

# Millennials don't worry about online privacy

Hadley Malcolm, USA TODAY

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*Millennials are more willing to share information with marketers online, especially if they get something in return.*



(Photo: Thinkstock)

Millennials let it all hang out. Online that is.

A new survey out from the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future shows that Millennials are more willing than any other generation to post personal information online -- especially if they get something out of it.

To be fair, Millennials are still concerned with anyone having access to their personal data or web history. In response to the statement, "No one should ever be allowed to have access to my personal data or web behavior," 70% of Millennials agreed, while 77% of those 35 and over agreed.

But whether it's early access to a sale, an exclusive coupon, or more relevant advertising, Millennials more instinctively understand that engaging with companies online has benefits, and that those benefits often become more valuable when companies have more information about who they are.

That could involve anything from "liking" a brand on Facebook, to sharing your location by checking in to an event or restaurant, or Tweeting about personal preferences — all data that companies are tracking and can use to better target customers and build loyalty, says Elaine Coleman, managing director of media and emerging technology at Bovitz Inc., a research firm that partnered with USC on the survey.

"Millennials are all about exchange of information," she says. "(They say), 'Sure, if you send me a relevant ad, I'll tell you where I am.'"

That attitude has a lot to do with the fact that Millennials grew up using technology, says Jeff Cole, director of the Center for the Digital Future.

"From very early ages, Millennials were just very comfortable really using technology as their bridge to the world, and therefore (have) very little to fear from it," he says.

According to the survey results, Millennials, ages 18-34, were more likely to share their location in order to receive coupons from nearby businesses: 56%, vs. 42% of those 35 and over. And 25% said they would give away personal information to get more relevant advertising, compared with 19% of the 35 and over crowd.

More than half of Millennials said they would share information with a company if they got something in return, vs. 40% of those 35 and over.

"They understand that their information is a valuable commodity, and they want to be compensated," Cole says. "They're willing to accept advertising, but they want something out of it."

"The willingness to share where we are, who we're with, what we're doing, and what we like with the virtual world is part of "the emergence of the participation economy," says Jeff Fromm, who runs a blog called MillennialMarketing.com and co-authored Marketing to Millennials. And it's a "millennial-led phenomenon," he says.

"Millennials are the trendsetters," he says. "They are the ones that are proving it's OK to do these things."

Will McComb, a freshman at University of Virginia, says that thinking about how much information companies are likely able to gather about him from his online profiles makes him slightly uncomfortable, but that the benefits of targeted advertising or following a brand on Twitter outweigh his diminished privacy.

"It makes it easier for them to try to sell me things," says the 19-year-old, who bought a tie last week after seeing a post about a flash sale in his news feed from a retailer he had "liked" on Facebook. "I can see how it's helpful for me."

Cole says this Millennial behavior is likely temporary, and the generation will become more careful about how much they share online as they get older and have more assets to protect, though he admits he can't prove this will be the case.

For his part, Fromm says the participation economy isn't going away, and neither will Millennials' willingness to be a part of it, no matter how old they are.

"This is a long-term behavior trend," he says. "The brands that are going to win with Millennials are going to allow for participation."