
Generation Resilience

How the Pandemic Changed Digital for Everyone



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FOREWORD:

An Unparalleled Event for Every Generation

“A Generational Shift” marks the fourth year WP Engine has undertaken research to provide brands and agencies with a closer look at digital trends and the factors driving them.

While past studies have focused primarily on Gen Z and its increasing influence across the digital ecosystem, this research offers a wider examination of changes that have occurred across all generations over the past year.

The pandemic has played an undeniable role in these changes, sparking a rapid acceleration to digital that has ushered us all into a new era of online connection. Put simply, for many of us around the world, our lives moved online.

At its peak in 2020, global internet use was up [more than 30%](#), with specific markets like video streaming up more than twice that number. In a similar vein, [nearly a third](#) of all businesses either began or increased their use of digital technologies during the pandemic.

In a flash, the digital experience became inseparable from the human experience, serving as a lifeline across all facets of our daily lives. Can you imagine the pandemic without the internet?

Today, it's hard to think of a grocery chain that doesn't include curbside pickup or a doctor who doesn't see patients online. With so much activity now on the web, and with new technologies constantly emerging that deepen the online connection, the relationship with the digital world has shifted for every generation.

Our hope is that the following sections arm you with a better understanding of the identifying behaviors and preferences of all generations that are playing out in today's digital landscape. The aim is to provide you with key insights to inform your technology decisions and, ultimately, guide your digital strategy for the future.

GENERATION RESILIENCE:

A Study of Digital Trends and Behaviors

"A Generational Shift" is the fourth annual study conducted by [The Center for Generational Kinetics](#) (CGK) and commissioned by [WP Engine](#). The study examines new and prevailing expectations for digital held by different generations of web users.

The information in this report is meant to equip marketers, strategists, and business leaders across every industry with insights into the digital preferences and needs of increasingly savvy audiences and consumers. While the study maintains a focus on younger generations that are comfortable embracing the latest tech trends, such as Millennials and Gen Z, it also offers added detail on the digital behaviors of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers.

The specific goals of this year's study were to understand how different generations have responded to and changed alongside the Covid-19 pandemic through a comparative generational analysis of data that included our previous three studies in addition to this year's research.

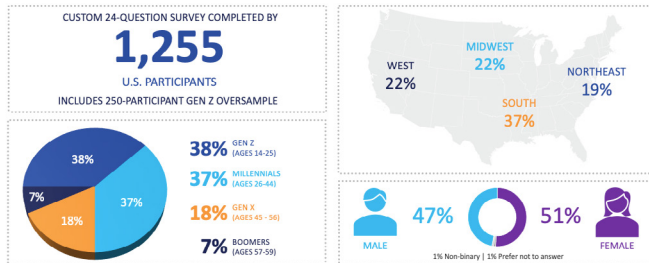
The sections below examine these results in greater detail, providing an overview of the resilience each generation has shown throughout the pandemic, as well as the ways they are rebuilding, and in many cases, rising higher than ever before.

The study also looked for new insights into consumer trends and online preferences through a customized U.S. national study.

Research Methodology

WP Engine and The Center for Generational Kinetics jointly led this research study, which was administered as a survey to a total of 1,255 U.S. respondents ages 14-59 including a 250-person oversample of Gen Z (ages 14-25).

U.S. NATIONAL STUDY METHODOLOGY



How Do You Define a Generation?

According to CGK, a generation is a group of people born around the same time and raised around the same place. People in this “birth cohort” exhibit similar characteristics, preferences, and values over their lifetimes.

For the purposes of this report, it’s important to understand how we define generational age groups based on the year they begin and end.

Who is Generation Z? Gen Z is defined as the generation born between 1996-2015, Millennials are defined as those born between 1977-1995, Gen X is defined as those born between 1965-1976, and Baby Boomers are defined as the generation born between 1946-1964.

If you’re wondering what comes after Gen Z, it’s Generation Alpha. While they were not included in this year’s data set because they are too young to be surveyed, we look forward to including them in the future.

The survey was conducted online from May 4, 2021 to May 19, 2021. Figures are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Margin of error is +/-3.1 percentage points.

