

Family, self-determination and community: a blueprint for brands to engage today's youth

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As brands continue to court a younger audience, they need to understand that young people today grapple with confidence and personal agency, according to the chief executive of National Youth Council (NYC), Singapore's national body for youth development.

David Chua explains to *The Drum* that this is important because even though youth value self-determination, actualising their potential remains a function of confidence and their ability to spot and grab the opportunities presented.

"The question then is how we can help them grow that confidence, whether as an employing organisation or a brand that young people identify with," he says. "Sometimes we can help shape a new narrative of redefining what success means and open their minds to the idea of alternative pathways to build meaningful lives for themselves and not blindly following social trends or societal expectations."

He continues: "At other times, we can also step in to offer mentorship and guidance for a period – there are opportunities for intergenerational transfers of values, wisdom and knowledge that both young and old will appreciate. We can also help put them on a path of growth by nudging them out of their comfort zones, by stretching them with new projects, assignments or out-of-country postings."

Youth STEPS

Chua's observations stems from a national-level longitudinal study the NYC recently conducted with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab of youths in Singapore aged 17 to 24 to better understand their experiences as they live, study, work and play in Singapore and to give youths a voice to shine the spotlight on issues that matter to them.

Called "Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore" (Youth STEPS), the study will look at youths' life evolving aspirations, values and attitudes, and achievements and mobility as they transition from adolescence to adulthood from between 2017 and 2022.

Ultimately, NYC hopes the findings from the study will contribute towards improving policies and programmes for youth in Singapore. It could also become the blueprint for brands that are keen to target youth.

"One of the key things that stood out for me is that family is fundamentally important to youth, in terms of relationships and endorsement. Not surprising for an Asian country, but worth noting that family as a value and aspiration has remained distinctively high at the top spot in many of our other surveys and research since early-2000s, notwithstanding the increased liberalisation of values," Chua says of the study.

"For us, it is a clear indicator that the family remains a key influence on the choices and narratives of our young people. It is a key driver of youth behaviour and decision-making, not to be underestimated."

He adds: “And whether the young person cares to admit it or not, there is a deep psychological attachment of importance to the family voice and need for family endorsement. The family dimension is something worth delving deeper into as a channel and approach.”

The study also found self-determination matters to youth, says Chua, as perseverance and independence are highly rated values. When asked to rank their top three critical success factors, internally driven factors such as hard work (97.7%), attitudes and values (97%) and drive (92.9%) came out on top. Family background, physical appearance, race and gender were also the least important.

Chua says the NYC is glad that these values continue to hold importance for the younger generation of Singaporeans as it did for the past generations of Singaporean pioneers.

However, he notes this means more space, autonomy and decision-making need to be ceded to youth.

“Whether it is government, large companies or small medium-sized enterprises, our youth today are better engaged when we create with youth and co-deliver with them,” he says. “A real stake and skin in the game with employers and government, to engender a sense of ownership and purpose, which brings me to my final observation.”

Finally, Chua says youth desire sense of community and purpose as the study found sub-values correlated to a sense of community like compassion, helpfulness, graciousness, consideration, honesty scored very highly, almost equal to self-determination and enjoying life.

When NYC triangulate this with the National Youth Survey that takes place every three years, the data shows that young Singaporeans are much more open than previous generations to supporting cause-based movements and organisations.

It found the social and sustainability causes cover areas like mental health, vulnerable segments of society, elderly, migrant worker integration, climate change, circular economy, mentorship and more.

“Youth also express their support through everyday actions and consumer (and abstinence) behaviours and find that sense of purpose and community when rallying around their selected causes,” he explains. “The young people are also judging organisations and brands in terms of what our values are, through our values statements, cultural environment and the causes that we support or rally behind. They are sussing us out, just as we are them.”

Preventing an echo chamber

Maintaining an open and properly informed perspective in the online and offline spaces is a key challenge for youth today, notes Chua, who calls it an “O2O (Online to Offline) echo chambering”.

The Youth STEPS study found that while the digital space is undeniably part of the youths’ new “social commons”, increasingly it is not as much of a “commons” as perceived, as there are self-selected online social echo chambers that social media algorithms can further reinforce and accentuate.

For youths, their real-world networks are also increasingly self-selected if social-economic divides affect their social mix at where they live, study and work. This means perspectives risk being narrowed and polarized if young people do not get sufficient opportunities for broad and balanced exposure, both online and offline.

“For Singaporean youth, there is a tension between pragmatism and youthful activation. I use the term activation because idealism expressed in words and ideas are easily done but translating ideals and values into positive action is always the much harder challenge,” Chua explains.

“Our youth are not blind to the pressures of a high-tempo, high-cost, high-stakes Singapore, and their desire to succeed and do well (and not just get by) in Singapore is high. This means they see a need to spend time, energy and focus on making it here, compelling them to dedicate more hours to school and work.”

He adds: “So, acting on their social causes and altruistic inclinations may take a back seat even though it matters a lot to them, and this tension of wanting to have more purpose in life but yet trying to make ends meet can cause a sense of frustration. Which is why some intervention and support may be needed for the time being.”

NYC’s initiatives

On its part, the NYC is innovating its digital engagement with partners that can curate and put across content differently, maintain a certain re-engagement rate with young people and allow for co-creation opportunities online.

It hopes the digital approach will allow it to customised outreach and allow the organisation to extend its reach to more diverse and new segments of youth whom it may not have been able to touch with its traditional offline platforms and programmes. It has formed partnerships with platforms like TikTok, Nas Daily and Grab.

Chua says collaborating with partners that have new reach and strong traction with new profiles and networks of youth is of interest to the NYC and it is more than prepared to let partners experiment new content and engagements.

“We also find that peer-led or peer-endorsed engagements work better, and therefore the theme of co-creation with youth will redefine the way we engage and how we work with partners. From the study, inclusiveness is also a strong resonant theme among the youth,” he explains.

“It would be useful for us to spotlight the under-represented in the youth communities that follow your brands or within your organizations, to inspire others from diverse backgrounds to step out and step up, not just providing platforms to share their voice. In reaching out to youth, staying authentic is key but extremely challenging. Authenticity is related to trust and impacts loyalty.”

He adds: “Today, maintaining that sense of trust is difficult and trying to come back from a broken trust is even harder, although not impossible. In our experience of digital engagement so far, even simple acts like being able to apologise properly on social media is not a trivial matter and can determine the feel and reputation of an organization or brand in quick time.”

This year, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), launched the Singapore Youth Action Plan (SGYAP). It is a platform for youths to partner with the government to create their vision of Singapore in 2025. They are encouraged to share their vision, recommend policy changes and take the lead on ground-up initiatives.

NYC will be working with MCCY and the youth to turn these conversations from SGYAP into action, through the Youth Action Challenge, which was held throughout 2018, where more

than 8,000 youths shared their perspectives on issues which mattered to them, from 2020 onwards.