The Evolving Modern Family

The American household is changing. People are living longer and getting married later in life, women are more in demand in the workplace and at home, and society is more accepting of same-sex marriage. These trends have made society increasingly more inclusive of a whole range of household circumstances and compositions.

Family, as described by the U.S. Census Bureau, is “a group of two or more people related by birth, marriage or adoption all residing together.” The term nuclear family, coined in 1949 by sociologist G.P. Murdoch in his book, Social Structure, came to define the American perception of family in the 20th Century. The 21st century family has been shaped by great sociological, ideological, and demographic shifts which have pushed the parameters of the definition of the family unit and rendered the term nuclear family nearly obsolete.

Multi-generational Households

While the Great Recession has posed many challenges for families, it has also brought them together in unexpected ways. Some 20% of young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 are living at home with their parents, the highest in over 60 years. Known as the boomerang generation, these young adults returned home jobless or underemployed. 37% of 18-29 year olds in 2009 were unemployed and one eighth of 22-29 year olds “boomeranged” home. Furthermore, with rising cost of home prices, many young adults are postponing leaving their childhood home to save up.

The multigenerational shift isn’t simply a bi-product of the economy. Americans are living longer and grandparents are now increasingly becoming part of the immediate family unit. 65% of all multi-generational households are comprised of head of household, child and grandchild. In one year alone, from 2007 to 2008, the number of Americans living in multi-generational households grew by 2.6 million.

Immigration also has a place in this shift in household composition in America. Like their earlier European counterparts, recent Latin American and Asian immigrants are more likely to have multiple generations under one roof.

The bottom line: The American family of today is far more diverse and inclusive of a multitude of compositions.
A Modern Proposal

Americans today are waiting longer to marry and are more skeptical of the institution than ever before. In 1960, 72% of all adults were married; today just 52%. Since 1970 there’s been a 5 year increase in average age of marriage to 28 for men and 26 for women. While millennials are waiting longer to marry, 70% still want to… one day. A majority of millennial women (59%) in a recent survey were happy to move in with their boyfriend before marrying.

There are many factors which influence this trend in America. According to the Department of Education, since 1982 more women have graduated from every form of higher education than men. In 2012, 60% of bachelor's degrees were earned by women. From Generation X, these adults have grown up accustomed to divorce (approximately half of all marriages end in divorce) and may feel the need to be more prepared to take care of themselves financially.

Women are putting off marriage and children in order to establish their careers. Birth rates reflect opinions gathered in Gallop and Pew Research polls which claim Americans prefer smaller families including no more than 2 children. Factors such as women attempting to have children at the end of their healthy childbearing years and the current economic crisis also lead to smaller families.

According to Bureau of Labor statistics dual income households are becoming the norm, representing 58% today verses one third in 1975. Cost of living increases in America have demanded these economic changes: if the median household income had kept pace with the economy since the 1970's it should be $92,000; instead it is $50,000. The Federal Reserve estimated that the average consumer owed $15,000 in credit card debt in 2010, demonstrating the financial burden weighing down the American consumer.

With more women working outside of the home, housework and childcare are becoming increasingly gender neutral tasks; Averaging 28.5 hours per week for women and 19.1 for men. Men are also taking greater charge of the shopping list, commanding more domestic purchase power than ever before. According to the 2012 Cone Communications Year of the Dad Trend Tracker, 52% of dads now say they are the primary grocery shopper in the household. Over a third of moms admit dads have, over the last few years, had more influence on grocery purchases for the household. In 2012 the Huffington Post reported that men surpassed women in online purchases for the first time.

The bottom line: The aspirations of adults in America have shifted away from the nuclear family of the 20th century and gender roles in the household are blurring.
With a projected total buying power of $790 billion, and more households claiming same-sex partnership (doubling in size and proportion since 2000), the same-sex household is growing in size and purchase power year-on-year. According to the US Census, 15 million adults (6.8%) identify as LGBT, and of those 24% have at least one child under 18 living in the household. A 2012 Nielsen report on the state of the LGBT consumer found that same-sex households make 16% more frequent shopping trips and spend 25% more annually on consumer packaged goods than general market households. This offers significant opportunities to manufacturers of consumer products if they are able to connect with this group.

The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule this month on the constitutional right to gay marriage and the right of gay married couples to federal benefits. The fiscal and legal implication that this Supreme Court ruling has on same-sex households is significant. Social security payments, spousal health insurance coverage, and even higher tax preparation fees can financially strain same-sex households. If the ruling by the Supreme court extends federal marriage benefits to same-sex couples then spending power for these households could increase.

There has been an outpouring of public support for these rights by politicians, prominent business leaders and public figures across America. According to PEW Research, 70% of millennials and 49% of the total population support gay marriage. Mainstream media has reflected this shift in public opinion over the years. Where Will & Grace was a trailblazer showcasing same-sex relationships on primetime TV in 1998, now shows featuring same-sex characters are blazing a trail: The New Normal, Glee and Modern Family.

What this all means is that same-sex households may continue to command greater attention and support in the media, lending to more same-sex-tailored advertising. Target’s same-sex registry ad propelling it to the top of the YouGov Brand Index along with 12 of the top 20 LGBT buzz rankings that were new in 2012 from 2011.

The bottom line: This is a consumer group which responds positively to same-sex tailored advertising, spends more annually on consumer packaged goods and has more spending power per capita than general market.
Going It Alone

Living alone in America has never been more prevalent. Nearly one third of adults today will never marry, which is double the percentage of Americans who did not in 1960. Single-occupant households account for over a quarter of all households and outnumber married-with-children households.

In the book *Going Solo* by Eric Klinenberg, he points out that the percentage of Americans living alone has skyrocketed from 9% in 1950 to 28% today. This figure is 35-45% in urban areas. He traces this to the increase of women in the workplace, a communication revolution, urbanization and longevity. The term “singleism” was coined by University of California psychology professor, Bella De Paulo. Dr. De Paulo attempts to rebut the claim that this group is “self-obsessed... rather advantaged... more cyber and more likely to be linked to members of their social networks by bonds of affection” in contrast to families, whose members are often stuck with each other. She argues singles enjoy intentional communities and are thus more likely to think about human connectedness in a way that is far-reaching and less predictable.

To cope with the demand of single-person urban dwellings, micro-apartments are cropping up in cities across North America. Other enterprising businesses are meeting the demands of a rise in urban, single person households. Car sharing services such as Relay Rides comprise one of the 26 U.S. car sharing programs which in total claim over 800,000 members.

The bottom line: The increase in single-occupant households has brought about a multitude of marketing opportunities and business strategies which capitalize on the fact that not all adults live in family households.

**Single parenthood**

Statistics show that single parenthood is on the rise in America. 24% of the 75 million children under 18 live in single-parent families, a number that has doubled in the last 50 years. The majority (70%) of single parents are mothers. While these households represent a range of socioeconomic circumstances, recently there has emerged a trend whereby empowered, independent, single women are opting to go it alone.

The bottom line: Parenthood represents much more than the nuclear family.

Among the multitude of single mom blogs online, these three were trending high on toppommyblogs.