

Demographic Factors to Consider

Brief: While each member of your audience is unique, understanding the demographic factors of an audience can give you a general sense of who they are, what they have experienced, and what they know about your topic.

Learning Objective: Understand how to analyze an audience based on demographics.

Key Terms:

- **Agnostic:** Someone who possesses a belief in the unknowability of the existence of gods.
- **Atheist:** Someone who possesses a lack of belief in any gods.
- **Cultural generation:** Individuals who grew up at the same time.
- **Demographics:** The characteristics of a population, including age, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, education; classification of the characteristics of the people.
- **Socioeconomic status:** An economic and sociological measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, generally based on household income, earners' education, and occupation.

What are Demographics?

The word “demography” comes from the Ancient Greek preface “demo” meaning “the people,” and “graphy,” which implies writing, description, or measurement. Demographics, then, is the statistical study of people that often reveals broad similarities and differences among those people.

While each member of your audience is unique, understanding demographic factors of an audience can give you a general sense of who they are, what they have experienced, and what they may know about your topic.

Age

Age is an important variable to consider when analyzing your target audience. Individuals who grow up at the same time are called cultural generations and often share many of the same experiences. The historical circumstance in which each generation grew up can have profound effect on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

When you speak to an audience with members of different ages, you are likely to experience a generation gap. One way generations distinguish themselves is through language. As new generations seek to define themselves, they adopt new lingo and slang.

With the development of technology, gaps in language have widened. For example, an older person might refer to the term “communication skills” to mean formal writing and speaking abilities, whereas a younger person might refer to the same term to mean e-mail, instant messaging, and texting skills.

Religion

Unless you are speaking to a particular religious group, you are likely to encounter audience members from several of the world’s religions in your audience. Understanding the religious beliefs of your audience can also help you relate to members of the audience more directly and avoid excluding members who may not observe the same practices as you do.

According to some estimates, there are roughly 4,200 religions in the world. The five largest religious groups by population—estimated to account for between 5 and 7 billion people—are Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese folk religion. Additionally, there may be atheists (lack of belief in any gods) and agnostics (belief in the unknowability of the existence of gods) in your audience.

Race and Ethnicity

A race is a human population that is believed to be distinct in some way from other humans based on real or imagined physical differences. An individual is usually externally classified (meaning someone else makes the classification), but individuals may also self-identify with a particular racial group.

Ethnicity refers to social traits that are shared by a human population. Some of the social traits often used for ethnic group classification including nationality, tribe, shared language, shared culture and shared traditions.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status is an economic and sociological measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, generally based on household income, earners' education, and occupation.

Socioeconomic status is typically broken into three levels (high, middle, and low). People with similar socioeconomic statuses tend to share similar life experiences that affect their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

From Concept to Action

Consider your personal demographics, including age, religion, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. How do these factors affect your perspective? How do they influence

how you relate to other people? Conversely, how do they fall short in accounting for the way you see the world?

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