The sample was weighted to the U.S. Census for age, region, gender, and ethnicity. Note: “Total Sample” in any graph represents the sample as a whole. In an instance that a chart total for a single select question does not add to 100%, please note that this is due to the minimal effect of rounding.

Key Takeaways

- **Technology is at the center of every generation:**
65% of all generations say they rely on technology now more than ever before.
- **Digital habits are forever changed:**
More than 60% of Gen Z and Millennials plan to continue using the digital channels they adopted or increasingly used during the pandemic.
- **Video streaming reigns supreme:**
70% of Gen Z increased their use of streaming services during the pandemic.
- **The remote workplace is here to stay:**
48% of Gen Z, 65% of Millennials, and 54% of Gen X would prefer to continue working remotely.
- **The web is now truly democratized:**
Website ownership has increased more than 300% over the past two years across every generation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Resilience, Rebuilding, and Rising Higher

Digital channels have served as a critical lifeline throughout the pandemic, fueling a collective global response that has inspired themes of resilience and renewal.

Even in the face of widespread disruption, many of our day-to-day routines have remained intact, albeit online. Businesses have continued operating, governments have continued to function, and consumers have continued purchasing the products and services they prefer, all from a remote, digital standpoint.

The result of this online migration has, unsurprisingly, been increased, widespread reliance on digital channels across every generation. As people in each age group have found new ways to respond to the pandemic, in many cases, they've also been able to bounce back from its initial shock.

While Millennials and Gen Z were already a powerful economic force due to their online fluency, the latest acceleration to digital has seen their influence expand exponentially, and it's far from its peak.

As seen in previous years, younger generations continue to lead the charge across the digital frontier. What's changed as a result of the pandemic has been the increased willingness of older generations to follow them.

With the growing need to build fast, authentic, and personalized online experiences, digital trends that were cutting-edge just a few years ago have become the industry standard thanks to younger generations like Gen Z, who have consistently demanded them.

As a generation of digital natives who have never known a time without the internet, Gen Z (along with Millennials) represents the innovators and early adopters on the [Bell Curve](#). In a similar light, it was only a matter of time before older generations caught up.

The realities of the pandemic have spurred every generation towards increased digital adoption, and as they've found their way in a new paradigm that blurs lines of online and offline more than ever before, their relationship with digital channels has been defined through three key areas: Resilience, Rebuilding, and Rising Higher.

The following chapters examine the results of our 2021 generational study through these lenses, offering a comprehensive look at the current state of digital as well as indicators for what's next.

RESILIENCE:

Connecting a Locked Down Generation

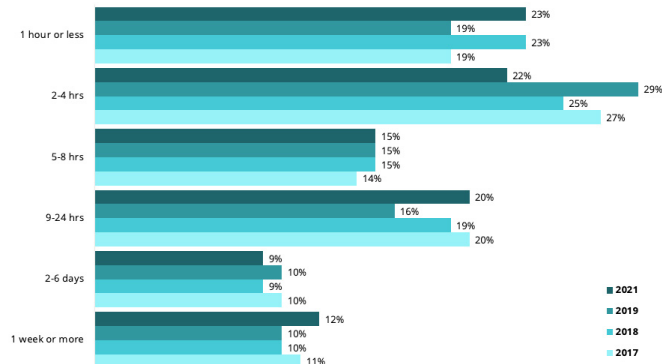
Lockdowns, quarantines, and an always-online mentality. Digital channels have unquestionably played a larger role in all of our lives due to the pandemic. But even as these channels have kept us connected and provided a source of resilience amidst disruption, the generations remain divided on what that connection looks like.

Gen Z Remains the Most Internet Dependent Generation.

Gen Z continues to represent the most internet-dependent generation, with more than a quarter of Gen Z respondents saying they could only make it an hour (or less) before wanting to use the internet. Meanwhile, Baby Boomers remain the largest cohort prepared to go a week or longer without it.

Gen Z is the most Internet dependent generation.

