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CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERATIONS: KEY DIFFERENCES AND THEIR IMPACT ON MARKETING STRATEGIES

ZACHOWANIA KLIENTÓW W KONTEKŚCIE POKOLEŃ: KLUCZOWE RÓŻNICE I ICH WPŁYW NA STRATEGIE MARKETINGOWE

Keywords: generational differences, consumer decision-making, marketing, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z, Generation Alpha

Słowa kluczowe: *różnice pokoleniowe, proces decyzyjny konsumenta, marketing, Baby Boomers, Generacja X, Millennials, Generacja Z, Generacja Alfa*

Abstract

Adapting marketing strategies to the specific needs of each age group can significantly increase customer loyalty and the effectiveness of marketing efforts. Different generations vary in their use of technology, preferred communication channels, as well as their approach to brands and consumer experiences. Values, preferences, and lifestyle play a crucial role in shaping the purchasing decisions of these groups.

The aim of this article is to analyse generational differences in consumer decision-making processes, focusing on five generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (Generation Y), Generation Z, and the youngest Generation Alpha.

Streszczenie

Dostosowanie strategii marketingowych do specyficznych potrzeb każdej grupy wiekowej może znacząco zwiększyć lojalność klientów oraz efektywność działań marketingowych. Wartości, preferencje i styl życia odgrywają kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu decyzji zakupowych a poszczególne pokolenia różnią się w zakresie korzystania z technologii, preferowanych kanałów komunikacji, a także podejścia do marek i doświadczeń konsumenckich.

Celem artykułu jest analiza różnic pokoleniowych w procesach decyzyjnych konsumentów na przykładzie pięciu generacji: Baby Boomers, Generacji X, Millennialsów (Generacji Y), Generacji Z oraz najmłodszej Generacji Alfa.

INTRODUCTION

Building lasting relationships with customers based on trust, two-way communication and listening to the opinions of leading customers, to create products and services corresponding to an in-depth understanding of their needs affects the goals of all parties involved [Szymura-Tyc, 2000].

Customer behaviour is usually studied and analysed to understand customer preferences, needs and expectations to better tailor the company's offer and service to their requirements. This information helps businesses improve their marketing strategies, make better business decisions, and build long-term customer relationships.

The essence of the customer relationship is a long-term and developing process, resulting from an earlier, single transaction, favouring mutually beneficial multiple acts of buying and selling [Otto, 2004].

In relations with customers, it is noted that these should be *win-win* relationships, i.e. based on the principle of mutual benefits (wins). These relations refer to relationships with customers, employees, distributors, as well as many other entities indirectly related to the company, the so-called external environment. These ties can be economic, technical, and social, and the result is a kind of marketing network that becomes a source of potential for the company [Mazurek-Łopacińska, 2000].

The result of properly conducted contacts with clients will be the development of mutual understanding and trust and respect for the capabilities of each party in accordance with their roles established in the market and in society [Żabiński, 2002]

Customer behaviour plays a key role in the functioning of companies. They have a significant impact on the success of the organisation, both in the short and long term.

Customer behaviour is a key source of information that helps companies adapt their marketing strategies. The analysis of customer behaviour allows you to identify customer preferences, needs and expectations, which allows you to better match the offer and communication to their requirements. Thanks to this, the company can reach its target group more effectively and generate more value for customers.

Customer behaviour is also important for building long-term relationships and loyalty. Some customers may be loyal to a particular brand and regularly buy products or use the services of that company. Others may be more inclined to switch providers depending on competing offerings.

Positive customer experiences, such as satisfaction with products or services, excellent customer service or a personalized approach, foster trust, and relationships with customers. Loyal customers are more likely to buy again, recommend the business to others, and be more resilient to competition.

Other benefits of gaining customer loyalty are:

- loyal consumers are cheaper to maintain and reduce marketing costs,
- it is less risky to expand the brand, because loyal customers are more likely than new ones to take advantage of the new offer,
- loyal customers provide stability to the company, contribute to its development, customer loyalty contributes to a higher level of return on investment,
- loyalty reduces the likelihood that consumers will change their preferred brand and therefore reduces the effectiveness of competitors' actions,
- customers are more resistant to price changes, i.e. they accept price increases more easily than new customers [Heinemann, Gaiser, 2014].

