Legislation and Communications Committee

New Millennial/Gen Z Research

Item 6b
November 17, 2025

Summary

Subject

New Millennial/Gen Z Research

Purpose

Report on insights from recent focus groups with a cohort of New Millennial/Gen Z students and young professionals

Demographics

Silent Generation (1928 - 1945)

Baby Boomers (1946 - 1964)

Gen X (1965 - 1980)

Millennials (1981 - 1996)

Gen Z (1997 - 2012)

Gen Alpha (2011 - 2024)

Gen Beta (starting 2025)

Gen Z = 20% of California's population

California Dept. of Finance, Demographic Research Unit, 2025

Reaching
Gen Z

Gen Z (1997 - 2012) - first generation to grow up using the internet, modern technology and social media; known for general awareness of social justice and political issues

Gen Alpha (2011 - 2024) - digital natives, growing up in a world fully integrated with technology, social media and global connection

Gen Beta (starting 2025) - will grow up with smart devices and artificial intelligence

National Millennial & Gen Z Community

Students and Young Professionals

- 30-member cohort
- Diverse representation

Purpose

- Elevate opportunities for NMGZ Community members in careers and professional development

- Engage leaders of major corporations, foundations, governmental agencies, civic groups, and nonprofit organizations

Three Focus Group Topics

Unique Opportunity

Listen & Learn

Objective
Obtain candid feedback from Gen Z to inform future communications, outreach, and workforce strategies

3 Topics

- Public Trust in Drinking Water

- Perceptions on Water Conservation

- Workforce Development

Public Trust in Drinking Water

Key Themes

- Generational habits strongly shape behavior (family norms about tap vs. bottled)
- Taste differences across regions affect perceived safety
- Many trust influencers/peers over institutions; authenticity perceived as higher
- Knowledge gaps about treatment processes and standards
- Building public trust in purified recycled water

Quotes

"We believe strangers on TikTok more than corporations."

"Show us—don't just tell us—the water is clean."

"If tap water were casually shown in shows or Reels, it would normalize trust."

Perceptions on Water Conservation

Key Themes

- Students connect water conservation with personal behavior; they're aware that larger systemic issues (corporate use, technology, infrastructure) are at play.

- Regional context heavily shapes perception, regions prone to drought have higher awareness.

- Media literacy and humor are key tools for engagement, especially through short-form platforms like TikTok.

- Strong desire for transparency, accessibility, and empowerment, both in understanding water quality and in contributing to water-saving solutions.

Questions Raised

- How can we balance innovation with sustainability?

- What are large companies doing to conserve or protect water?

Workforce Development

Key Themes

- Students unaware of water-sector roles outside engineering

- Desire for rotational programs and job shadowing

- Workplace culture matters—mission, community impact, DEI, and mentorship

- Need clearer education-to-career pathways and recruiting across all majors

- Branding gap: public agencies perceived as rigid; need to highlight innovation and flexibility

Quotes

"I never knew a communications major could work at a water agency."

"Rotational programs could help people find where they fit best."

"We want to work somewhere that gives back."

Learning from Gen Z

"The amount of misperceptions that I held was a key takeaway. There is so much that I didn't know about water districts and the work they do and put into the community."

Key Insights

- **Authenticity > authority;** peer voices and creators drive credibility.

- **Education through experience;** show the journey of water.

- **Trust through transparency;** consistent brand and message.

- **Community and purpose motivate** early-career talent.

- **Multi-channel engagement** (TikTok/Instagram + in-person pop-ups) is essential.