

By Patricia Martin  
October 2009

CONTACT INFORMATION

Patricia Martin  
444 N. Michigan Ave. 12th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60611

reception: 312.283.5995

mobile: 630.710.5995

<http://twitter.com/PatriciaMartin>

<http://www.patricia-martin.com>

# american life & culture survey

## Research Approach

Seismic shifts in the way we create meaning are reorganizing our work, leisure, and belief systems—in essence, our culture. This is the first installment of a study on the role of culture as it relates to how people seek, participate, and express themselves in a changed economy.

Through a yearlong process, Patricia Martin and her LitLamp Communications Group collaborated with leaders in arts, business, and technology to identify phenomena they were curious about. Ten organizations with reach into 26 markets provided access to a sample of 2,348 consumers who frequently partake in arts and entertainment offerings.

The survey instrument, designed by Donna Surges Tatum, PhD, of Meaningful Measurement, is intended to capture the beliefs and behaviors of the American cultural consumer and to provide a benchmark for further research. Our culture scouts out in the field read findings and offered insights. To round out the picture, we interviewed ten marketing executives whose brands are having success as “cultural brands.” That is, brands that have relevance because they provide a few or all of the following for the user:

- a means to create
- a way to learn
- a platform for participation

# Findings

## TAKEAWAY

Cultural consumers have a multiplier effect. The younger produces content, especially digital content, and act aggressively to draw audiences to their work using social media such as Twitter, MySpace, and Facebook. Connecting with them can expand your reach exponentially.

Young creatives are pushing to mobile platforms. Build programs that work on a variety of platforms including mobile and web.

## Creativity and Digital Culture

It has been widely noted that we are becoming a nation of producers more than consumers. Survey participants value creativity universally. But the younger cohort—between the ages of 18 and 35—is creating content.

### **Millennials create. Boomers consume.**

Younger survey respondents make more art. They compose music, form bands, and write blogs—82 percent said their peers consider them to be creative. They spend a good deal of time online, and they are heavy users of tools such as Facebook, Twitter and blogging platforms.

More mature (46-65 years old) cultural consumers create less, and instead consume cultural experiences and acquire art objects. Despite difficult economic conditions, they still attend live theater and dance and visit galleries. If they have to cut back, they drop their class or music lesson. They, too, spend more than three hours a day online. They are more likely to search for information rather than to create content.

### **The echo effect multiplies a message**

The creators among these consumers are geeks when it comes to using social media and online self-promotional tactics. Nearly 30 percent (29.7%) maintain blogs. Immersed in their own creative pursuits, they use social networks online and personal technologies (phones, laptops, and PDAs) to build an audience for their work and keep in touch with other artists.

## TAKEAWAY

Don't distract creatives. Instead, go where they are going. Launching new offerings requires that you to link to their existing creative pursuits.

Your app or product must help promote their band or poetry, sharpen their technique, transfer knowledge, give them fresh ideas, or help make them famous. Ford Fiesta (<http://www.fiestamovement.com/agents/>) and Red Bull (<http://www.redbullflugtagusa.com/Roadies.aspx>) are brands that give people an opportunity to be creative and gain recognition for it. Creativity is their participation platform.

### Married to the muse

We found some 60-year-old bloggers held the same opinions as 24-year-old poets: they are willing to work hard in their creative endeavors. Content creators say they spend a lot of their time producing and spreading their creative expressions. They don't spend time gaming online. This may be because creating original content is demanding—as is mastering and maintaining a social network online. Creativity is time-consuming. The time demands of a creative life, no matter what age a person is, require allegiance to one's art.

### Spending Behaviors

How has the poor economy affected spending attitudes and purchase behaviors? Not as much as one might think. The majority of this group is

- still buying books (78%)
- paying for cable (73%)
- attending live theater (67%)
- renting and going to movies (63%)

However, they are much less inclined to pay for online games (6%) and sporting events (21%).

### Free entertainment is fashionable

"I have found a treasure trove of free entertainment." Today's idea of what constitutes culture is broader and more nuanced than ever. People are changing their attitudes about how to spend their time entertaining themselves. There are a lot more cultural experiences available to people than one would think—and much of it is free. Both rural and urban respondents appreciate

## TAKEAWAY

Messages that promote health and the environment are in alignment with the basic beliefs and behaviors of this group of people. They are willing to pay more for a product when it fits their healthy, green criteria.

cultural assets and use them. For example, free concerts and live performances are available to 90 percent of these people, and 69 percent attend them. As for outdoor sculpture, it's available to 83 percent of the people. Public green space is available to 90 percent and 73 percent take advantage of it.