Differentiating in the market: A good understanding of customer behaviour allows a company to stand out in the market. Analysis of customer preferences and consumer trends allows you to identify a market niche or new business opportunities. Tailoring your offer to your specific customer needs can bring you a competitive advantage and attract more customers.

Customer experience optimisation: Customer behaviour is also important for improving the customer experience. Behaviour analysis allows you to identify touchpoints where customers may experience difficulties, frustration, or dissatisfaction. Based on this information, the company can take actions to improve processes, improve customer service, and provide a better experience when interacting with the brand.

Long-term growth and profits: Customer behaviour has a direct impact on a company's bottom line. Loyal customers are more likely to make recurring purchases, which leads to a stable and predictable revenue stream. In addition, satisfied customers often generate positive word-of-mouth marketing,

recommending the company to others, which contributes to the acquisition of new customers and long-term profit growth [Jedynak, Domańska-Szaruga, 2009].

Customers can make purchasing decisions based on various factors, such as price, product quality, brand, other customers' reviews, promotions, but also based on the following factors:

Customer service interactions: Customer behaviour may include how they communicate with customer service, such as making complaints, asking questions, asking for help, or providing feedback.

Use of sales channels: Customers may prefer specific sales channels, such as brick-and-mortar stores, online stores, phone, or mobile applications, depending on their preferences and convenience.

Sharing experiences: In the digital world, customers often share their shopping or service experience with other people [Muñoz-Leiva, Hernández-Méndez, Gómez Carmona, 2018].

Monitoring customer behaviour enables companies to better understand their preferences, needs and expectations. This allows the company to tailor its products, services, and marketing strategies to better respond to customer needs.

By analysing data such as purchase history, preferences, product browses or website navigation, the company can provide customers with personalized recommendations and offers that are more tailored to their individual needs.

Monitoring customer behaviour helps companies assess the effectiveness of their marketing efforts. Analysis of data on the effectiveness of various marketing channels and strategies allows companies to optimise their activities and allocate resources. Analysing customer behaviour data can provide companies with valuable insights into market trends. This allows them to tailor their offerings and strategies to be competitive in the market.

Monitoring customer behaviour also enables companies to detect irregularities, problems, and customer dissatisfaction. Data analytics allows you to identify areas where customers are experiencing difficulties or dissatisfaction, which in turn enables the company to take corrective action and improve the quality of its products or services.

Customer behaviour analysis can include various research methods such as surveys, market research, data analysis, online behaviour tracking, and many other techniques. All of this is used to better understand customers and tailor the company's operations to meet their needs and increase customer satisfaction and loyalty [Serhat, Selçuk, 2020].

MODELS OF COMMUNICATIONS WITH CONSUMER

Decision making is a procedural and technological feature of the management process with multiple economic and psychosociological conditions.

Decision-making can be considered in two senses. In a broad sense, it is a complex process that consists of registration and evaluation of information, identification of the decision problem and application of the adopted selection criterion, determination, and issuance of a decision (decision-making task) and registration of information about its implementation.

In the second sense – decision-making is only one of the stages of the decision-making process and means a conscious act of will of the decision-maker making a non-random choice of one of the set of possible options for solving the decision problem (these variants must of course be identified or designed in advance).

The simplest form of decision making includes 3 stages. First stage – recognising the problem, i.e. determining the causes, effects, and probable solutions, the second stage – decision design, i.e. the development of variants of the optimal solution, the third stage – selection of the final decision, i.e. selection of the best option in accordance with previously established criteria [Kowalczyk, Roszyk-Kowalska, 2016].

Customers make decisions based on different models and processes. The most frequently described in the scientific literature are rational model, heuristic model, emotional model and social model.

The rational decision-making model is one of the main approaches to describing the decision-making process of customers The rational model assumes that customers make decisions in a rational and logical way. Before making a choice, they analyse the available information, compare different options, evaluate costs and benefits, and make a decision that maximises their expected benefits. This model assumes that customers are well informed, carefully weigh their options and make decisions according to their own preferences.