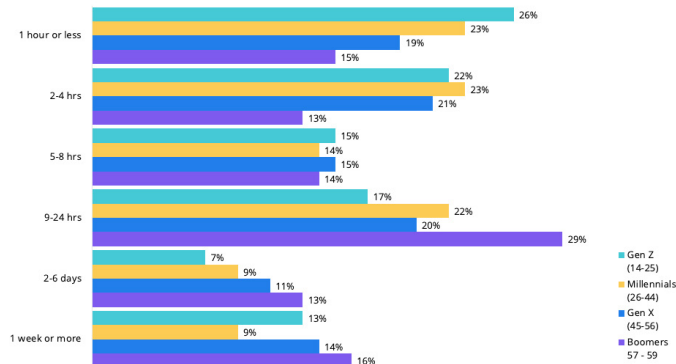
Q1: HOW LONG COULD YOU COMFORTABLY GO WITHOUT ACCESSING THE INTERNET?



That said, nearly half (45%) of all respondents said they couldn't go more than four hours without internet access before becoming uncomfortable. While that number is significant, it wasn't dissimilar from years past—overall, web dependency has remained mostly stable.

Gen Z is the most Internet dependent generation.

Q1: HOW LONG COULD YOU COMFORTABLY GO WITHOUT ACCESSING THE INTERNET?



One interesting nuance is the drop in respondents from 2020 to 2021 who cited two to four hours as the amount of time it would take them to become uncomfortably disconnected from the web. While some of those users seem to have upped their internet dependency, others have arguably curtailed it.

This could be explained in part by the overwhelming nature of digital proliferation throughout the pandemic. Zoom fatigue, endless email, and nonstop social media scrolling have undoubtedly left some web users, regardless of age, feeling burnt out.

Another interesting development brought on by the always-online nature of the pandemic is a growing awareness around the importance of “digital detoxing.” Likely more and more people, across all generations are learning how to forgo digital devices, at least temporarily, to let go of the stress that stems from constant connectivity.

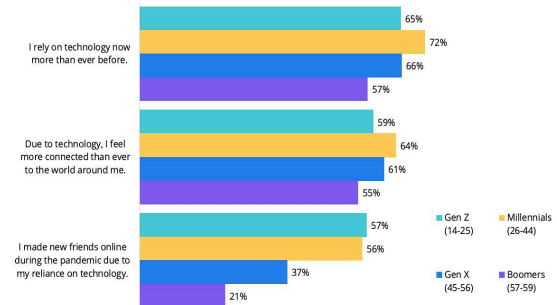
A key takeaway here? Even though digital channels are more prevalent than ever, the audiences that populate them remain selective in how and where they spend their time. Businesses and brands should take note.

Technology is Now at the Center of Everything

Dependency on the internet, however, shouldn't be confused with dependency on technology as a whole. Our research found that even though web dependency has remained stable throughout the pandemic, dependence on technology has dramatically increased for every generation.

Technology dependence more prevalent than ever

Q: Select True or False for each of the following questions



A majority from each group of respondents (65%) said they relied on technology more than ever before, with Millennials—not Gen Z—leading the pack at 72%.



65% of all generations say they rely on technology now more than ever before

Mobile phones, laptops, tablets, and a growing list of other connected devices are the crucial link here, with each generation appearing to value the technology that connects them to the web more than the web connection itself.

Connection to others was also a prevalent theme, with every generation indicating they felt more connected to the world based on their use of technology.

The Acceleration of Digital Trends

The desire for connection was also evident across the acceleration of digital trends and activities each generation engaged in for the first time as a result of the pandemic.

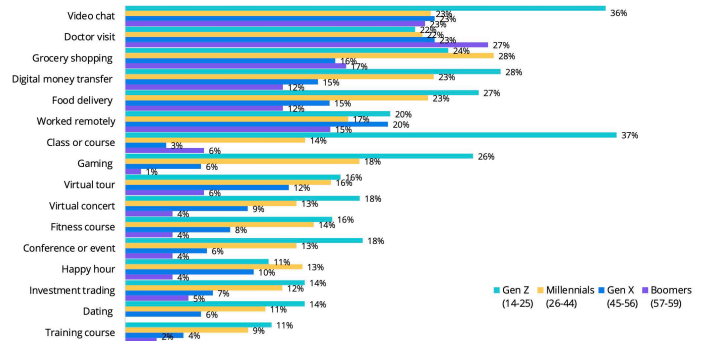
37% of Gen Z respondents said they tried online classes for the first time. 28% of Millennials tried online grocery shopping, and 27% of Baby Boomers experienced telehealth for the first time—all forms of connection that have been supported and, in many cases, replaced by digital channels

due to the pandemic.

