

Beer & Gen Z



WHY BEER IS FAILING
TO ONBOARD THE NEXT
GENERATION OF DRINKERS

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agency.**

Executive Summary.

Beer does not have a Gen Z consumption problem.

It has an onboarding problem.

Gen Z participates in beverage alcohol. They do drink beer. What is breaking down is not interest or availability, but the moment where beer should form its first meaningful relationship with a new drinker.

Most beer brands were not designed to welcome someone into the category. They were designed to reward familiarity, reinforce habit, and signal credibility to people who already understood beer culture.

This white paper examines where and why beer fails to onboard Gen Z drinkers, and outlines the structural changes required for beer to become a first-choice category again.

The Core Insight.

Beer was built as a habit category.

Gen Z lives in a choice culture.

Habit categories assume repetition, familiarity, and reinforcement over time. Choice cultures demand instant clarity, emotional permission, and identity alignment at first contact.

Beer continues to speak the language of habit to a generation that has not yet chosen it.

Where Beer Fails to Onboard Gen Z.

01 BEER ASSUMES LITERACY INSTEAD OF EARNING IT

02 THE FIRST BEER MOMENT IS POORLY DESIGNED

03 LEGACY AND MASCULINE CODES CREATE FRICTION

04 FLAVOUR IS POSITIONED AS A TEST

05 ENTRY SKUS ARE UNDEFINED OR MISPOSITIONED

06 BEER LANGUAGE IS NOT SOCIALLY USABLE

01

WHERE BEER FAILS TO ONBOARD GEN Z

Beer Assumes Literacy Instead of Earning It.

Most beer brands assume a level of category knowledge that Gen Z does not yet have.

THEY ASSUME

- ◆ Familiarity with styles and terminology
- ◆ Understanding of bitterness, hops, lagers versus ales
- ◆ Confidence ordering in social settings
- ◆ Recognition of brand hierarchies and cues

Gen Z does not lack curiosity. They lack permission.

Onboarding fails when confidence is required before comfort.

02

WHERE BEER FAILS TO ONBOARD GEN Z

The First Beer Moment Is Poorly Designed.

BEER BRANDS

However, optimise for:

- ◆ Shelf presence
- ◆ Trade education
- ◆ Loyalty among existing drinkers

Very few brands intentionally design for the first sip moment.

FOR GEN Z

The first beer experience typically occurs in:

- ◆ Social gatherings
- ◆ Parties
- ◆ Festivals
- ◆ Bars with peers.

These are low-attention, high-social-risk environments.



When that first experience feels bitter, heavy, confusing, or socially awkward,

Gen Z does not learn beer.

THEY DISENGAGE.

03

WHERE BEER FAILS TO ONBOARD GEN Z

Legacy and Masculine Codes Create Friction.

BEER BRANDS

Much of beer's visual and verbal language remains rooted in:

- ◆ Tradition
- ◆ Masculinity
- ◆ Earned toughness
- ◆ Performance
- ◆ Authenticity signalling

These cues resonate with older drinkers.

FOR GEN Z

To Gen Z, they often read as:

- ◆ Exclusionary
- ◆ Dated
- ◆ Unnecessary
- ◆ Performative

Gen Z is not rejecting beer culture. They are rejecting posturing.

04

WHERE BEER FAILS TO ONBOARD GEN Z

Flavour Is Positioned as a Test.

BEER BRANDS

Beer frequently introduces itself through complexity:

- ◆ Bitterness
- ◆ Style purity
- ◆ Technical distinctions
- ◆ Earned taste

For new drinkers, this frames beer as something to work up to.

FOR GEN Z

Gen Z tends to attach to categories through immediate enjoyment and low cognitive load.

When flavour is framed as a challenge rather than an invitation, onboarding slows or stops entirely.

05

WHERE BEER FAILS TO ONBOARD GEN Z

Entry SKUs Are Undefined or Mispositioned.

Most beer portfolios lack a clearly defined onboarding beer.

INSTEAD, NEW DRINKERS ARE OFFERED:

- ◆ A heritage flagship
- ◆ A light option framed as compromise
- ◆ A confusing array of craft styles

None of these clearly answer: “This beer is for you, right now.”

Without an intentional entry SKU, Gen Z self-selects out of the category.

06

WHERE BEER FAILS TO ONBOARD GEN Z

Beer Language Is Not Socially Usable.

Gen Z places high value on social confidence.

BEER OFTEN REQUIRES:

- ◆ Pronouncing unfamiliar terms
- ◆ Explaining preferences
- ◆ Defending taste choices

If ordering or sharing a beer increases social risk, Gen Z avoids it.

Onboarding fails when silence feels safer than participation.

Beer Onboarding Failure Map.

The following map outlines where beer most commonly loses Gen Z during the onboarding journey. Each failure compounds the next.

ONBOARDING STAGE	WHAT GEN Z NEEDS	WHAT BEER DELIVERS	RESULT
First Exposure	Visual clarity, low pressure	Heritage cues, seriousness	Intimidation
Shelf Scan	Immediate understanding	Dense labels, style codes	Confusion
First Order	Social confidence	Jargon, pronunciation risk	Avoidance
First Sip	Immediate enjoyment	Bitterness, complexity	Disappointment
Social Context	Ease of sharing	Individual preference signalling	Self-consciousness
Repeat Opportunity	Clear next step	No defined progression	Drop-off

This is not a single failure. It is a system failure.

Structural Gap.

Beer optimises for loyalty before it secures entry.

Most brand systems, portfolios, and communications are designed to deepen relationships, not start them.

Gen Z does not arrive with loyalty. **They arrive with curiosity.**

Beer rarely meets them there.

What Successful Beer Onboarding Requires.

Beer does not need to abandon credibility or heritage.

It needs to redesign the first conversation.

EFFECTIVE ONBOARDING REQUIRES:

- ◆ Clear, intentional entry SKUs
- ◆ Visual systems that prioritise clarity over authority
- ◆ Language that invites rather than educates
- ◆ Flavour profiles that reward first taste
- ◆ Social susability at the point of order and sharing

Onboarding is not simplification. It is hospitality.

The Risk of Inaction.

Beer is not being rejected by Gen Z.

It is being skipped.

Categories that are skipped at entry rarely become habitual later.

Gen Z is forming preferences now. Brands that fail to onboard them will age with their existing audience and struggle to rebuild relevance.

Conclusion.

BEER'S GEN Z CHALLENGE IS NOT ABOUT:

- ◆ Drinking less
- ◆ - Competition from other categories
- ◆ - Health or moderation trends

It is about onboarding.

Until beer brands design entry with the same rigour they design loyalty, Gen Z will continue to arrive, sample, and quietly move on.

Entry decides everything.

About This Paper.

This paper is intended for senior leaders in beer, beverage alcohol, and brand strategy seeking to understand structural, cultural, and design-led barriers to Gen Z adoption.

The opportunity is not to change what beer is.

The opportunity is to change how beer welcomes the next generation.

GET IN TOUCH

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