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# IDENTIFYING WITH CONSUMER IDENTITY

## A REFRESHED LOOK AT THE COMPLEXITY OF CONSUMER DEMOGRAPHICS

Solid marketing strategy requires solid consumer insight. But how we've traditionally analyzed and segmented shoppers lacks relevancy in today's marketplace.

**Read on** to learn about the challenges of using demographic details to understand consumers and develop business strategy.



# IDENTIFYING WITH CONSUMER IDENTITY

## A REFRESHED LOOK AT THE COMPLEXITY OF CONSUMER DEMOGRAPHICS

One major key to successful marketing strategy is understanding your target market. So we talk to consumers and launch surveys and test our work; data analysis leads to segmentations and client prioritization.

But what if the simplest elements of this understanding – demographics like age and gender and marital status – don't help us to understand consumers at all? What if these labels aren't the concrete basics of human identity that we thought they were? What if these labels don't have anything to do with how consumers identify or how they perceive themselves?

Here are some examples to consider. What if your consumers are genetically male but identify as being a woman? What if they're legally married but identify as being single? How about visibly white-skinned but identify as being black? Or born in America but identify as being a Canadian? In their 40s but identify as being 20-something?

We've been asking demographic questions about gender, marital status, and age, among others, for many years, but what do the responses really mean if that's not how our customers identify themselves? And most importantly, ***what are the assumptions and business decisions that we're making based on those demographic questions?***

How people define or identify themselves is an increasingly complex topic. As social norms evolve, the spectrum of definitions for our 'standard' demographic questions needs to change with it, or we need to abandon these questions in favour of asking what we *really* need to know to understand consumers and to move our product or service forward.

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## GENDER

The standard survey request to respondents in Western cultures is a choice between “Male” or “Female” – the biological ends of the sex spectrum which covers nearly 100% of the population<sup>1</sup>. For the development and marketing of most products and services do we honestly need to know which genitalia our respondents have? Not to mention that the question is often asked as, “what is your gender?” but the options given – ‘male’ and ‘female’ – are classifications of sex.

But *gender - not sex* - is a social and psychological and physical construct that captures and reflects what we *really* need to understand about our audiences. **Gender isn't which genitalia or chromosomes someone has, but "a person's self representation or how that person is responded to by social institutions based on the individual's gender presentation [as a man or woman]."**<sup>ii</sup> In other words, “gender” captures the needs and wants of the consumer market that consumer industries – in most cases – should be addressing.

In a human rights movement broadly known as “challenging the gender binary”, there is encouragement to allow for over 50 genders for humans to identify as, including agender, two-spirit, pangender, and transsexual<sup>ii</sup>. Facebook and Google+ have embraced this movement and allow users to identify themselves beyond the usual ‘male’ or ‘female’. And in an unprecedented move, in 2017 the Government of British Columbia issued a health card without a gender to allow the recipient (an infant) to chose their own gender as they age, not the gender that they would traditionally have been associated with based on their biological sex<sup>iii</sup>.

## MARITAL STATUS

Generally the response options given for marital status are: single, common law, married, divorced, or widowed. Because a respondent could fit into two or more of those categories at any one time so we attempt to clarify this multiplicity by asking the respondent to select only their current legal marital status.

The valuable piece of consumer data is the one that reflects the respondent, not the one that legal forms say is accurate. The usefulness of legal labels stops short of providing any insight into how the respondent approaches their relationship style (monogamous or open or polyamorous), whether they share their time or resources or decision-making opportunities with one or more individuals, or even, necessarily, how they perceive their relationship status (single or divorced), legalities aside.

Marriage and remarriage rates are declining, and so we need to reassess what is the value we're deriving from this variable or whether we need to review different varieties of relationship situations.<sup>iv</sup>

**There is inherit bias in assuming that marital “status” is determinate of how a person makes decisions or responds to marketing material:** will a married couple that spends very little time together have the same consumer mentality as a married couple with one stay-at-home partner? Is someone legally divorced for any length of time any different from someone legally single?

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<sup>1</sup> A small percentage of the population falls into other natural categories, such as intersex or hermaphrodite.

## RACE AND ETHNICITY

In 2015, Washington's NAACP President Rachel Dolezal made headlines when her Caucasian parents 'outed' her for representing herself as a black woman<sup>v</sup>. Ms. Dolezal, "has always identified with the African-American culture and had black siblings who were adopted. [Her parents] said she went to school in Mississippi and was part of a primarily African-American community." But, her parents argued, "Rachel has wanted to be somebody she's not. She's chosen not to just be herself but to represent herself as an African-American woman or a biracial person. And that's simply not true."