### **“I live within my means.”—the carefully curated lifestyle**

“I’ve always lived within my means and will continue to do so.” People commented that they had begun scaling back their lifestyles, or budgeting to stay within their means, prior to the decline. Overwhelmingly, they said they are not living a diminished lifestyle, just carefully selecting experiences that further their personal growth and help them live a meaningful life. Tickets to live theater, movies, and concerts were deemed meaningful.

### **Cultural consumers lead healthier, greener lives**

Cultural consumers are extraordinarily health conscious. Taking care of the body is a way of life for this consumer segment. The vast majority (70%) routinely exercise, go to the doctor and eat well. Despite higher costs, 63 percent buy organic food. If farmer’s markets operate in their communities, they shop at them.

As good stewards of the earth, 95 percent believe we should do all we can to address pollution. They recycle (94%), do everything they can to be green (83%), and will buy environmentally friendly products even if they cost more (73%).

## TAKEAWAY

Bedrock American beliefs still find common ground with consumers. Linking messages to core values such as self-reliance and getting a good education will strike responsive chords. These core beliefs have driven American life and aspirations since the founding of this country, and continue to frame the collective narrative. Consider a remix that evokes traditional core values with wired lifestyles.

## Values

### **Pragmatic, self-reliant, American dreamers**

Have Americans' bedrock values been altered by the economy? Yes and no. The cultural consumer's attitudes reflect the core American beliefs in the power of the individual, the value of a good education, and the possibility of success. For decades, American identity hung its hat on rugged individualism. This idea persists, even today.

- There is nearly unanimous agreement that "my success depends on me," and that it is important to have a good education.
- Nine out of ten people believe that individual hard work leads to success, and that education is the great equalizer.
- Two-thirds do not believe that class and privilege predict success.
- Half (51%) the people still believe the old saying that "anyone can grow up to be President."

### **SHIFT: Americans don't always solve problems**

Whether it is American ingenuity, technology, or pluck, the society has long seen itself as a nation of problem solvers. People were less confident about this aspect of American character. Few strongly agreed that Americans always solve problems. A more global mindset may be forming, whereby the American point of view is one of many.

## TAKEAWAY

Supporting educational efforts is important to these people. The research reveals that they value the use of collective revenue for efforts that increase knowledge. And they avidly participate in a wide variety of cultural experiences because they value the transfer of knowledge that occurs. Create messages that link to this value.

## Civic Life

For cultural consumers, civic life has a consumable dimension. People expressed opinions about how we should spend money as a society versus expenditures that should be left up to the individual. It's not a matter of "good" versus "bad." It's more a matter of prioritizing among many competing "good" programs. For example, things like public universities and museums fall into a personal choice, whereas K-12 education and public libraries should be valued and publicly funded.

### **Empowered and vocal**

Cultural consumers are politically engaged. More than 90 percent stay up to date with political news and vote both nationally and locally. Many of them also write to their elected representatives. Federal bailouts have made consumers more like citizen stakeholders. What amenities are they still willing to spend their tax money to support?

### **Schools rule**

There is overwhelming agreement that education is important to the American way of life. When it comes to taxes, about three-quarters (73%) consider K-12 a top priority. Tax support for public libraries and infrastructure investments such as streets and roads were also deemed important by more than half (53%) of the respondents. Higher education was designated for funding by about a third of the people, far ahead of other amenities including park districts, public art, museums, and concerts.

## TAKEAWAY

To win hearts and minds among consumers and civic leaders alike, tout the cultural assets your brand supports. Sponsorships of events such as live concerts, street fairs, and arts events are cost-effective ways of getting close to cultural consumers, while providing a context for the brand to be experienced in unexpected ways.

As the economy diminishes, these knowledge seekers will face underemployment. Recruiters and marketers alike will want to offer cultural experiences, purposeful art making, and adventurous community activism as rewards.

### **It's still important to have a good education**

Consistent with where they'd like tax dollars to go, cultural consumers overwhelmingly believe in education as a person's best shot at a better life. It has long been a belief among American adults that children are not learning as much as previous generations. This group contradicted that notion; they believe that the intellectual abilities of children are not declining.

## Work and Culture

### **Cultural assets stimulate growth**

Ninety percent of the people agree that arts and cultural organizations help to keep the local economy strong and create growth. People were aware that local cultural spending keeps people shopping for goods and services within the community, and often during later hours and in alternative venues. They consider this a good thing.

### **Work your bliss**

Universally, people said it's important to love your work. And they value doing original work. The younger cohort is particularly passionate on this point. Since many of them are also creative, they are contributing to the culture and are challenged to make art and make a living.

