking approach to traditional marketing and data insights has helped 1000's of clients to build lasting customer relationships and engage with new audiences.

www.smart-distribution.co.uk
hello@smart-distribution.co.uk

01516449475

**Unit 6, The Lightbox,
Knox Street,
Birkenhead
Wirral
CH41 5JW**





Smart Distribution Solutions

www.smart-distribution.co.uk