But what makes it true or untrue? Racially she may be Caucasian, but ethnically she identifies as a member of the black community. What makes her choice to present her racially Caucasian body as black less 'true' than Caitlyn Jenner's choice to present her biologically male body as a woman<sup>vi</sup>?

In the research world we may ask for race or country of origin, but do either of those answers truly indicate how the choices of the individual respondent are affected? **Race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality are all extremely important elements in shaping a person, but they're all more than just skin deep.** The communities and identities *we choose to belong to* say a lot about our deep-seated personal values and our belief systems.

## AGE AND GENERATION

Studies were forever changed when David Foot published *Boom, Bust & Echo*. The idea that consumers could be divided into groups and analyzed by year of birth and not a broad era of civilization or century led to countless corporate and sociological segmentation studies based on generations like 'Boomer', 'Millennial', 'Gen X', and the latest 'Generation Snowflake'.

**The evolving complexities of social norms and use of technology have affected the ability to broadly quantify someone into a generation based on age alone.** Millennials - aka Gen Y aka Echo Boomers - are born somewhere between the late 1970s (in their mid-30s now) and late 1990s (in their late teens now). It might seem like a shortcut to talk about how to market to "Millennials", but it's a naïve assumption to think that the two ends of this Gen Y spectrum have much in common with each other except the guesstimate that their parents were Boomers.

The low hanging fruit on proving the challenges to marketers of generation-based segmentation is the role of technology in the young lives of these generational anchors. In the early 80s the first Millennials got their advertising exposure from a small handful of sources: a few antenna or cable stations, the radio, maybe a newspaper, and the Sears catalogue. At the end of the century, the tail end of the Millennials had doubled rates of household penetration of cable and satellite service, and the newly minted World Wide Web for consumers bringing an endless barrage of information and advertising.

So how do we benefit from generation-based segmentation? It's a short cut, yes, but a valuable one? That's debatable.

**Ultimately, we need to seek information that can be used to help our industry and our colleagues and our clients make business decisions.**

## **IMPLICATIONS**

If biological sex or legal marital status or year of birth is required to make a business decision, then, of course, this perspective doesn't apply.

But for marketing researchers and user testers and experience designers and consumer insights leaders the questions we ask show that – or whether - we understand our respondents, and for marketers this is how we show we understand our target markets.

We ask questions to understand how people think and feel and to learn what they believe and to understand their intrinsic needs, which subsequently shapes how they decide to act, and how we can communicate in line with their priorities and interests. Why, then, do we continue to ask questions that are rife with tradition, personal bias, and subjective inference?

***Ultimately, we need to seek information that can be used to help our industry and our colleagues and our clients make business decisions.*** Questions that really add life to data: not male or female nor married or single nor Canadian or American, but daily activities or preferred role models or emotional stories or visual cues or degree of decision making control. We can learn – and more importantly *apply* – immense value from consumers' stage of life or emotional mindset or comfort level with technology: anything that transcends hard data and adds tactical relevancy to marketing and communications design.

Staying relevant as a consumer researcher goes beyond delivering device agnostic surveys or ensuring that a survey or software interface is easy to use. These, of course, are important challenges to our industry. But it also means ensuring that our most fundamental challenge – designing and asking questions to understand those we serve - catches up to where society is and is heading, and preparing for the changing demographic landscape of consumer marketplaces worldwide.

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<sup>i</sup> ["Draft Guidance for Industry and Food and Drug Administration Staff Evaluation of Sex Differences in Medical Device Clinical Studies"](#). U.S. Food and Drug Administration. 19 December 2011. Retrieved 3 August 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> [Facebook's 71 gender options come to UK users](#). The Telegraph. 27 June 2014. Retrieved 15 June 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> [This B.C. baby's ID says 'U' under gender. Here's why that's good, experts say](#). TheStar.com. 9 July 2017. Retrieved 10 July 2017.

<sup>iv</sup> [I do.... Take two? Changes in intentions to remarry among divorced Canadians during the past 20 years](#). Statistics Canada. 21 November, 2011. Retrieved 15 June 2017.

<sup>v</sup> [Parents out 'black' NAACP leader as white woman](#). USA Today. 12 June 2015. Retrieved 7 July 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> [Caitlyn Jenner](#). Wikipedia. Retrieved 7 July 2017.