---

## TAKEAWAY

Creating platforms that allow these creatives to express their spiritual ideals in a non-denominational way will help them anchor in times of change.

## Faith

### **Heart, soul, and hard work**

Most (83%) say they believe in things they cannot see. Three-quarters of these consumers consider themselves spiritual people and believe in a higher power. Yet, while they consider themselves enlightened, they are also self-reliant. As mentioned earlier, nearly every person (98%) agreed with the statement: "My success depends on me." One reason the yoga movement has exploded is because it fuses fitness with spirituality and allows consumers to experiment with new spiritual practices. Consider also that since the 1960s, consumers with spiritual inclinations have come to expect that the enlightenment they seek will come from the broader culture, not their local church. Picture the Beatles' pilgrimage to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Messages that are empathetic to the search for enlightenment will have meaning for these consumers.

## The Way Forward: How These Findings Apply

Look for these **TRENDS** in cultural marketing:

1. Cultural incentives and rewards programs will click with these consumers: win a Kindle, a theater subscription, \$20,000 to produce your documentary, or earn points toward free improv training. These types of messages will be motivating.
2. More seemingly niche Facebook and iPhone applications (apps) will proliferate to enhance cultural occasions, such as dining tips near the theater, a sign-up for last-minute cheap seats, a nearby funky art event-finder, or a notice of worldwide call-for-entries to film fests. All have appeal, and will eventually find their way to people who will use them, love them, and tell their fellow culture mavens.
3. Campaigns that use art and technology to “animate” cities with citizen-generated expressions will earn favor. Such efforts have the added benefit of stimulating urban development in ways that have long term rewards for the people living there: improved real estate values, exciting street life, and enhanced sense of community.
4. Expect visiting artists in unexpected work places. More opportunities that rub together artists, scientists, engineers, and digerati to spark innovation will arise.
5. Consider these consumers doers, not viewers, when it comes to sports. Athletic apparel, nutritional supplements, cameras and an array of self-improvement products might find a kinship with cultural consumers.

## Why Do This?

Every two years, we assemble a research team to take a deeper look into some aspect of consumer culture. This is our fourth study. As you can imagine, it takes a great deal of thought and effort to create these reports. We do it for these reasons:

1. **It helps our industry evolve.** In a post-advertising era, consumer attitudes and behaviors are increasingly driven by cultural values and social movements. Today's marketers need to know what this means and why it matters to their work.
2. **We like starting conversations.** It's our conviction that the future will be shaped by the people who create the culture. The emerging culture now favors collaboration among people from business, arts, and technology. We like to stimulate discussions among those leaders to spark innovation and build bridges across industries.
3. **Our pioneering clients crave it.** We serve leaders who want their messages to change or contribute to the culture, not clutter it. If you are reading this report, chances are you are such a person. We hope you'll find something here that helps you think straight in a fast-changing world.

To find out more information on cultural trends shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors, subscribe to our free newsletter and check out our blog at <http://www.patricia-martin.com>, or follow us on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/PatriciaMartin>.

## About This Survey

---

### Why Study Culture?

In the midst of such seismic shifts, the way we create meaning is reorganizing our work, leisure, and belief systems—in essence, our culture. As we dive deeper into the information age, conflicting versions of our culture are presented through traditional media and online sources. In this environment the American consumer, with rising insistence and anxiety, faces a difficult question: What can I still believe in?

Unmoored from many of the customs and identities that defined life in the previous century, the American people now question not only their belief in science and industry, but also their belief in what matters in life. In an age of such profound change, culture is the medium of most significance in shaping preference and seeding new possibilities. By practicing the art and science of research into the culture, we can uncover opportunities, imagine new products and services, and travel new paths toward prosperity.

### Why Cultural Consumers?

Cultural consumers have a multiplier effect. The younger swath, often described as Millennials, are content creators and therefore contribute to the culture. They actively spend time using social media and building audiences for their art. No matter what age, these consumers circulate. And they spend a good deal of their leisure time out of the home. They interact with what's taking shape in their communities and they share opinions with other people. This makes them influential as brand ambassadors.

---

Cultural consumers avidly consume and often create many of the objects, expressions, and movements that constitute the culture. The American Life and Culture survey respondents are particularly creative:

- 87% have been told by others that they are creative
- 94% feel a sense of fulfillment when sharing original ideas
- 86% create original work
- 70% enjoy arts and crafts as a hobby

Their behaviors tell us they are curious about the world. They prize learning. They read. In fact, books, newspapers, and online news sources are avidly consumed. They address problems through political means. They vote. They assiduously follow politics. They act responsibly. Protecting the environment is important to them. Most of them habitually recycle.

