

# The big Fix: can milk be futureproofed?

Megan Tatum

Gen Z just isn't buying milk, with some even calling it evil. Dairymen tasked creative agency Zak with breathing new life into the white stuff

**G**en Z don't see the point of milk. It's unnecessary. It has zero to say. It's pumped out of cows that need it more than we do. And hey, on top of that? It's destroying the planet.

At least, that's the view of your average 18 to 24-year-old, according to research by creative agency Zak, which has gathered insights from its 1,000-strong network of Gen Z and millennial 'early adopters', consumers at the cutting edge of emerging attitudes.

Asked for details of their views on the white stuff, comments from these Gen Z-ers ranged from the pretty disastrous 'milk is evil', to 'milk is only for the cows' to 'milk is just gross, and why would I bother with it when there are perfectly good dairy-free alternatives out there?'

In short, they found a generation "sticking its middle finger up" to the status quo of dairy milk consumption, says Zak's chief creative officer Matt Bennett.

It's a trend backed up by plenty of other data too. A 2019 survey by ComRes found that more than a quarter (28%) of 18 24-year-olds in the UK have either reduced or cut out dairy consumption entirely since 2017.

**With the 'original' SKU sold in a simple glass bottle, the product is designed to give a nostalgic nod to the comfort and familiarity of the milkman**



And according to an exclusive survey carried out by Harris Interactive for The Grocer, nearly a third (31%) of this demographic didn't pick up a single pint of traditional cow's milk during lockdown, opting for dairy-free alternatives instead.

A distaste for dairy isn't confined to Gen Z (one in five millennials also say they've cut down on cow's milk, according to another 2019 survey, with half of those citing pressure on social media) but it's a view that's becoming almost endemic in some of the youngest consumers.

"The overall view from Gen Z is that milk is bad for the cow, milk is bad for you and milk is bad for the planet," sums up Bennett. "That's a pretty hard place to come back from."

For this year's Dairymen, though, we asked the agency to take on that challenge. To reimagine milk in such a way that would appeal to the demands, desires and disruptive inclinations of a generation that represents around 32% of global consumers (outnumbering both millennials and boomers, as of 2019) and has the economic clout to reverse years of decline.

So, what did they come up with?

To understand how to fix the problem, Zak began by getting to grips with the major problems the milk industry faces when it comes to Gen Z. For Bennett, it boils down to three key challenges: the competition, the image and the environmental impact.

The reality is that milk



**Milk is naturally high in protein, potassium and vitamin D, so Fix takes these attributes and turns them into on-pack and marketing messaging that compares nutrient levels in one serving with foods already enjoying a healthy reputation**



**FIX** <

**LESS IS MORE.**  
**MORE CALCIUM** THAN A CUP OF SPINACH  
**MORE PROTEIN** THAN 100G OF KIDNEY BEANS  
**MORE VITAMIN D** THAN 2 TUNA FILLETS  
**MORE POTASSIUM** THAN A WHOLE BANANA

**A LITTLE FIX GOES A LONG WAY.**  
> FLASH FILTERED MILK FOR EVERYDAY NUTRITION.

alternatives are more accessible, more affordable and more appealing to younger consumers than ever before. According to The Vegan Society, the UK plant milk market is now worth around £240m, a figure that's expected to double in the next five years, with an estimated CAGR of 13.8% from this year, to 2025.

In July, Oatly welcomed new investors (including the likes of Jay Z and Oprah Winfrey) giving the Swedish oat milk brand a \$2bn valuation, only four years after it first expanded into the UK.

So ubiquitous are plant milks that, walk into your local coffee shop, and it feels incumbent on the customer to specify that they'd like dairy milk in their flat white, points out Bennett.

On top of this growing availability, these alternative milk brands 'get' Gen Z, he believes. Sixty-four per cent of Gen Z want to see brands 'take a stand' on important issues, according to research by Accenture, and 74% say purchasing decisions are influenced by the values and actions of company leaders.

**“Green-and-white cartons, fields, farmers, pails, stools, grass, happy cows – Gen Z is not interested”**

Milk alternative brands “understand that if you want to talk to this audience you have to show up looking a bit different, behave differently and have a different set of values that you market yourself by”. It's why, where once they opted for white Tetra Pak cartons and a picture of a nut, the new wave of milk alternatives uses colour, contemporary designs and adopts a strong brand voice.

