YOUTH CULTURE REPORT

In the past year, industry journals and the popular press have become intensely interested in today's youth market, and companies are well aware that teenagers and young adults have become a driving force in domestic and international marketplaces. Many companies are eager to capitalize on the buying power of this consumer group, but the kind of deep insight into this demographic that leads to innovative product solutions and successful marketing campaigns is not always realized.

This paper attempts to describe why companies need to understand and connect with teenagers and young adults today, and outlines some of the difficulties companies have faced in trying to do this in recent years. We then describe some original research that Communispace Corporation has conducted with this market segment and present the results. Key findings are organized by insight, with the intent to highlight what we've heard from nearly 300 teens and young adults, as well as the professionals who are engaging and observing them on a daily basis.

Background

There are many reasons why it is critical to understand youth culture. First, the youth market segment is large and growing. In the United States alone there are more teenagers than there are baby boomers—over 33 million—and there are more than **40 million consumers between the ages of 15 and 24.**[1] Additionally, there are yet another 40 million children[2] (3- to 12-years-old) that could be influencing parental buying behavior.

Today's youth have a great deal of spending power as well. The 15- to 24-year-old age **group spends more than $350 billion every year**[3] and influences the spending of others by more than $50 billion[4], which makes them one of the most formidable buying forces in today's market. This spending power is augmented by the degree to which this group makes its own decisions about how much money to spend and what to spend it on. **Teens now spend just as much money shopping on line as do older consumer groups** (with over 11% of them having their own credit cards) [5], and their purchasing habits are often dictated not by practical necessity, but by what best supports their current interests. And finally, the decisions that young people make today—what brand loyalties they develop, the services to which they become accustomed, the hobbies and activities they learn to enjoy (and invest in)—will shape their consumer behavior for years. Future success may depend on cementing relationships with this critical group as they continue to develop their consumption habits.

---

[1] "The U.S. Youth Market: Deciphering the Diverse Life Stages and Subcultures of 15- to 24-Year-Olds" "*The-infoshop*" <http://www.the-infoshop.com/study >.
[2] "The U.S. Kids Market: Understanding the Trends and Lifestyles Affecting 3- to 12-Year-Olds, 6th Edition" "*The-infoshop*" <http://www.the-infoshop.com/study>.
[3] "The U.S. Youth Market: Deciphering the Diverse Life Stages and Subcultures of 15- to 24-Year-Olds" "*The-infoshop*" <http://www.the-infoshop.com/study>.
[4] "The Merchants of Cool: A Report on the Creators & Marketers of Popular Culture for Teenagers." *Frontline*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows>.
[5] "Teen Spending" "*The Mint*" <http://www.themint.org/about/teenspending>.

Challenges in Understanding the "Youth Market"

Building a relationship is easier said than done, however. To date, companies have struggled to achieve a deep, timely and continual understanding of what it is teenagers and young adults *do* want. Although there are probably many barriers to understanding, here are some important ones:

They are diverse: The term "youth culture" can be misleading. In actuality this group does not represent a single culture so much as overlapping and interconnected subcultures. Reaching this consumer group is complicated because the youth market is markedly diverse—some are raising families, others are attending school full time, and still others devote much of their time to a myriad of leisure activities. How can companies consistently "take the pulse" of what this group cares about, wants and needs? What technologies work best in reaching out to or tapping into this group?

They are elusive and technologically savvy: This group is notoriously hard to reach through traditional advertising or marketing means—they do not necessarily watch television consistently nor do they depend on paper-based sources for information. We know they rely heavily on the Internet, but how do they use technology? What are their preferences? What gets their attention and what drives their loyalty?

> ### Challenges
>
> ➢ **They are diverse, with many sub-cultures**
>
> ➢ **They are elusive, hard to reach, and technologically savvy**
>
> ➢ **They are experienced consumers—sophisticated and skeptical**

They are sophisticated and skeptical: Teens and young adults are experienced consumers in many respects. They have been potentially over-exposed to advertising for as long as they can remember. How does this affect how they make buying decisions? What kinds of information do they trust? Who influences them and how do they influence each other?

