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From Digital Natives to Digital Gourmets

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We all know the concept of Digital Natives, from whom we by now have a very sharp picture: Looking at them, we see a generation, which really lives and merges with the new media. Digital Natives are permanently connected to the Internet by smartphone or tablet. They define their own identity by Facebook and other social media, they substitute TV by on-demand services, they use all kind of messaging systems and picture apps such as flickr or instagram. Contrary to Digital Immigrants from older generations, which have to learn the new media the hard way, and Digital Outsiders or Digital Strangers, who just stay away from all these elements of the new world, Digital Natives just love the Internet and just love to be connected 24/7. Being connected is not just part of lifestyle, it is life.

It took companies and all Digital Non-Natives a long time to understand these important young people. But now, after almost 15 years of work of trend spotters, consultants and media journalists, many companies recognise the relevance of this group. After neglecting many opportunities for more than a decade, companies want to connect into the habitat Digital Natives migrated into. Especially this group has grown into being their employees and customers.

As employees, Digital Natives appear just ideal. Since they are always connected to the Internet, they look always connected to the company. We can contact them by phone, by e-mail, by SMS, by WhatsApp, by Skype and by all kind of other media. Their smartphones are never off or on mute and their eagerness to be contacted never go away. Whether you have a problem at 10pm on Saturday or your

customer needs additional information: Digital Natives will see the inquiry instantly and furthermore are eager to help immediately. If you then combine all that with home office or remote working places, those employees will easily work more than the regular hours and probably do not realise they are doing overtime: Digital Natives as employees will be connected to their work even during commuting to work, on weekends and during vacation. In addition to that, companies have complete control over their Digital Natives: By smartphone-GPS, they know where they are, by monitoring, they know what they do, by Facebook or Google, they know what their employees think. And the Digital Natives feel comfortable with all of that, since they see it as normal part of life.

As customers, Digital Natives appear also just great. Always connected and therefore reachable, these Digital Natives wait virtually for the companies at a permanent existing point of contact and they are always ready to buy. Of course, they buy electronic products such as eBooks, games, music and videos. Even more important: Digital Natives can be reached 24/7 by marketing messages, which are quite effective, since the companies gain a huge amount of information about every single individual by browser-tracking and user-profiling. Knowing all that, the whole range of products can be sold, from consumer electronics all the way towards sport utility vehicles. Advertisement can be individualised and Digital Natives are that susceptible that they want to buy those products. The dream of marketing: By combining geolocalising with user-profiles, companies can offer the “right” product even at the point of sales. And the Digital Natives just love it.

It is easy to understand that companies definitely go for this generation with their positive and uncritical attitude. And it is easy to understand, that media research comes up with the corresponding trends:

We have content all over. Surrounded by media clouds, we experience an abundance of content. Blogs, articles, wikis, eBooks, and videos: All present content. And publishers do not only publish new content: They also make in a rapid way older non-electronic content available in the Internet. Furthermore, some content will be published on the Internet before any quality control has happened. It is so easy to publish that everything is published.

We have access all over. Speaking of mobile media, there is no part of the day left out. Beginning with the e-mails on the mirror over the washbasin in the morning or on the iPad during breakfast, smartphone-connected watches for jogging, the Skype application on the television screen, mobile connection in the car to all applications: We have always and everywhere access to everything.

We have interactions all over. We use voicemail, reply to a short message service, comment on Facebook, give feedbacks at online-stores, bid on the electronic auctions, book a train or check-in for a flight via internet, use an app as customised reservation function for the restaurant at the evening. This means: We are not just listening; we are using and interacting.

We have producers all over. This closes the circle to “content all over”, even though this is another issue. It all starts with on-media companies producing texts:

Traditional non-media-companies, such as manufacturers of cars, cosmetics or cereals, they all got media departments and produce media. Citizen journalists use blogs and other platforms, which result in a real time alternative to online and offline products of traditional media companies.

But how does all this survive the reality check? If we take these trends, and there will be even more, one simple question arises: How will the Digital Natives be able to handle all that? The common wisdom of most researchers dealing with Digital Natives is a simple extrapolation, assuming that the amount of data handled by the Digital Natives keeps on increasing. This logic of extrapolation relies on multitasking and multi-channelling as well as on the belief that these Digital Natives really stay 24/7 online. They will optimise their data handling and adapt it towards the increase of new data.

Do they Digital Natives really act the way they are currently perceived by the companies?