In contrast, the milk industry has failed to differentiate itself, adds Bennett. It has failed to develop a clear voice or express its values extrinsically at all.

That failure has compounded into the second major obstacle milk faces: its image. Compared with these contemporary milk alternatives, milk and its branding just feel stale.

“Green-and-white cartons, fields, farmers, pails, stools, grass, happy cows – Gen Z is not interested,” says Bennett. “It does not chime with this audience. It's a sea of sameness and blandness.” Yes, this has happened largely as a result of the major mults, he ↻



FULLY BIO-BASED PAPER CARTON  
DYED WITH NATURAL INK



accepts, demanding ever bigger volumes at ever smaller prices. But the result has been zero emphasis from the milk industry on personality and branding.

Which brings us to the third, and final, problem: the environmental impact. Influenced by both viral Netflix documentaries like *Cowspiracy*, plus more formal denigrating of dairy's sustainability such as the findings of the EAT-Lancet commission, many in Gen Z are firmly of the view that milk is bad news for the planet. It isn't only the impact of production either; there's also the waste throughout the supply chain.

This was exemplified during the early stages of the pandemic, when the media was chock full of images of farmers pouring milk down the drain, as supply in foodservice suddenly outstripped demand.

But it's a longer-term perception too, with a 2018 report by Wrap highlighting that around 7% of milk is wasted each year, around 330,000 liquid tonnes, both in the home and the supply chain.

Buying up litres of milk and chucking it out when it approaches its use-by date is commonplace, points out Bennett, as "it's seen as a commodity. That commoditisation is not good for the perception of the product. Particularly when you're dealing with eco-conscious Gen Z-ers."

"You're talking about a generation that doesn't want to see waste and won't put up with it. There's a whole series of behaviours by brands, businesses,

**The brand's eco-friendly packaging is built around the concept of 'less is more'. Even with its lunchbox-sized flavoured range, the emphasis is on added ingredients that don't rely on heavy processing, instead using raw cacao, 'real' banana, and cashew**

any post-biscuit guilt or at the end of the day when you need a protein hit".

### Packaging

Its bold but minimalist design ensures it'll stand out on shelf (in contrast to the lack of differentiation in private-label milk).

With the 'original' SKU sold in a simple glass bottle, the product is designed to give both a nostalgic nod to the comfort and familiarity of the milkman, says the design agency, as well as addressing Gen Z concerns around the sustainability of the product.

A survey earlier this year of 10,000 consumers across 13 European countries (albeit one commissioned by the European Container Glass Federation) found that 40% of consumers say they actively choose glass over other packaging materials because it's seen as more easily recyclable.

Fix users will also be encouraged to refill at designated refill stations, says the agency, as another way to reduce environmental impact and waste.

The brand has been designed around three strategic pillars, explains Bennett.

The first is a conscious decoupling of milk from its bovine origins. Gone are the images of grazing cows, or smiling farmers standing in their wellies. In their place, a stripped-back look, with its black-and-white colour palette the only hint of a cow.

This approach addresses the uneasiness that some Gen Z-ers feel around animal products and, in so doing, takes its cues from other dairy categories, such as cheese and ice cream.

Interestingly, younger consumers were more likely to up their intake of cheese during lockdown than some older demographics, according to the survey by Harris Interactive. For Bennett, that's





because “cheese is more removed from the cow, there’s a strong element of a human hand in there” thanks to better branding and a more diverse product landscape. Milk needs to take a similar approach.