These questions challenge any executive who is trying to achieve marketing efficiency or accelerate innovation. The youth market is difficult to understand and becoming harder to reach; and this complexity is likely to increase and intensify with advances in communication and other technologies.

Insights and Key Findings

When asked what forms of technology they use the most, participants clearly chose music and Internet technologies over television. One third of these teenagers and young adults said they most frequently used technology for music ($n = 92$) and one quarter selected instant messaging and general Internet use as their most preferred means of technology-based entertainment ($n = 71$). By contrast, only 11% of participants indicated that

> ### Research Methodology
>
> ➢ *Total participants: 276*
> ➢ *Ages: 16 – 25*
> ➢ *Gender: mix*
> ➢ *Data collection: internal study, external review, surveying*
> *See Appendix for detail*

television was their first choice (*n* = 31). These data confirm what is being reported in the popular press and marketing literature today: **The most reliable way to connect with the youth consumer is through the Internet, where music, conversation and a wide range of information and resources can be found.**

In order to understand and access the youth market, then, companies would be well advised to develop innovative strategies to connect with this group *online*. The results of the current research suggest a number of ways companies can be more successful in this regard.   Key insights can be grouped into three broad categories:

1 - How to attract and engage youth online

2 - How to develop and maintain their loyalty to a particular site or community

3 - Behavioral observations about who influences them and how they influence each other

> ### Research Terminology
>
> *Survey participants described online venues as "websites," "sites," and "communities" (e.g., MySpace.com). In this paper we used the word "site" generically when participants were unclear about what "type" of online venue they were referencing.*

1. Attract and engage: Meet them where they are—online…

When it comes to youth culture, getting their attention—and keeping it—can be a major obstacle.   And although it is clear that the Internet represents one of the most consistent media venues for this group, teenagers and young adults are not necessarily loyal to any one particular site.   That being said, our research uncovered keys to engaging this group:

- **Information must be updated frequently,** which translates into at least every other day. Participants indicated that they regularly visit sites when they know there is new content posted daily (*n* = 104) or every few days (*n* = 93). Qualitatively, participants elaborated on this finding, saying they "forget to visit" sites that don't post new information daily, and that "people notice and get bored" if fresh content isn't provided continually.   In the words of one 21-year-old fulltime student, favorite sites are "informative or updated regularly enough so that I don't need to search for new ones."   The message here is clear—if information isn't new, this group will not hesitate to look elsewhere. Although updating sites with current information has always been an important factor, the desire for this on at least a *daily* basis is particularly striking.

> ### Attract and Engage
>
> *They say they want:*
>
> ➤ *Frequently updated information, at least every other day*
>
> ➤ *Interfaces that are visually appealing, attention grabbing and "quick and easy" to navigate*
>
> ➤ *Help multi-tasking; working concurrently online is a necessity of their daily life*

- **Popular websites are visually appealing and easy to navigate**, meaning they are attractive, polished looking and well laid-out. Participants indicated that they

preferred online venues that were "aesthetic" and that had "good graphics," "structure" and "organization." Our analysis of one-stop community sites popular with this group (such as MySpace and Facebook) further confirmed the importance of using graphic elements and animation to grab attention, emphasizing new or interesting content, and providing "quick and easy access" to information.

- **They want to get more done faster,** which means they depend on technology to multi-task. Visual elements and easy-to-find, recently updated information facilitate accessing what one needs quickly and reliably, as does being able to accomplish many tasks from one location. (Websites that contained a wider variety of activities and information were reported to be more appealing.) This consumer group favors websites that increase efficiency, perhaps because ready access to in-depth and personally relevant information is viewed as a *necessity*, not simply a diversion or source of entertainment. After listing her current favorite websites, one 24-year-old woman explained, "I need them in my daily life."