But 2020 was a year of firsts for a wide array of activities, and for every generation.

A year of firsts for all generations

Q: Which of the following have you done for the first time over the past year?



For Gen Z, video chat, remote learning, and gaming were among the most cited activities they experienced for the first time in 2020. For older generations like Gen X and Baby Boomers, telehealth and remote work were far more prevalent.

While those digital trends mirror many of the activities each generation was already engaged in pre-pandemic (and often in a physical setting), the online options that replaced them

have experienced rapid adoption, with little sign of turning back.

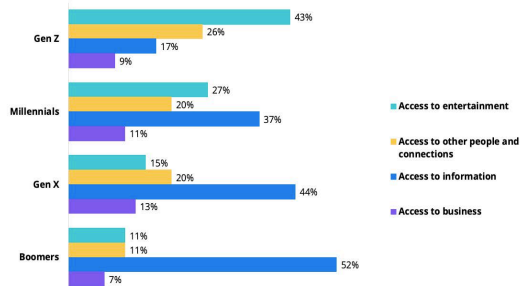
Entertainment vs. Information: A Generational Split

Another digital trend that accelerated during the pandemic was video streaming, which was overwhelmingly led by Gen Z. 70% of Gen Z respondents said they increased their use of video streaming in 2020, aligning with their larger desire to be entertained, not informed, when accessing the internet.

In line with our previous research, every generation except for Gen Z continues to look to the web for access to information. Gen Z bucks that trend, gravitating to the internet for entertainment more than anything else (Millennials come in second place with approximately half as much interest).

Information vs. Entertainment

Q: Which aspects of the internet do you depend on daily?



The Info vs. Entertainment dynamic remains a tricky one—should you target younger audiences with dynamic, entertaining content at the risk of alienating other generations? Our research suggests the answer is yes, as Gen Z and Millennials now make up 70% of online audiences.

Many businesses have approached this issue carefully, slowly weaving more engaging, entertaining content like video and social media into their digital footprints while remaining informative and even somewhat formal.

On the other hand, businesses have also bolstered their approaches by meeting younger audiences across the sources of entertainment they increasingly prefer.

TikTok, for example, which was already extremely popular among younger generations, [grew 180%](#) among Gen Z users in 2020. Other generations, who have joined Gen Z and Millennials in using services like Netflix and Hulu, helped boost streaming services [above 1 billion subscriptions](#) worldwide in 2020.

Entrenched Habits, Evolving Trends

Resilience was on display throughout the pandemic, both in the deepening digital habits of each generation, as well as the acceleration of digital trends and adoption that occurred as a result.

Digital channels unquestionably filled an immediate void in the face of closures and restrictions across the physical world. As those initial circumstances have translated into longer-term realities, digital habits and behaviors across all generations have gone from the reactive to the proactive, transitioning from resilience to a focus on rebuilding.

REBUILDING:

Digital Habits Are Forever Changed

Just as digital connections fueled resilience throughout the pandemic, they've also served as the tools each generation has used as they begin rebuilding—in their careers, their education, or their connection with others.

Digital channels have allowed each generation to transition from the initial, reactive state of resilience, and transition into a more proactive stance for rebuilding, in both their personal and professional lives.

From Digital Trends to Daily Habits

While every generation used the web for a litany of first-

time activities during the pandemic, they also adopted these outlets as mainstays of their new daily routines.

While every generation relied on the web for first-time activities due to widespread physical constraints, many respondents expressed the desire to continue their use of the digital channels they adopted or increasingly turned to during the pandemic.



+60% of Gen Z and Millennials plan to continue using the digital channels they adopted or increasingly used during the pandemic.

Large majorities of Millennials (68%) and Gen Z (57%) said they expected to maintain their digital habits going forward, as so much online activity is now woven seamlessly into their daily lives.

This widespread confidence among younger generations is a notable indicator of something we already intrinsically knew: the tide of digital acceleration that came in with the pandemic is not turning back.

The convenience and safety that digital channels provide have unlocked a new level of expectation that now sits squarely

alongside the physical domain. Outside of an unforeseen Luddite revolution, there's little reason to believe it will change course.