Looking more carefully, there are additional observations: The new generation definitely does not want to be connected to the Internet all the time. It is nearly logical because everywhere everything is one click away sounds exhaustive. This generation consciously takes hours off, sometimes even days. And the new generation definitely does not want to be connected to the employer all day long for the whole week. The new Generation has a basically sceptical and realistic attitude towards the world, sometimes even towards the “new media”.

All this results in a very selective behaviour of those belonging to the new generation:

They do not want to have content all over. They are “picky”, which means that they go only to content which they associate with quality. The majority of the content in the World Wide Web is not of interest for them at all. For content they value, they are ready to pay, because it saves time and ensures quality of what they get. Quality is the criteria for their consumption.

They do not want to have access everywhere. A world characterised by multichannel and multitasking is not for them. They have a few channels and they are very loyal to them. Besides, they have clearly separated channels for close friends (channel always open), for casual friends (often open) and for employers (not open on weekends and evenings). They are knowingly adjusting their filter setting according their preferences.

They do not want to have interaction all over. Why should I use the phone at the same time send a short message? Why should I watch a movie and surf in the Internet to get an abstract of the plot? Why should I use all the interaction, knowing the security problems, such as Microsoft reserving the right to read all Skype communications? Listening to music during work is okay, but why do I have to chat, to mail, to blog, to post and, of course, to follow at the same time?

They do not want to be producers of content for everybody. As a part of the sceptical generation, they do not see the purpose in writing blogs, from which only a few companies

get rich. And they know that the majority of the media is just worthless to write for. Making money within the Internet is reserved for a minority and this generation knows about this reality.

This new group, which is about getting recognisable, shall be called "Digital Gourmets".

Digital Gourmets is a group, which is very selective, knows how to value good communication and information, has a high competence in that field and is evolving into the new digital elite. It becomes evident that Digital Gourmets differ sharply from the description of the Digital Natives that are commonly used by research and companies.

It is easy to sympathise with Digital Gourmets, since they are intelligent, cultivated, and they oppose to all kind of mass media and mass consumption. However, it is necessary to emphasise that they are no digital dropouts and they do not exercise absenteeism. Even though they have a very selective knowledge about information technology, they still have a rather positive attitude towards the new electronic media but they still say that digital media is not everything.

Digital Gourmets are neither ideal as customers nor as employees. They are not such stupid customers as companies hope. They are too selective and they are always ready to change their behaviour. And they are neither such loyal employees as all the HR-consultants try to make us believe. For them, work is clearly to be separated from life. And they do everything to keep it separated. Still, if trust

is established within a team, some loyalty can be achieved. But if trust is disrupted, they are gone forever.

Even though we have to research this phenomenon even further in order to understand these Digital Gourmets, we still can propose some of the consequences of Digital Gourmets:

As to media behaviour, Digital Gourmets will read newspapers, magazines and books. They spend a lot of time without interruption in watching movies – most likely on an on-demand-system.

As to their role of customers, Digital Gourmets “do not eat everything”. They are interested in the way something is produced: Aspects such as sustainability and global responsibility are important for them. Maybe, they even do not believe Bill Gates has honourable objectives with all his initiatives. They look behind the scenes and want to buy an attitude, not solely a product.

As to their role of employees, this will be a sad story for companies: Even though unemployment may be high, Digital Gourmets are not thankful for their job. They expect the companies to be thankful for them working the regular hours a week, since they see themselves as the new elite of the future and they know the company needs them.

Not everybody will be a Digital Gourmet. But most of the important customers and important employees could turn out to go in this direction. They will not be forced and driven by systems; they will shape their own future. Life will be complicated for the so-called “mass-media” and maybe we will even get some kind of quality journalism. Companies can

reach Digital Gourmets only by offering real value for real money: If the value is right, Digital Gourmets are willing to pay for it like in a fancy restaurant.

One last thing: Maybe the philosophy of Digital Gourmets will not just be restricted to certain years of birth. And maybe it will even spread to Generation X and to the Baby Boomers. If this happens, companies and “Digital Native”-consultants really have to rethink some of their nice-and-easy concepts for the future, even before they really understood and implemented them.

Isn't that deep down a really positive message?

Christian Scholz

P.S. This little essay is written for Digital Gourmets. It has neither bullet points nor does it highlight something. It is a text, not to be read in one minute between two e-mails. If it had written as a PowerPoint presentation or a twitter tweet, it would contradict itself. Sorry for that.