Taken as a whole, the above points illustrate that teenagers and young adults use technology in ways that may be unfamiliar to older age groups. Not only did participants indicate **they used between seven and eight different forms of technology in a week (*M* = 7.46), they described using many of these *simultaneously*—in a given moment.** For example, between 8:45 and 9:00 in the morning, a college student may be listening to music, activating instant messaging, checking work and school e-mail, logging in to Facebook, perusing headlines on a favorite news website, finding out who won last night's ball game and downloading new music in the background. Whereas a baby boomer might view this routine as that of a "highly distractible teenager," the data suggest that this kind of activity is a typical and regular example of getting organized and a "good start for the day."

2. Develop and maintain loyalty: Speak their language, and listen...

But how do we do this? Once this group is engaged online, how do we make sure they stay engaged over time? Results suggest that language and listening play a critical role in developing loyalty with this group. Landing pages may grab attention with slick visuals, and fresh content may encourage teenagers and young adults to visit more than once, but this group will not stay connected long-term unless their voices resonate loud and clear. We listened to members of our youth communities and their networks, and interviewed our most experienced facilitators for this group in order to understand this better. Here is what they said:

- **They want to hear their own language and tone.** Sites that are visited regularly use language that employs youth-driven terminology, tone (a casual feel) and word count (e.g., shorter blurbs are preferred over detailed paragraphs). One idea that has proven effective for a community of youth style leaders at Communispace is to add a dynamic glossary (or "lingo lexicon"). This has served the dual purpose of building long-term engagement (members enjoy adding favorite expressions and seeing how the list grows and changes over time) and providing a method for keeping published content relevant for this group. These consumers

report being drawn to those online venues that seem to be authored by other young people—ones they can "relate" to. As one participant remarked about Collegehumor.com (another very popular website), "[It] is funny and the fact that it is written by college students or recent alumni makes it much more fun to read."

- **"Funny" is seriously important to this group,** and a much sought-after feature online. In reviewing participants' qualitative responses about what makes an online website or community interesting for them, humor was mentioned repeatedly. This included funny material incorporated into the sites themselves, as well as plenty of links to humorous information on other locations. Participants stated that they wanted to see: "a cool design and very funny little games," "funny pictures," "a funny joke," "funny article," "funny videos," "very funny stuff, weird news and jokes."

- **Facilitate self-expression.** In addition to accessing information, survey participants indicated that they use their home pages and networks as a way to express themselves. One very compelling reason to visit a site regularly is that it is personally meaningful—a virtual extension of one's self. One 17-year-old female explained that interesting online settings "allow for people to create a site that fits the person's personality. It allows people to be creative and stuff." This preference is clearly observed in those one-stop sites that allow members to create personal homepages. A recent New York Times article described the homepages on MySpace as being adorned "with garish artwork, intimate snapshots and blogs filled with…ribald commentary on their lives."[6]

> *Develop Loyalty*
>
> *They say they want:*
>
> ➢ *To hear their own language and tone*
>
> ➢ *Things to be funny— humor is critical*
>
> ➢ *Places where they can express themselves*
>
> ➢ *To hear each other's voices and be heard themselves*
>
> ➢ *To feel like they are elite and insiders*

- **Give them a voice, listen to them, and act on what they say**, because this is the best way to create a meaningful and continually relevant online experience. Participants stated they were more interested in visiting and participating in sites that reflected their hobbies, were geared to what they like, related to them "better," and had direct relevance to their lives. It is critical, then, that rather than just publishing information for reading purposes, companies find ways to create two-way conversations and interaction with young consumers to ensure an integrated and rewarding place in their lives.

- **Make them feel like "insiders."** Members of our online communities have consistently stated that their clear status as insiders is a key reason they return to and participate continually. The appeal and cachet of being "in the know" is especially compelling for young and savvy consumers. As one youth community member explained, "As i signed up for this, i got the idea that i was part of an elite group of

---

[6] Alex Williams. "Do You MySpace?" *New York Times,* 28 August 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

guys who are cooler than most people who aren't members…it would be lame if just anyone can qualify for it. I want to be elite." Additionally, their sophisticated use of technology for networking, self-expression and sharing information have made them voluntary brand enthusiasts when they were offered insider status.