Digital money transfer, for example, through platforms like Venmo and Cash App, has rendered waiting in line at the bank mostly unnecessary. Digital money apps saw usage skyrocket during the pandemic, with much of that activity continuing to grow. Indeed, more than a third (34%) of Gen Z respondents said they planned to continue their use of digital money transfer specifically, which 28% tried for the first time in 2020.

On the other side of the generational divide, Baby Boomers, who have historically been the most reluctant generation to adopt new technology, have embraced digital medicine, with more than a quarter of respondents over the age of 56 expressing the desire to continue with the convenience and safety of telehealth rather than return to in-person doctors appointments.

In all, the ubiquitous nature of digital channels for activities that appeal to every generation has led them all to embrace these channels when and where it's most convenient for them.

The eCommerce Boom

That widespread embrace is perhaps most apparent in the surging world of eCommerce, which is [set to become a trillion-dollar market](#) by 2022.

U.S. eCommerce sales grew 44% in 2020, and this rapid increase in online shoppers has meant [higher revenues](#) for many businesses.

At the same time, it's also made the landscape more competitive, as eCommerce is among the top online activities that's centered around convenience. Today, eCommerce sites with subpar performance and a poor user experience can no longer compete with fast-loading, easy-to-use, more visually appealing alternatives.

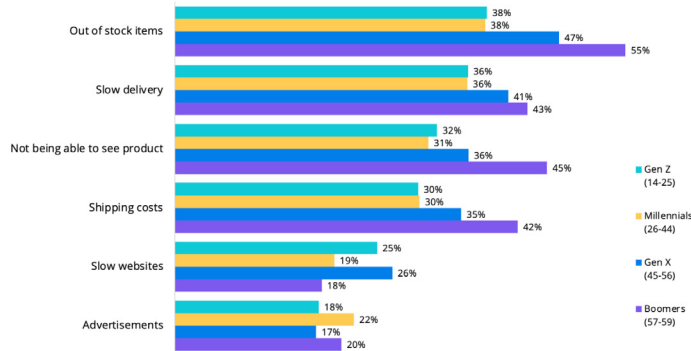
Younger generations have long been the audience eCommerce sites are competing for, and they've had a major influence on the strategies and best practices some of the largest eCommerce sites have employed with success.

Beyond faster page speeds and easier navigation, Gen Z's digital preferences have played a key role in bringing deeper personalization, simplicity, and authenticity to the web in general as well as eCommerce sites specifically.

But even as Gen Z and Millennials continue to push the limits of technology, eCommerce strategies may actually be well-advised to take a cue from Baby Boomers, who have increasingly engaged in eCommerce activity during the pandemic with a healthy dose of frustration.

Boomers frustrations with online shopping tell the story

Q: What has frustrated you the most about your buying experience during the pandemic?

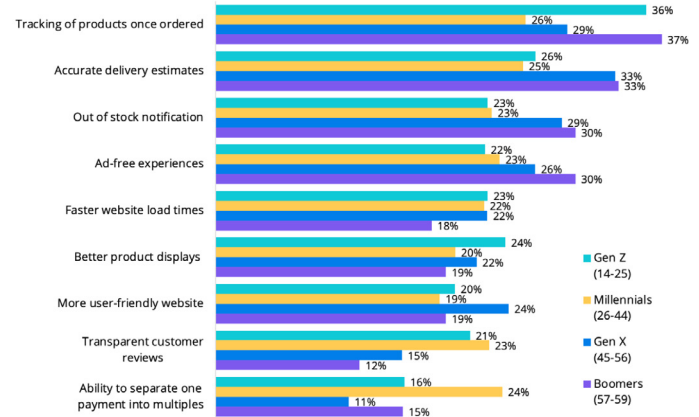


While irritation with product visibility, slow websites, and advertisements are shared across the generations, Baby Boomers offer a line of sight into the larger challenges faced by businesses that rely on eCommerce.

As seen in the chart above, many of their eCommerce frustrations occur away from the website itself—out of stock items, slow delivery, and shipping costs. However, these frustrations underscore the importance of businesses incorporating this information and offering real transparency within the online shopping experience.

Getting what they want on time is key

Q: How can the online shopping experience be improved?