Stages of this model:

1. Recognise the problem. The customer recognises that there is a problem, need, or purpose that requires a decision.
2. Seeking information: The customer collects information about the available options. They can use various sources of knowledge, such as the Internet, reviews, product comparisons, recommendations of others or previous experience.
3. Evaluation of alternatives: The customer evaluates the available alternatives taking into account various criteria and preferences. It analyses costs, benefits, product features, brand reputation, quality, price, availability, and other factors that are important to it.
4. Choice: The customer chooses from the available alternatives. The decision can be made on the basis of logical and rational calculations, such as comparing benefits and costs, or on the basis of one's own preferences, values, or intuition.
5. Post-purchase assessment: After the purchase, the customer evaluates their experience and satisfaction with the decision made [Kotler et al., 2019].

Heuristic model: This model assumes that customers make decisions based on short-term strategies or rules, called heuristics. Instead of analysing all the available information, customers use simplified approaches that help them make faster decisions. An example of a heuristic might be choosing a product based on the brand, popularity, price, or recommendations of others.

The consumer decision heuristic model describes an approach in which customers use simplified strategies or rules, called heuristics, when making decisions.

Heuristics enable clients to make decisions quickly and efficiently, omitting a thorough analysis of all available information. Customers judge the probability or value of something based on the ease with which it comes to mind. If the information is readily available in their mind, they give it more weight. For example, if customers see frequent ads for a particular brand, they may find it more popular and trustworthy. Clients judge the probability or value of something based on its similarity to a certain pattern or stereotype. For example, if a product reminds customers of other products they are familiar with, they may conclude that it has similar characteristics and benefits.

Customers prefer to make quick decisions with minimal analytical effort. They choose the option that seems the easiest and requires the least intellectual effort or time. For example, they can choose the product that is first on the list or the most promoted.

Customers rely on recommendations or opinions from other people, such as family, friends, celebrities, or influencers, to make a decision. They will trust other people or social groups that they consider reliable or have similar preferences [Malewska, 2019].

The emotional model of consumer decisions assumes that emotions play a key role in the decision-making process of customers. According to this model, customers are guided by their emotions, feelings, and intuition, which affect their preferences and choices. Emotions can have both positive and negative influences on consumer decision-making [Lerner, Keltner, 2001].

Emotions can influence how customers perceive products and brands, what they prefer, and what features or benefits are important to them. For example, positive emotions can make a customer feel more inclined to choose a product, even if it is not logically justified.

Emotions can play an important role in consumer decision-making. Customers can base their choices on emotions such as joy, fear, anger, surprise, or satisfaction [La Pira, 2011]. These emotions can be triggered by advertising, shopping experiences, interactions with the brand, or the opinions

of other customers. Emotions can influence the evaluation of the shopping experience and customer satisfaction. Positive emotions related to the product, customer service or the entire purchasing process can lead to greater customer satisfaction and loyalty to the brand. Brands often try to evoke the right emotions in customers in their marketing campaigns. They use strategies that aim to stimulate positive emotions, create emotional bonds with customers and build emotional associations with the brand [Pham, 2007].

The social model of consumer decisions assumes that customer choices and preferences are strongly shaped by social influence, i.e. interactions, opinions, and social norms. According to this model, people are guided by what others do and what socially acceptable patterns of behaviour and preferences are. Customers often compare their preferences, choices, and behaviours with what others in their reference group, such as family, friends, colleagues, or other consumers, are doing. If others choose a particular product or brand, it can influence the customer's decision [Woiceshyn, 2009].

Customers often rely on the opinions, recommendations, and reviews of other people, such as celebrities, industry experts, bloggers, or other consumers. Positive opinions and recommendations can convince the customer to choose a given product or brand.

Customers are subject to social norms, i.e. rules and expectations regarding behaviour and preferences in a given community. If a particular brand, style, or trend is socially accepted or perceived as prestigious, it can influence the client's decisions.

Customers may feel social pressure to conform to the expectations of other individuals or social groups. This can lead to choosing products or brands that are widely accepted or fashionable, even if these are not their personal preferences [Evans, 2008].

It is worth noting that the decision-making process can also be a combination of different models or be context dependent. Customers can use different models depending on the type of product, time, time pressure, level of engagement or individual preferences. In addition, customer decision-making can also be influenced by psychological, cultural, and economic factors, further shaping the way customers make choices [Malewska, 2019].

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN CONSUMER DECISION

Knowing the characteristics of a generation is of great importance in marketing, as different generations have different preferences, behaviours and values. Appropriate adjustment of the marketing strategy to specific age groups can significantly increase the effectiveness of marketing activities.