Our data suggest that this group may be more loyal to those online sites that facilitate sharing music and humor, and provide a platform for self-expression and personal voice (through personalized homepages, images, diaries, etc.). Observing them in their space and listening to their conversations allows companies to provide two critical incentives for ongoing engagement: Content and services that are more targeted to what this group says it wants, and—more importantly perhaps—a place where they can simply "be" and even become.

3. Learn who influences them, and observe how they influence each other...

Developing targeted and efficient marketing strategies is a business imperative notoriously difficult to achieve with today's youth consumer group. The data presented so far indicate some ways to attract and engage the youth market, as well as how to create loyalty via the Internet. Specifically, our data suggest that the voices this group most wants to hear are their own. If this is the case, what hope do companies have of maximizing their marketing dollars? What kinds of approaches work when the goal is to influence young people through technology?

Our primary aim in conducting this study was to better understand what engages teenagers and young adults online, so these questions were not addressed directly through this research. However, our data do reveal some behavioral preferences that indicate why some strategies may be more effective than others.

- **Facilitate their ability to connect with each other.** Participants reported visiting between two and five websites on a daily basis (72%, $n = 199$), with social networking communities such as Facebook and MySpace being popular choices (50% of participants reported visiting journaling or networking sites, $n = 139$). Additionally, 60% of participants indicated they used instant messaging every day ($n = 163$). As one 17-year-old female put it, she likes that she "can meet some amazing people and find so much about them, just by reading." Taken alongside their preference for youth-authored content and experiences, these data suggest this group spends a significant amount of time online reaching out to each other, expressing ideas and opinions, and listening to their peers. Qualitative analyses reveal two interconnected themes that speak to how this group is influenced: they enjoy the social aspect of connecting online and they actively seek information, ideas and advice through these networks and online communities. So the power to influence the youth market may reside with young people, themselves.

- **Understand what kinds of information they *won't* forward online.** Data indicate that, while this group is highly interactive and social, they share a common skepticism about forwarding suspect information. In particular, this group demonstrated a heightened awareness of spam, viruses and other annoyances that create "hassles" for savvy technology users. Likewise, participants appeared to screen

information almost as a courtesy to friends in their social networks. This sentiment is captured in the words of one 24-year-old woman, "I don't want spam or junk mail to be piling up in my inbox." This finding suggests that these consumers are unlikely to transmit information unless they fully trust its source. If companies want to be in a position to affect what is being communicated throughout the youth market networks, then building trust and credibility with this group could be a valuable strategy.

▪ **Understand what kinds of information they *will* forward online.** While this group may be particularly sophisticated about forwarding information from sources they deem unreliable or suspect, data do suggest music and humor are frequently shared online. For example, one participant stated that he "always [forwards] links to funny/interesting sites," and humor was the most common kind of information participants mentioned when we asked them to share with us the most recent e-mail or website they forwarded to a friend. This observed behavior suggests that there are some ways to make online information easier to transmit (in a viral sort of way). It is possible that trusted information sources that also include humor are more likely vehicles for messaging with this group.

▪ **Incentives are expected, but not all that motivating.** Survey participants indicated through their comments that "free stuff" and "prizes" were expected rewards for visiting sites online, "if two websites are similar then I'd rather visit the one that might give me a prize." The data also suggest, however, that prizes (such as free music or gift certificates) are in themselves a commodity and do not necessarily influence behavior or create evangelism. Our experience with youth-oriented communities (as well as those comprised of other age groups) suggests that it is tangible evidence of corporate "listening" that converts online visitors into enthusiastic customers. In the words of one young man, "It's like the whole package, yeah sure the incentives are nice but [it's] the surveys and bulletin boards, it's the heads up on future products and promotions, you kind of feel that you had a say in what goes on when [the sponsoring company] markets a brand, you're like yeah I did a survey about the effects of that ad."

