

## Sustainability for Every Generation

Nov 13, 2020 | Rebecca Rom-Frank

Last year, [Greta Thunberg](#) became the face of climate change activism, which might lead one to think that environmental sustainability is most important to Gen Z consumers. However, our Visual GPS research revealed that sustainability is important to consumers across *all* generations, with Baby Boomers ranking the most passionate, and Gen Z, surprisingly, the least. These findings prompted us to take a closer look at the most significant similarities—and differences—between generations when it comes to visualizing sustainability.

Across the globe, all four generations we surveyed—Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers—were twice as likely to respond to visuals showing large-scale solutions such as renewable energy or reforestation, especially with a human touch.

So, why not just show renewable energy all the time? Our data shows that 81% of consumers expect companies to be environmentally aware in all of their visual communications—even when the visual storytelling is not directly related to the environment. Considering that nearly all (92%) consumers are concerned about the environment, sustainable lifestyle choices won't always look the same for everyone. People fold sustainable choices into their daily lives based on a number of factors, and our research shows that generational values are one of them.

### **Baby Boomers**

While the solar panel icon tested well with everyone, the recycling symbol tested particularly well with Baby Boomers and Gen X, leaving younger generations less impressed. Our research shows that Baby Boomers tend to favor imagery showing the direct impact of environmental issues on people, animals, and nature. They have more faith in individual actions such as recycling and eliminating single-use plastics, and in non-profits and community groups. So, it's especially important to show seniors directly involved in personal environmental projects, such as recycling, volunteering, or using reusable products.

### **Gen X**

Gen X is the most skeptical of any industry's ability to do good for the environment, but they are also the generation most committed to [sustainable investing](#). This group is currently in a life-phase in which many people have children or leadership responsibilities at work, so they are in a position to influence the future of sustainability. There is an opportunity to show Gen X in both sustainable lifestyle and business

imagery, whether it's leading a team of renewable energy workers, teaching a child how to garden, or eco-proofing their own home.

## Millennials

Recycling may inspire older generations, but our data shows that sustainable business is more likely to strike a chord with Millennials. A [2017 Shelton Group study confirms](#) that although Millennials are less likely than Baby Boomers to engage in small individual actions such as recycling, they are more likely to buy from companies and businesses that adopt environmentally sustainable practices—and, historically, they have been [the main drivers of sustainable consumption](#). Visuals showing Millennials as sustainable small-business owners and customers will reflect their lifestyle choices and draw them in.

## Gen Z

Gen Z prefers visuals that tell a story associated with the environment, have a global feel, and capture real human emotions. They place more responsibility on the media, and believe in technology's potential to help encourage sustainable practices. They may not have as much spending power as older generations, but they still see themselves as ethical influencers and catalysts for change. To capture this growing demographic, show the emotional gratification that this age group derives from coming together to do what they can for the environment.

[Covid-19 has not chased Sustainability away](#), but it has changed who cares most about it. The global pandemic and subsequent recession has [hit younger generations particularly hard](#), and [a Deloitte study confirms](#) that although sustainability still matters a lot to younger generations, older generations are currently leading the way as sustainable consumers. In our Summer 2019 survey, Gen Z and Millennials were the most passionate about sustainability, with more than half reporting that they only buy from eco-friendly brands. Our Spring 2020 survey revealed the tables have turned: now, Baby Boomers and Gen X are more passionate, and up to 10% more committed to buying from eco-friendly brands. Assuming that the economy will improve after the pandemic has subsided, it's important to consider all generations when showing sustainability.

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