While eCommerce will undoubtedly play a dominant role for years to come, there's less of a consensus when it comes to the strategies and types of websites needed to reach online consumers across all generations with engaging digital experiences that provide them with exactly what they're looking for, fast.

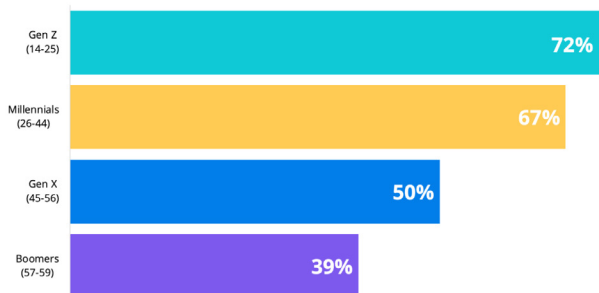
Thinking about your target customer demographics and incorporating some of the generational specific feedback into your eCommerce stores will imbue your overall shopping experience with precisely the features and functionality your consumers want.

Carrying America's Social Conscience

In a continuation of data from previous years, Gen Z remains at the forefront when it comes to forging a connection between companies and the social causes they support.

Gen Z and Millennials are carrying America's social conscience

Q: Do you buy from companies that support social causes?



37% of Gen Z and 25% of Millennials said they get information about a company's involvement with social causes from social media specifically.

While this may come as little surprise given younger generations' heavy social media activity, it is notable as businesses rebuild from the pandemic, widen their social reach, and forge connections with specific social causes.

As they do, younger generations will be paying close attention, rewarding companies that take a stand on the issues they align with and dismissing those that don't.

Reimagining the Classroom and the Workplace

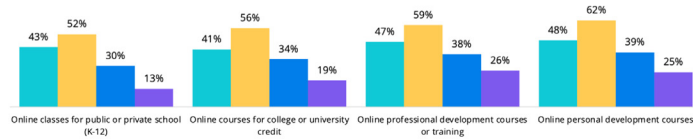
A final, if seemingly obvious, area where each generation has harnessed digital channels to rebuild from the pandemic has been across the daily routines of work or school.

For younger generations, education has been forever changed, with in-person learning suspended for indefinite periods of time and virtual learning jumping in to fill the gap.

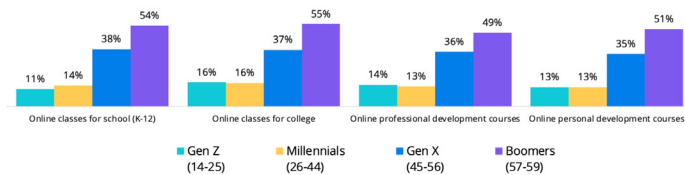
While it certainly has its detractors, virtual learning has served a vital role in allowing younger generations to continue their education, even at the height of the pandemic. In fact, a majority of Millennials (57%) and nearly half of Gen Z (45%) said they found virtual learning to be more conducive to their education than in-person classes. Meanwhile, older generations had a far lower opinion of virtual learning, with 35% of Gen X and 19% Baby Boomers viewing it as effective.

Virtual school is the new normal for younger generations

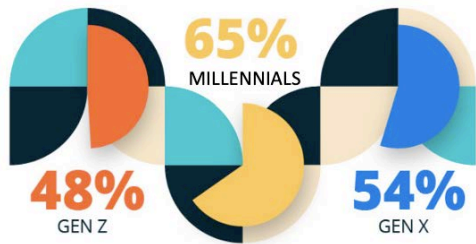
Q: Effectiveness of online learning



No experiences with online learning



A similar dynamic has played out in the workplace, where the majority of respondents said they found remote work favorable to a full-time return to the office. 48% of Gen Z, 65% of Millennials, and 54% of Gen X would prefer to continue working remotely indefinitely, while Baby Boomers, many of whom are retired, tracked lower at 30%.



would prefer to continue working remotely

While burnout and fatigue were expected sentiments when gauging work-life balance during the pandemic, a surprising 49% of Gen Z and 59% of Millennials said their work-life balance had actually improved.

That said, 49% of Millennials said remote work had stunted their careers, due in no small part to the loss of physical, in-person connection that's inherent in the virtual workplace.