▪ **Connect them to a brand.** As the above quote illustrates, the importance of being connected to a specific brand cannot be overemphasized. Survey participants often used words like "cool" and "popular" to describe appealing online activities, locations and information. In the private online communities we facilitate at Communispace, we have found that being engaged in dialogue with a particular brand is extremely motivating for participants of all age groups. In our experience, branded communities (rather than communities where the sponsor is not explicit) build trust and loyalty,

engender openness and information sharing, and create evangelism in consumer and customer groups alike.

The results of the current research suggest that teenagers and young adults are continually influencing each other online. By strengthening their means for connection and by bringing their voices to each other, companies can help to create a powerful and self-motivated network of savvy and discerning consumers who are trusting and respectful of the company sponsoring this peer-to-peer sharing. In order to capitalize on this system of influence and to leverage the natural momentum of this group, we believe companies need to focus on building a reciprocal, ongoing relationship with this market.

Implications for Online Communities

Clearly, the insights generated through this research could apply to any company that wishes to engage the youth market online. At Communispace, we are passionate about helping companies achieve deep, iterative, and actionable insights into the wants, needs, and sensibilities of this critical consumer group. As a result, we are continually working to engage teenagers and young adults online over time. Below are some implications of this research for private online communities of young consumers.

Leveraging these insights…

- **Listen, and don't leave them hanging.** Listening to consumers is always important, but we have found that community members know they have been heard when companies take the time to report back and close the loop. So there really are three strategies here: facilitate communities so that members can speak up; direct corporate listeners to what customers are saying; and make sure sponsoring companies follow up with community members on what they have heard. This is all consistent with the notion of being an "insider." This group's status is affirmed when they feel that they are *truly* making a difference.

- **Design communities so that information is updated as much as possible.** When participants said they wanted "updated information," they meant a minimum of every other day. Software that shows new content continually helps keep youth community members coming back and making new contributions. For instance, in Communispace, the "site" is updated literally whenever a member makes a comment.

- **Build in ample opportunity for connecting and re-connecting.** Online communities are a natural venue for building relationships and connection. For these consumers, who are already skeptical of the corporate world, it is critical that the online experience be about connecting with each other (in addition to connecting with the company). This includes plenty of community-building activities (such as "top ten" surveys, music and video game dialogues, etc.) as well as offering instant messaging as a way to help them connect.

- **Help them learn about each other.** This seems to be particularly important for the youth market communities we facilitate. Community members want to be known to each other, so finding fun ways for them to share personal information with each

other—their interests, lifestyle, and priorities—helps to create a social network. For example, in one of our youth communities we use a quiz format for members to create surveys about themselves, with different members signing up to be featured every few weeks. Along similar lines, community members are encouraged to post images, poems, and stories to share who they are with other members.

- **Capitalize on multi-tasking.** Whereas older consumers tend to prefer engaging in a few activities for a concentrated period of time (e.g., a 45-minute slot once a week), young consumers are most comfortable engaging in multiple concurrent activities and coming in on a daily basis, for five minutes per day. This is a different rhythm for community facilitators, but one that is more natural for young consumers.

- **Be conscious of their disdain for spam.** Especially in member recruiting, companies need to be authentic and clear, spelling out carefully the purpose of the community and why their participation matters.

- **Learn from the conversations they start with one another.** We have found that community members share information that companies would never even have thought to ask. Once members feel connected to each other and to the sponsoring company, the wealth of unsolicited insights that are generated can be incorporated into corporate messaging strategies, advertising and marketing campaigns, and product development (in the formative and concept-testing stages). Given the changeable nature of this consumer group, ready access to their interests, perspectives, and needs can help streamline many business processes.