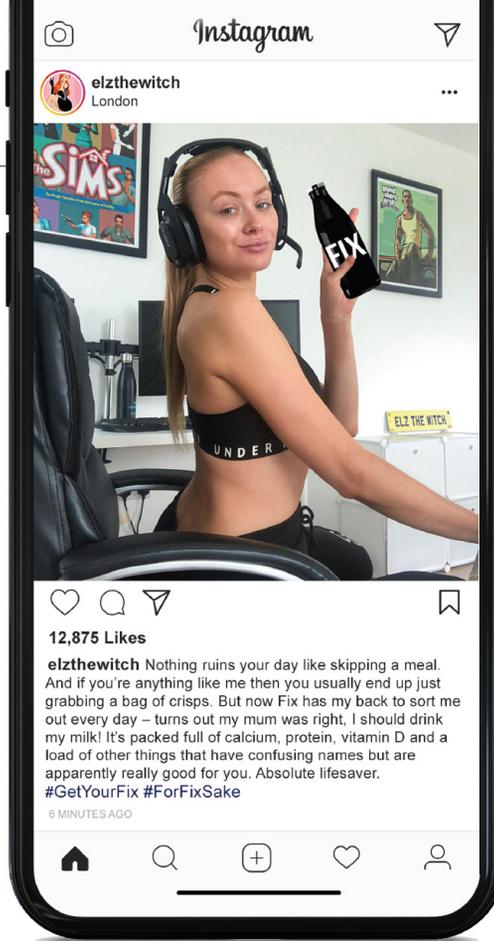
Next is functionality. In short “milk is really good for you, why isn’t the industry shouting about that?” asks Bennett. “It’s insane not to talk about that, especially in today’s environment where everyone (Gen Z more than most) is more health-conscious and more aware of what they put into their bodies.”

Milk is naturally high in protein, potassium and other minerals, and it’s only lightly processed via pasteurisation.

Fix takes these attributes and turns them into a compelling on-pack and marketing message of ‘A little Fix goes a long way’, comparing the levels of protein, calcium, vitamin D and potassium in one serving with foods that already enjoy a healthy reputation.

This focus on function follows through into other products within the range too. Drawing its design inspiration from the sports nutrition and food replacement categories, Fix+ takes milk by-product whey (thereby addressing one element of waste) and turns it into an easy everyday nutritional powder, leveraging its purity and minimal processing to drive up value and create additional revenue streams for the industry.

Finally, the brand – from its design, to its



**Elz the Witch, a 24-year-old gamer and presenter with 130k YouTube subscribers, would be the perfect choice of influencer to enlist as Fix brand advocate**

With 40% of consumers saying they actively choose glass over other packaging because it’s more easily recyclable, Fix users will be encouraged to use designated refill stations to reduce environmental impact and waste



eco-friendly packaging, to its minimal processing – is built around the concept of “less is more”, says Bennett.

In so doing, it draws direct comparisons with alternative milks, which often undergo fortification processes to boost their nutritional content. Even with its lunchbox-sized Fix flavoured range, the emphasis is on added ingredients that don’t rely on heavy processing, instead making use of raw cacao, ‘real’ banana, and cashew (“there’s no reason nut-flavoured real milk shouldn’t be successful”) to emphasise naturalness and simplicity throughout the product.

**Gen Z**

All of this sets Fix up as a more thoughtful, craft product to appeal to Gen Z.

“It becomes a more small-batch product that feels closer to the consumer, as opposed to this industrial wasteful behemoth driven by corporate greed from supermarkets.”

This same ethos is reflected in how the agency envisages its launch and distribution too.

Using only a small budget, the brand will begin with a guerrilla-style marketing campaign that points the finger at a lack of transparency in milk alternatives, in particular regarding their need to fortify in order to provide a truly nutritional product.

“We’ll plant the idea into the Gen Z consciousness that not all is as good as it seems with alternatives via a long, modern PR campaign.”

Then it’ll drop the solution: Fix. To start with, distribution will be targeted with the brand unavailable in stores. Instead, awareness will be built up via collaborations with people, brands and businesses that have “some cultural chops” with Gen Z.

These brand advocates couldn’t be further from gym buffs, says the agency. Instead they’ll be “healthy but human”. Think the likes of Elz the Witch, they suggest, a 24-year-old gamer and presenter with 130k subscribers on YouTube who “keeps fit, but doesn’t drone on about it”.

“As such, she fits in perfectly with the Fix messaging of giving an easy, natural top-up of nutritional goodness for busy young people leading a hectic lifestyle.”

Only once these famous Gen Z faces have raised awareness, alongside targeted distribution direct to consumers, will the product be rolled out more widely. At that point Fix will appear in small waste-free formats in on-the-go meal deals and in other “considered, thoughtful and targeted” distribution channels.

Fix might only be a design concept. But it should serve as inspiration to an industry that has so far failed to resonate with a generation soon set to wield trillions in global spending power.

“Let’s clean up the act a bit, make sure everyone is aligned on a vision and plan for milk,” urges Bennett. “Let’s breathe new life into this industry.”