As each generation has rebuilt personal and professional connections throughout the pandemic, there are clear trends and more complex nuances that have emerged across each age group. What's clear is that every generation has leveraged digital channels to their advantage, making the best of situations that might have otherwise been far more isolating or detrimental to personal or professional growth.

As each generation has put one foot in front of the next, they've not only rebuilt their own realities within the new digital paradigm, many of them are rising higher than ever before, as they shape the digital landscape ahead of them.

RISING HIGHER:

A New Digital Paradigm Has Already Begun

As every generation finds its new footing, members of each are wasting little time in exercising their entrepreneurial spirit. Building new businesses and tapping into the digital channels that have become second nature is of clear interest across the generations, with entrepreneurial zeal increasing the younger they are.

Entrepreneurial Optimism, Despite It All

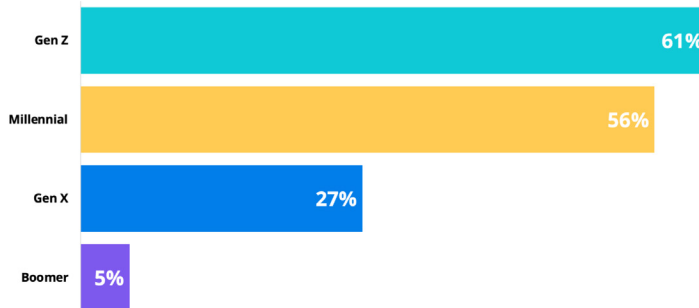
Even as the pandemic has slowed economic growth the world over, younger generations, to their credit, have not been dissuaded from their business goals.

Call them dreamers or label them naive, but the youngest age groups sampled in our research made it clear that they weren't satisfied with resilience or rebuilding in the face of the pandemic—when it comes to building a business, younger generations are setting their sights higher than ever before.

Every generation we surveyed was more entrepreneurial than the generation before them, with Gen Z leading the way. 61% of these respondents, followed closely by 58% of Millennials, said they planned to start a business in the future.

Each generation is more entrepreneurial than the last

Q: Do you plan to start a business in the future?



Older generations showed less of an interest in creating a new business, with only 27% of Gen X saying they had plans for a future business venture. While only 5% of Baby Boomers responded the same, this cohort, as noted above, includes many retirees and others close to retirement, rendering new business creation a less relevant pursuit.

Even then, there are interesting takeaways when we examine the types of new businesses each generation is gravitating towards, and the way those preferences have changed in two short years.

In 2019, 30% of Baby Boomers expressed interest in starting a retail business. That stat has now flipped, with nearly a quarter expressing interest in real estate. For Gen X, the shift has been less pronounced, with retail remaining their top choice. However, the rise of technology as an area of interest for this generation is certainly of note.

Millennials have actually replaced retail with technology as their primary industry of interest, signaling this generation's increased confidence and familiarity within the digital world.

In a surprising twist, Gen Z appears to have moved past technology, shifting to entertainment as the primary type of business they're interested in starting. These changes no doubt are connected to the generational preference between information and entertainment noted above, with a clear connection between Gen Z's online behavior and their professional aspirations.

Skyrocketing Website Ownership

In a similar vein, the overall acceleration to digital has pushed every generation to embrace technology in some way, no matter what type of business they may be powering with it.

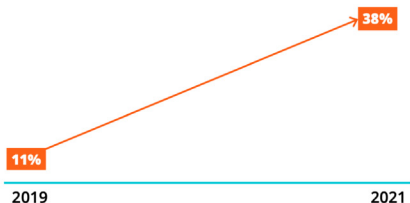
This is clearly visible in the surge of website ownership over the past two years, which has increased more than 300% across every generation.



Website ownership has increased more than 300% over the past two years across every generation.

In less than two years website ownership has increased more than 300%

Q: Do you own a website?



This growth is on full display among younger generations, where 37% of Gen Z and 50% of Millennials now own a website.

Businesses should take heed here too, and understand that many of the visitors to their sites are also site owners themselves. With that in mind, site performance and optimal user experience are no longer something that can be swept under the rug.

Your users know better, and they are not only more likely to notice mediocrity, they are more inclined to view it in a negative light.