> ### *Leverage Key Insights*
>
> ➢ *Listen, and follow up on what you heard—let them know they are making a difference*
>
> ➢ *Design communities so that information is updated continually*
>
> ➢ *Build in ample opportunity for connection*
>
> ➢ *Help them learn about each other*
>
> ➢ *Capitalize on multi-tasking*
>
> ➢ *Be aware of their disdain for spam*
>
> ➢ *Learn from the conversations they start with one another*
>
> ➢ *Reveal what your brand is rather than having a generic community*

- **Reveal what your brand is rather than having a generic community.** You can't be an insider if you don't know what you are inside of, so companies can gain a lot by being transparent about their identity. Openness on the part of the sponsoring company fosters openness and trust in return, and status can be a powerful incentive.

In Conclusion

Although it is challenging to keep up with the youth culture of today, it is doable with the help of innovative technologies such as online communities. However, technology alone

is not sufficient. You can *attract* youth through clever design, (e.g., using "young" language, making online navigation easy, providing opportunities for connection and personal expression, etc.), but will achieve deep and iterative insights only through commitment to genuine and *persistent* listening. Because the youth market is fast-paced, sophisticated, and fickle, companies that want to develop lasting connections with this group must find ways to meet them where they are—online and on the move. The youth culture market is not static—what is true today for this group could change tomorrow. Our recommendation and commitment is to create an online venue they find attractive, and then to keep them interested and engaged by encouraging interaction, facilitating openness, building trust, and as always, listening.

Appendix: Research Process and Methodology

The current research was designed to explore the questions raised above. In particular, we wanted to enhance our understanding of how we connect with this group online and to gather as many insights as possible into the preferences of this important market segment. We also wanted to understand why Communispace's youth-oriented communities tend to be extremely vibrant, with high participation rates and significant insights.

Data collection process

Data were collected through three parallel efforts:

- **Internal study:** Internal interviews were conducted with those Communispace facilitators who have worked extensively with our client youth culture communities.

- **External review:** Online venues known to be popular with this age group were reviewed for content, visual elements and other qualities that seemed to differentiate these websites from others on the Internet.

- **Survey:** A viral listening project was conducted via an online 37-item survey in which youth community members were asked to describe their preferences in using technology, entertainment and the Internet. The survey employed both closed- and open-ended questions and was available for completion in two Communispace-facilitated youth culture communities. Additionally, community members were asked to forward a copy of the survey to their friends outside the community (to increase sample size and to extend the research beyond Communispace community members).

Survey participants

The total number of participants was 276, with ages ranging from 16 to 25 and of mixed gender. The table below summarizes the demographic breakdown.

Age	Gender	Relation to Communispace
16-20: n = 97 (36%)	Male: n = 170 (62%)	Members: n = 225 (80%)
21-25: n = 179 (64%)	Female: n = 106 (38%)	Referrals: n = 51 (20%)

A note on terminology: Our data indicate this group frequented conventional content websites, such as CNN.com, as well as more community- and one-stop-oriented locations, such as MySpace. In their own language, survey participants used several terms to describe these online venues, most notably "website," "community," and "site" (as the most generic term). We have chosen to present our findings using a similar language scheme, so "site" is used generically and when possible, we have been more specific about the kind of site under discussion (e.g., community or website).

Communispace

Communispace Corporation, a pioneer in creating vibrant online customer communities, enables businesses to directly connect market intelligence to business growth and innovation. The company's turnkey solution, including building, managing and facilitating proprietary online communities, engages customers in a rich and multi-dimensional dialogue, 24/7. By delivering rapid and continuous access to unprecedented insights, companies secure real-time results—driving faster product development cycles, increasing marketing efficacy, solidifying customer advocacy and overall, lowering marketing expenditures.

Communispace is headquartered in Watertown, MA with offices in Atlanta, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.

For more information visit: **www.communispace.com**

Communispace Corporation
100 Talcott Avenue
Watertown, MA 02472
617.607.926.4555