

Dude, where's my life?

BY LIZ TORLÉE

Debt and cynicism weigh heavily on the average 20 year-old

"Youth is wasted on the young," George Bernard Shaw once declared, but it is unlikely he would feel the same way today. Perhaps, instead, he would echo the sentiments of a 24-year-old graduating student looking at a standard employment rejection: "Shit. Being young is hard work." Some argue that this is why we now endure *emo*, the punk-inspired, emotionally charged music enjoyed by young males in rec rooms or, if you're really unlucky, in your neighbour's backyard. One academic (who, not surprisingly, asked to remain nameless) describes it as "what happens when a culture lacks compulsory puberty initiation rites," but its perpetrators claim it represents a genuine anxiety over what is to come, a lament for a better world apparently lost forever.

Regardless, there is little evidence these days of the optimism of youth. What happened? Youth is supposed to be about seeing and saving the world and worrying later. Excuses were made for recklessness and anti-social behaviour: He's only young, She'll learn soon enough. Now, heads shake in commiseration and very few people over 40 would trade places with today's 20-year-old.

Youth is a subject of much discussion and concern because it still represents the most elusive target group marketers want to seduce, their insurance for the future success of their product. When trying to attract a younger crowd, a sense of "cool" is thought to be mandatory. There is a need to find the right vocabulary, to know what's hot and what's not, to catch an emerging trend before it becomes mainstream. However, we all may be barking up the wrong trees here. That sense of adventure is possibly only true in beer advertising. It seems to be the last thing on the minds of today's 18- to 30-year-olds.

For a start, their dreams seem to be smaller. Thirty years ago, if a young person was asked what they wanted to achieve in the next 10 years, their answers were ambitious and idealistic: Write a book, travel round the world, climb Everest. Today, here are some of the typical answers: Get a job, get married, pay down my debts, maybe buy a car. It is not that these dreams are less worthy, but that the horizon is so much closer, the boundaries tighter.

Recent ethnographic work among people in their 20s indicates a sharp skepticism and rejection of traditional definitions of success. Most baby boomers thought the world was their oyster, but today's youth are facing a much bleaker world. This is one reason more 20- to 29-year-olds are staying at home longer. In 1981, 27% of them lived at home. In 2001 it was 41% (47% in Ontario). And they are delaying marriage. In 1981, 52% of 20- to 29-year-olds were married; in 2001 that number dropped to 35%.

The parents and employers of this generation struggle with the unreasonable (their word) values they are encountering—the cynicism, the apparent lack of respect and the refusal to adopt the same work ethic or perform to the same standards. There are many factors fueling this attitude but the most obvious is the breakdown of so many previously revered institutions. Few young people can plan or dream in quite the same way as their parents. Many of them are from broken or fragmented homes—33% of children today will experience the separation of their parents before they reach 16—and many have witnessed the burn out of their parents in one form or another. Some anthropologists believe that,

today, the often strikingly conservative values of people in their 20s closely mirror those of their grandparents. Their parents are the odd generation in the middle-the ones who thought they should save the world but, to quote a 22-year-old woman, "sold out when they hit 30, leaving drug abuse, AIDS and religious fundamentalism in their wake." And, according to many, they stimulated the intense corporate greed and corruption that has forever compromised the working world for those who follow.

Although this sounds bitter, many younger people are, in fact, quite philosophical about their lot. What older people claim is an attitude of entitlement, they defend as the need for a more balanced life. They are not going to work as hard as their parents or their bosses because they have learned that hard work is not, in fact, rewarded. They've seen their father get "severed" after years of loyal service; they've watched their mothers juggle children, a frantic schedule and a thwarted career; and they've come home from school to empty houses, playing video games and eating chips to pass the time. As their education ends and they have to face the future head on, they seem to want little more than a steady job and a cosy, domestic, secure life.

Consider these comments from two 24-year-old, single, male university students: "Yeah, I want a good job but I don't want to climb the ranks-not if it takes me away from my family," "I want six kids-OK, maybe four kids, and a job that will help me feed them all!" And, perhaps most telling, from a 26-year-old woman: "I don't want to make the same mistake my mother made. She's really successful but I don't think she's happy."

Many of them, as they approach 30, feel tremendous pressure. One called the 30s "the Big Squeeze," explaining that you have to do so many life-altering things in such a short space: Meet the mate of your dreams, get married and have all those kids before pregnancy time runs out, buy a house and make a dent in the mortgage. But "you've got \$30,000 worth of student loans to pay down first." To some, this is overwhelming and there are indications that the tide is turning and more are opting for early marriage and having children at a younger age. They reason that they may as well start building the life they want now and adopt a fingers crossed attitude to the future... "that's if there even is a future," one of them cautioned.

So, what about being cool, having fun and seeking adventure? Well, the needs may still be there but they are buried deep. As we try to understand the motivations and values of a critically important group of people who will certainly reshape the products and services of the future, we should keep in mind that they are already wise beyond their years. Authentic and honest-it is these words that resonate best.

While all consumers are tired of over-promise, the younger group are going to insist on accountability and on their right to be treated well. Which brings to mind another great Shaw quote: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

Perhaps we'd better try even harder to understand those unreasonable younger people and their demands for a balanced life. Maybe they're on to something.

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LIZ TORLÉE is Joint Managing Director at TerraNova Market Strategies Inc.
www.terranova-msi.com