

## **Time for an Update: Making Fraternity/Sorority Appeal to Generation Z**

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Digital Natives. iGeneration. Generation Fix-It. Global Generation. Non-Joiner Generation. Generation Z.

We've come to know this "new student" as a number of things and have talked about it to a point where "Generation Z" is starting to be another standard buzzword in the fraternal community. For the past decade, fraternities and sororities have been marketing, recruiting, and onboarding members in the same ways that worked during the 2009-2014 membership boom. With this new generation comes a new reality; if fraternity/sorority membership is going to appeal to the "new" college student, then it is time to update the way that campuses and headquarters market, recruit, and onboard these students.

Membership in fraternity/sorority paralleled the growth seen in postsecondary enrollment from 2002 to 2016, where a 19% enrollment increase was experienced (Hussar & Bailey, 2019). Now that growth is slowing down to a projected 3% growth rate, there won't be this boom from the Millennial generation, who is known more for seeking community and being optimistic. The new generation of students entering college this past year is known more for valuing individualism and being realists. These are not the same students that were easy to recruit in the past. Professionals in the fraternity/sorority field need to take a moment to reflect and discuss how this will impact the experience offered and how the story of membership is told.

A plethora of resources, including Meghan Grace and Corey Seemiller's, "Generation Z Goes To College" and "Generation Z Leads," can assist in guidance on understanding this generation as a whole. While noting the lack of information specific to fraternity/sorority, Phired Up Productions recently finished a study in January 2019 designed to analyze Generation Z students on their intentions and perceptions of the college experience and more specifically, the fraternity/sorority experience. The study is still being analyzed, though early outcomes paint a picture for taking a close look at how marketing, recruiting, and onboarding is done for the industry.

Phired Up's study focused on current high school students and received responses from just over 2,000 individuals. These respondents represented an even distribution of geographic regions of the United States and Canada. Participants were found via social media advertising platforms, such as Instagram and Reddit, and were incentivized to participate with a chance of winning an Amazon gift card.

The story of fraternity/sorority is being told by a mass number of individuals, all who paint fraternity/sorority in a different light. When asked about where they gained their opinion of fraternity/sorority, the majority said it came from a movie (67.2%) or TV show (55.6%). While campuses and headquarters cannot control these platforms, this generation can be marketed to on the social media platforms they use the most. 74.3% of high school students reported using YouTube on a daily basis and 85.7% are on Instagram daily. Fraternity/sorority on YouTube is dominated by videos of dance routines or personal vloggers detailing their “rush” experience. Meanwhile, Instagram is littered with individual chapter accounts that share photos of their members posing together in matching shirts.

This generation needs to have their perception of fraternity/sorority challenged by the real stories and real voices making up this experience. They fear conforming and need to see that this is a place where their individuality can shine. They also need to receive this messaging earlier on. Rather than waiting for freshmen orientation, this generation needs to be reached in high school to start considering membership. In marketing to them, it’s key to focus on the individual experiences and worth of membership, as this generation is not as keen as Millennials to join a large group.

Recruiting students for membership has been traditionally focused on the belonging and social benefits in college it can provide. Where these aspects are still true and valuable, this generation of students needs to hear a more complex and individualized sales pitch. The study asked high school students to describe what they wanted to gain from a college experience and their greatest concern for college, in order to better understand how to recruit them. Top responses described they wanted college to be memorable and would set them up for professional success. Top concerns were focused on the affordability of college and ensuring they would leave college with all the tools they needed to find successful employment.

This student can no longer be recruited on the generalized statement about friendship and fun in a group setting. A Generation Z student needs to be shown what the return on investment of this additional cost is. They are hyper aware this is a premium student organization and need to understand the benefits that relate to their future career. Without adding on additional programming and time taken away from studies, fraternity/sorority needs to better explain the professional outcomes their organization offers, which already exist in general membership. Rather than explaining the experience in overarching terms like “sisterhood” and “networking,” this generation of student needs to be recruited in a way that paints a picture of the individual experience. They want to hear specific stories describing the worth of joining in which they can see themselves in.

Once a Generation Z student is successfully recruited, extended effort is required to retain and onboard these members. To a generation of individuals raised on a “try before you buy” mentality, the onboarding experience is viewed more as a trial experience than a commitment. If these new members do not immediately get the worth they are seeking in areas such as professional development, they are significantly more likely to leave before ever being initiated. Campus and headquarters staffs are encouraged to analyze if the first three weeks of membership accurately reflect the true experience of a lifelong membership.

The study on high school students revealed the amount of “never joiners” has increased, where nearly half (49.6%) have a low to very low interest in joining a fraternity/sorority. The other half showed a neutral interest (37.6%) or high to very high interest (12.8%), showing the number of students that can be recruited into membership is smaller than the boom seen years earlier. If fraternity/sorority is going to continue to provide the value and impact the professionals in the field know it offers, updates are needed to increase the appeal. At the very least, each campus and headquarters should be prepared to answer a Gen Z student’s biggest question: “Is this worth it?”

For more information about Phired Up’s study on high school students, contact Erin at [erin@phiredup.com](mailto:erin@phiredup.com).

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## References

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