WordPress is the Leader in Website Creation

Behind much of the growth in website ownership and ongoing web innovation is [WordPress](#), which has long played a major role as an open source, content management system (CMS). It now sits atop its respective market as the best way

to empower all digital creators with a wide array of tools and options for functionality.

Since its [launch in 2003](#), WordPress has grown from a simple, HTML-based platform that was first popular among bloggers to become the dominant type of site on the internet, and the most popular way to build websites around the world.

WordPress is currently used by more than 40% of all websites and more than 35% of the top 10,000 most popular sites in the world by traffic. At 64.9%, its market share is far greater than all of its competitors combined.

Throughout the pandemic, WordPress has served as a driving force, fueling a massive ecosystem of makers, builders, and entrepreneurs across every generation, and helping them rise higher by allowing them to meet the inherent challenges of evolving technology head-on.

One key factor behind WordPress' monumental rise is the flexibility and true site ownership it provides, which is a stark contrast from closed, proprietary platforms. Because it's built with open source code, WordPress is highly integratable, and users can freely build upon its core software.

This is an attribute that not only resonates with younger generations; it speaks to older age groups as well. Ease of use, cost-savings, and a low barrier to entry are all attractive characteristics that each generation values, even if they come to it based on different requirements and perspectives.

With a vibrant community that's grown around it, WordPress also inspires a deeper personal connection than many of its closed, proprietary counterparts. Beyond the thousands of developers and engineers who have contributed to WordPress Core over the years, the larger WordPress community comprises a diverse group of web professionals, business owners, and educators (to name a few), and the wide contingent of theme and plugin authors who have all fostered an incredible ecosystem that supports WordPress sites.

As members of every generation look to rebuild and rise higher from the uncertainty that marked the pandemic, WordPress offers a clear road forward which many of them, regardless of age, are increasingly noticing.

What Does the “New Normal” Hold in Store?

The pandemic and the online acceleration that's come with it have blurred the digital and human experiences more than ever before.

The results are apparent across every generation, and in this new world, it's important to both understand the “always online” mentality that has become even more widespread, while balancing it alongside the nuances each generation reflects in its digital behaviors.

As you navigate the evolving digital landscape, keep in mind the following:

- **Embrace the new normal**

To win more share of wallet from Millennials today and Gen Z tomorrow, companies will need to create business leaders who adjust their approaches to match the new market realities younger generations are bringing to the fore.

Doing so will create a tremendous advantage for reaching customers now and into the future. Failing to adapt to these influential trendsetters, especially at this critical time, puts not only their demographic at risk as drivers of overall business growth, but other established customers, too.

- **One experience for all, with nuances for each**

While Gen Z and Millennials have blazed a trail as trendsetters, it's critical for digital leaders to separate generational myth from reality and then take the appropriate action.

All generations are embracing digital but a digital experience built for Gen X or Baby Boomers may need to emphasize very different things from one that is meant to engage Millennials.

- **Digital interactions are now make or break**

One thing that has become abundantly clear over the

past year? The failure to pivot online is less forgiving than ever. New digital interactions across the entire customer journey must now be powered by responsive, modern, scalable technology. Businesses that create these interactions will win increased wallet share from not just Gen Z but every other generation, too.

Fuel your freedom to create with WP Engine

WP Engine powers the freedom to create on WordPress.

As the study revealed, website ownership has soared over the past year with more and more people selecting WordPress, the world's favorite CMS, as the choice for their site. WP Engine's products, the fastest among all WordPress providers, power 1.5 million digital experiences. More of the top 10M sites in the world use WP Engine to power their digital experiences than anyone else in WordPress.

See how WP Engine's [managed WordPress hosting](#), [eCommerce solutions](#), and enterprise offerings, including our [WordPress experience platform](#) and [Headless WordPress solution](#), can power your digital front door.



About WP Engine

WP Engine, the WordPress technology company, provides the most relied upon and trusted brands and developer-centric WordPress products for companies and agencies of all sizes, including [managed WordPress hosting](#), [enterprise WordPress](#), [Headless WordPress](#), [Flywheel](#), [Local](#) and [Genesis](#). WP Engine's tech innovation and award-winning WordPress experts help to power more than 1.5 million sites across 150 countries.