### **Research methods note**

Executive Summary results are given as percentages. However, for the in-depth analysis, the Rasch research model was used. An instrument common to the social sciences, the Rasch method is helpful to marketers because it measures how consumers perform as thinking, feeling human beings operating within a culture. It is based on a psychometric measurement standard that calibrates subtle behaviors, abilities, attitudes. The mathematical and philosophical underpinnings of Rasch are taken from physics and give a stable basis from which to compare individual responses. The findings reveal degrees of certainty that go beyond simple percentages.

---

## About the Researchers

### Patricia Martin

<http://www.patricia-martin.com>

Patricia Martin is a writer, researcher and marketing strategist. Author of the book *Renaissance Generation: The Rise of the Cultural Consumer and What It Means to Your Business* (Platinum Press 2007), Martin pioneered the point of view that the convergence of art, technology, and entertainment is remaking the American consumer. She crisscrosses the country giving talks on emerging culture and the new consumer.

As founder and CEO of LitLamp Communications, an award-winning marketing and communications boutique, Martin has earned acclaim for using culture as a medium to connect brands with communities of consumers. Martin conjured a sponsorship strategy for the Asian tour of the New York Philharmonic, spearheaded a viral Information Privacy initiative funded by George Soros, researched social networking habits of creative Millennials for Steppenwolf Theatre, launched Animal Planet, introduced Dannon products into school lunchrooms nationwide, and refocused Sun Microsystems' higher education strategy.

In 2008, Martin was named the Charlotte Kim Scholar in Residence at the Chicago Public Library. A blogger since 2004, she writes for *Advertising Age*, *Crain's Chicago Business* and *The Huffington Post*, and has been featured as an expert on ABC, NPR, and in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, *MarketWatch*, and *Harvard Business Review*.

---

**Donna Surges Tatum, PhD, CAE**

<http://www.meaningfulmeasurement.com>

Donna Surges Tatum, PhD, CAE, earned her PhD in Measurement Evaluation Statistical Analysis (MESA) from the University of Chicago, her MA in Persuasion and Organizational Communication from Purdue University, and is a certified association executive. She researches, publishes, and presents widely on a variety of subjects, particularly performance assessment, persuasive communication, computer-adaptive testing, and workforce studies. Dr. Tatum lectures at the University of Chicago and is also appointed to the faculty of the Graduate School at Purdue University.

Dr. Tatum is CEO of Meaningful Measurement, which she founded in 1990. Comprised of nearly eighty associates who are specialists in the fields of psychometrics, health care, business, marketing, statistics, computer science, association management, education, psychology, and communication, Meaningful Measurement is a group of professionals with a unique strength in its ability to create diverse on-demand expert teams that investigate problems and then provide real world solutions.

**Katie Darr**

Ms. Darr is a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Jane Addams School of Social Work. She devoted herself to every aspect of this study, down to the last detail.

---

## Partners

Our special thanks to the following partners who shared the responsibility for data collection. Thanks to them, response rates were high and the survey sample had depth.

Arts and Business Council of New York, NY

Arts and Business Council of Rhode Island, RI

Boulder Arts Commission, CO

Bravo Greater Des Moines, IA

Columbus Area Arts Council, OH

LA Stage Alliance, CA

League of Chicago Theatres, IL

National Corporate Theatre Fund, NY

Houston Arts Alliance, TX

OvationTV, NY

With additional help from

American Association of Museums, Washington, DC

University of Houston, Center for Public Policy, TX

---

## Contributing Brands

We interviewed representatives from each of the following brands to learn more about their interactions with younger cultural consumers between the ages of 18 and 35.

Facebook

Ford Fiesta

Google

J. Crew

Kenneth Cole

MySpace

Pepsi

Red Bull

Scion

Starbucks

## Contact Us

---

Stay tuned. *American Life and Culture* is the beginning of what we hope will be more research on the people and forces that are reorganizing our work, leisure and belief systems—in essence, our culture. Our greatest hope is that the study will stimulate discussion. We look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Patricia Martin  
LitLamp Communications Group  
444 N. Michigan Ave. 12th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60611

reception: 312.283.5995

mobile: 630.710.5995

<http://twitter.com/PatriciaMartin>

<http://www.patricia-martin.com>

Stay current with the latest tips, trends and information on the cultural consumer by subscribing to Patricia Martin's newsletter (<http://www.patricia-martin.com/newsletter.htm>).