Knowing the characteristics of the generation allows for accurate market segmentation. Each generation has its own unique consumer preferences, lifestyles, and ways of communicating. Thanks to this, it is possible to better match the offer to the needs and expectations of a given age group.

Generations vary in values, interests, and lifestyles.

Different generations prefer different channels of communication. Younger generations often use social media and mobile communications, while older generations rely more on traditional channels such as TV or print media [Tri et al., 2023].

A good understanding of the characteristics of a generation allows brands to build a bond and trust with consumers. Showing that the brand understands their needs and values can result in greater customer loyalty and engagement. Creating content and campaigns that are appropriately aligned with the values and lifestyles of a given generation leads to positive customer relationship [Naoki, Ryuta, 2023].

Currently, there are several generations on the consumer market:

The oldest of them, **Baby boomers**, is a generation of people born in the post-war period, mainly in the years 1946–1964. The name "baby boomers" derives from the fact that it was a period in which there was a sharp increase in births after the end of World War II.

Baby boomers are often described as hardworking and dedicated to their work. They grew up at a time when struggles for workers' rights were going on and they were witnessing the progression of

industrialization. They tend to attach great value to a professional career and achieving success in the professional sphere [Tri et al., 2023].

Baby boomers have witnessed rapid technological development, especially in the field of communication. While some of them may find it difficult to use modern technology, many have learned to use computers and use the Internet.

Baby boomers often sought to achieve material success and achieve a higher social status. In times of economic growth and stability, they often placed great emphasis on acquiring material goods and financial security.

In addition, baby boomers had a big impact on the development of popular culture. They witnessed the birth of rock and roll, the hippie movement, and the youth revolution.

They introduced new trends in fashion, music and art that had a significant impact on society at the time.

Baby boomers are also of great demographic importance, as they constitute one of the most numerous generations. Their ageing and retirement has an impact on social and economic systems in many countries [Naoki, Ryuta, 2023].

Generation X is a group of people born in the period from around 1965 to 1980.

Generation X grew up in a period of many social changes, such as social movements, the struggle for human rights, the development of technology and globalisation. They witnessed events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the technological revolution.

Generation X is often described as a generation that had to fend for itself because their parents often worked and were busier. Therefore, people of this generation show strong independence, self-reliance, and the ability to cope with difficult situations.

Generation X was the first generation to face difficulties in the labour market, such as increasing competition and economic change. As a result, they are often hardworking, flexible, and determined, striving to achieve professional success.

Generation X has experienced a rapid development of technology, albeit at a younger age. They witnessed the birth of personal computers, mobile phones, and the beginnings of the Internet. Although they are not as naturally connected to technology as Generation Z, they are able to adapt and use new technological tools [Zjawin, 2018].

Generation X is known for its independence and spirit of rebellion. They witnessed punk culture, alternative movement, and defiance of social norms. They tend to express their individuality and independence in different aspects of life.

In the context of work, Generation X is known for its ability to adapt to change, flexibility and ability to cooperate with different social groups. They have work experience and are often seen as disciplined, independent, and determined to achieve their goals [Tri et al., 2023].

Generation Y, also known as millennials, is a group of people born between about 1981 and 1996.

Millennials grew up during a period of rapid development of digital technology, including the Internet and mobile phones. They have experience with both traditional technologies and new digital tools. They are well versed in the use of electronic devices and modern applications.

Millennials are pioneers in the use of social media. This generation was one of the first to actively use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. The use of social media has become a natural way for them to communicate and build social relationships [Ratajczyk, 2017].

Millennials are aware of the importance of work-life balance. They often seek flexibility in working hours and look for ways to combine career and private life. They are more likely to seek satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment in life rather than just at work.

Millennials have a greater interest in sustainability and environmental issues. They are aware of the challenges posed by climate change and strive to take action to maintain ecological sustainability. Millennials are more open to diversity and cultural tolerance.

An important aspect that distinguishes Generation Y is also their ability to work in teams and use communication technologies for effective remote collaboration. Many of them prefer flexible forms of employment, such as remote work or cooperation on a project basis [Tri et al., 2023].

Generation Z, also called the digital generation, is a group of people born between around 1997 and 2012.

Generation Z is raised in a world where digital technology is common and commonplace. Children of this generation have often been exposed to electronic devices from an early age and have a natural ability to use technology.

Due to the development of the Internet and easy access to information, Generation Z has an unlimited opportunity to gain knowledge on various topics.

