

How Hulu's Design Gets It Right

Hulu, a major coup for Hollywood's Web aspirations, is the latest offering successfully designed for the elusive Gen-Y youth market

by [Matt Vella](#)

It's a sleek-looking, fun-to-use media service—and, no, it isn't from Apple ([AAPL](#)). [Hulu.com](#), which launched to the public Mar. 13, is Hollywood's long-awaited entry into free, on-demand Web video. The joint venture between News Corp. ([NWS](#)) and General Electric's ([GE](#)) [NBC Universal](#) division allows users to stream full-length episodes of some 250 television series online, such as NBC's *The Office* and Fox's *24*, as well as films from [Warner Bros.](#) and Lionsgate ([LGF](#)), and content from major sports leagues.

In addition to heralding a sea change in media distribution—the ambitious project seems to have reconciled two once-vicious competitors, NBC and Fox, into working cooperatively online—the new Hulu is "also a prime example of Gen Y-oriented design," according to Bruce Temkin, a vice-president and principal analyst with market researcher Forrester Research ([FORR](#)).

He's referring to the 79.8 million-strong generation, also known as Millennials, that comprises the much-discussed twentysomethings born between 1977 and 1995. Temkin, who authored two reports on designing for Gen Y late last year, says the site is a good example of design geared to a market segment that has been identified as having a decisive impact on everything from the success of [Facebook](#) and Google's ([GOOG](#)) [YouTube](#) to the eventual outcome of the U.S. Presidential election.

In fact, Hulu is the latest in a growing number of new products and advertising campaigns—both experimental and fully hatched—that exhibit an increasingly savvy approach to designing for Gen Y. The demographic is identified by analysts, marketers, product planners, and researchers as technologically literate, highly individualistic, and advertising-averse.

SIMPLICITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Hulu's chief design theme, one that clearly appeals to this market, says David Wertheimer, executive director of the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California, is its pared-down aesthetic, which "gets at the bare essence of the product." Hulu's simple pages are unencumbered by advertising, while the user interface is uncomplicated and intuitive. "There are no blinking lights, no flashy buttons all over the place," says Wertheimer. "It's a simple, high-quality streaming experience."

In contrast, other streaming television services, from [ABC](#), [CBS](#), as well as Fox and NBC's own branded sites, are advertising-heavy, often work poorly, and are generally more complicated to navigate. "These consumers crave things that work the way they're supposed to," says Wertheimer, a former Hollywood executive, of the much coveted segment. He says his research shows Gen Y, despite being highly tech-savvy, puts a premium on ease of use.

Another key design point, explains Kelly Mooney, president of the Columbus (Ohio)-based marketing firm [Resource Interactive](#) and co-author of *The Open Brand*, a book about the influence the Web is having on new marketing techniques, is "to be authentic; Gen Y-ers can smell a fake a mile away." Both Temkin and Mooney say Hulu's focus on providing an

accessible viewing experience makes the site more appealing and authentic. (Mooney helped Victoria's Secret craft its Pink line of casual products aimed at younger Gen-Y girls, marketing the brand in colleges and via student blogs, allowing students to speak for—and model—the brand. Since its launch in 2004, the line has ballooned into a business worth more than \$700 million annually.)

"Being fake is worse than being uncool," jokes Mooney. Still, authenticity doesn't necessarily come easily. Sony's ([SNE](#)) covert attempt in 2006 to promote its PSP mobile game device with a fake blog, [alliwantforxmasisapsp.com](#), and Smirnoff's disastrous "Tea Partay" campaign last year for its Raw Tea, replete with a gag rap song, are just two examples of Gen Y-aimed experiments that tanked, thanks in part to execution that missed with its target audience.

IN ON THE GAME

Embracing consumers, asking them for input, or crowdsourcing for contributions are other key attributes of brands that might do well with Gen Y. Hulu, for one, features an extensive commenting feature for every clip, episode, and film, as well as an iTunes-like star system that allows viewers to individually rate content.

Mooney, meanwhile, points to DEWmocracy.com, a Web site established by beverage brand Mountain Dew last year, where users can vote for one of three new drink flavors. The winner will be sold later this year. Doritos' "Crash the Super Bowl" campaign was a Web-based contest for a user-created 30-second ad; the winner was broadcast during the game. "These are campaigns you wouldn't have seen two years ago," says Mooney. "But Gen Y expects to be heard; they expect their ideas to shape products."

THE "OLD WORLD" AFTER A NEW MARKET

Just as Hulu's parent companies realize the need to take a bet on the youth market, other larger, "old world" companies are also getting in on the act, proving appropriate Gen-Y properties need not only be the domain of hip, youth-oriented brands like Nike ([NKE](#)) and Apple (the companies notably collaborated on the much lauded, award-winning Gen Y-focused Nike Plus Web site).

To date, Bank of America ([BAC](#)), [Geico](#), [State Farm Insurance](#), and Wells Fargo ([WFC](#)) have been testing new Gen Y-aimed products through mini-sites, or honed Web sites separate from the rest of a company's products. "These companies aren't trying to reinvent themselves entirely," says Temkin, "but trying to create specific products designed with Gen Y in mind."

So far, Hulu has faced criticism for its comparatively slim selection of content, while much of the press attention has focused on its media-industry impact. But Hulu's killer app may just be that its Gen-Y design allows a seamless connection with its audience.

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