Generation Z is very connected to social media. For them, constant contact with their peers through platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok is natural. They tend to create their online identity and use these tools as their main means of communication [Ratajczyk, 2017].

In the face of economic uncertainty and rapid changes in the labour market, Generation Z is more practical and willing to acquire practical skills that can ensure their stability and professional success. They are also more self-reliant and enterprising, looking for alternative career paths such as freelancing or entrepreneurship.

Due to the development of technology and multiple sources of information, Generation Z has a natural ability to perform many tasks simultaneously. They can simultaneously use different applications, browse the Internet, listen to music, and have conversations, maintaining a high ability to focus.

However, Generation Z has great potential to influence society and shape the future. As the first generation raised fully in the digital age, they possess unique skills and perspectives that can contribute to innovation, social change, and technological progress.

As Generation Z matures and enters the workforce, its influence will deepen. They will have the opportunity to introduce new ideas, create new technologies, contribute to business development, and make key socio-political decisions.

The largest and best researched group as consumers are representatives of generation Y and Z. Because learning about the preferences and habits of individual generations of customers can be a source of benefits for companies, research on changing the way they respond to marketing tools is carried out by many independent institutions. Interesting research in this regard was carried out by Dellolitle. Research conducted by Dellolitle shows that there are many differences between Generation Y and Generation Z regarding processes related to purchasing. Millennials (Generation Y) have higher expectations regarding the level of service and are willing to pay a higher price for it. 75% of them consider their expectations regarding the standard of customer service to be extremely high. The same amount is willing to pay more for a better level of service [www.deloitte.com].

Generation Z is focused on saving and generation Y on experiencing. It seems that saving interests today's teenagers more than millennials were when they were at that age. Generation Z likes shopping that allows you to achieve the greatest value at the price offered. Millennials are more interested in the buying experience itself and are more willing to pay for the level of service.

Generation Z is frugal, carefully, and consciously manages money, but is also involved in searching for "authentic" brands.

Teenagers are enthusiastic about their "no Photoshop" rule because they do not like processed or artificial photos [www.deloitte.com].

Generation Z prefers to buy in stores and Generation Y are specialists in online shopping.

Since the transition from Internet phone calls to fixed network connections has taken place before their eyes, they use this facility at every opportunity. This attitude may also contribute to the difficulties experienced by brick-and-mortar stores. Generation Z, on the other hand, prefers to shop in stores. They want to touch what they want to buy to make sure the product has the right quality.

Millennials are attached to brands, and Generation Z wants to remain independent. The best marketing strategy aimed at Generation Z therefore focuses on individuality. Communication should show that they can be whoever they want, no one imposes anything on them [www.deloitte.com].

Generation Alpha is the youngest generation known today, whose birthday fell from 2013 to the present. Although it is still too early to determine all their characteristics precisely, it is possible to identify several general tendencies characteristic of this generation.

Generation Alpha enters the world in the digital age and is raised with access to smartphones, tablets, and other electronic devices from an early age. They have a natural ability to use technology and quickly acquire digital skills.

For the Alpha generation, digital technology is something natural.

Because of their access to a variety of media and technology, the Alpha generation tends to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. They are able to operate multiple applications, browse the Internet, listen to music, and have conversations while maintaining a high ability to focus.

Thanks to technology and easy access to information, the Alpha generation has wide access to diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences. They are more open to diversity and have a greater awareness of global issues.

For the Alpha generation, social media is an integral part of their lives. They have the opportunity to stay connected, share their experiences, and build an online identity. However, this can lead to problems related to excessive use of social media and mental health [Tri et al., 2023].

It is also important to understand that generations often overlap and the boundaries between them are fluid.

CONCLUSION

Understanding generational differences is essential for businesses looking to craft successful marketing strategies. Each generation has distinct consumer preferences, values, and behaviours that influence their decision-making processes. By recognising and adapting to these differences, companies can create targeted marketing campaigns that resonate with their intended audience, build stronger customer relationships, and ultimately drive greater brand loyalty and engagement.

As new generations such as Generation Alpha continue to emerge, marketers must stay ahead of the curve by constantly researching and adapting to the ever-evolving consumer landscape. The key to future success lies in understanding that each generation's unique set of experiences and values shapes the way they interact with brands and make purchasing decisions**.**

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