#VANLIFE COULD BE THE FASTEST-RISING TRAVEL TRENDS

NOMADIC TRAVEL IS TRENDING WITH MILLENNIALS, AND THIS STARTUP IS TAPPING INTO A MOVEMENT THAT’S HELPING THEM GROW MASSIVELY...

While much of the auto industry is flagging as young people turn to Uber, public transit, and used vehicles, one niche is getting a generational boost: recreational travel. The hashtag #vanlife has accrued over three and a half million posts on Instagram alone, as nomadic living becomes the latest social media-driven Millennial travel trend. No longer just a pastime for retirees, the viral lifestyle choice is piquing Generation Wanderlust’s imagination, as more opt to abandon (or take a hiatus from) their 9 to 5 careers to pursue their passions by way of the open road. And it should come as no surprise that they’re documenting their journeys: according to our Instagrammability research, 70% of 18-34-year-old social media users say that it’s important that the places they travel look good in the pictures they post to social media—and 45% say it’s very/extremely important. That could be one of the reasons that one van-lifer reports seeing “a massive increase in the number of van-lifers over the last few years.” But this movement has many trends working in its favor: Instagrammability, wanderlust, and even young consumers opting for minimalist lifestyles (think: tiny homes).

Automakers have caught on. Fast Company reports that Volkswagen and Mercedes Benz, among others, have come out with new vans made with Instagram in mind. In addition, Airstream is betting on Millennials with their latest campaign after seeing their Airstream Basecamp model generate social media hype, according to MediaPost, and appealing to young consumers by offering smaller, cheaper trailers. Auto-adjacent companies are expanding their business too, like companies that customize vans for Customization Nation. But what about the Millennials that want the #vanlife experience, without actually buying that van?

Enter Outdoorsy. The online platform for booking RV and van travel experiences lets recreational vehicle owners rent out their wheels when they’re not using them, and it has grown 465% year-over-year, and 40% of their customers are reportedly under 40-years-old. Founders Jennifer Young and Jeff Cavins are #vanlifers themselves. They turned away from their corporate careers, hopped in an RV, and traveled the country to conduct some IRL market research before launching their Airbnb for RVs-style site. We talked to Young to get some insider intel on this rapidly rising trend, why Millennials are gravitating towards van travel, how important Outdoorsy’s own social media presence is, what the future of travel could look like, and more.

Ypulse: #Vanlife on Instagram has over three and half million posts and many accounts are dedicated to documenting nomadic travel. What is your opinion on that trend and why RV and van travel have captured young people’s imaginations?

Jennifer Young: I love #vanlife as a hashtag, and I think it captures people's hearts because it just rips right to the core of what most human beings want. And that is a sense of freedom and connection to themselves and to the planet we live on.

#Vanlife is a movement of young people that stripped down all the excess right down to the basics. They want compact, simple travel and living so that they're focusing on the environment...
around them. What do they see outdoors? Where are they staying? How do they have a meal that feels great and satiates them and they know where it came from? How do they spend their time in a destination where they'll actually bump into people who have similar interests and are out there doing the same things as them? You don't get that when you work in a company and you meet up in the kitchen to grab your coffee. That's not where you really connect with other people that have similar interests, but you sure do when you hit the road on Friday, and you're out driving down the coast of Big Sur and end up having a campfire and cooking a meal with people. That's really where life’s best moments are and #vanlife helps represent it, and a platform like Outdoorsy helps power it.

YP: Can you tell me about Outdoorsy's core demographic?

JY: Forty percent of customers on Outdoorsy are under 40, so that squarely puts us in the Millennials market, although there are some pretty significant and interesting pockets of other age groups. For example, early retirees or Baby Boomers are buying camper vans and they're starting to do a lot of outdoor hiking trips so that they can stay fit and healthy longer by getting out on the road.

YP: Do you think that trend will continue with Millennials as they age up and retire?

JY: 100%. There are so many cool things about Millennials as a group of people. Every new generation sets the pace for what's important in life. Right now, Millennials are telling us that what's important in life is more authentic moments with people that they care about. Young people are driving the movement of experiences. Millennials think that what matters is experiences with people that matter to you and your own personal mental and physical well-being and health, along with helping the planet. They champion a lot of causes related to the environment and related to mental health and well-being. So we see that in their choices for how they're choosing to spend their vacation time now.

YP: What do you think is driving young people's wanderlust today? Why is travel so important to them?

JY: Social media and a lot of new digital platforms are part of it. Digital media and social media is their currency. It's how they demonstrate to one another that they're living their best life. So in order to feed social media and their online presence, they have to look for new and interesting experiences ways to explore the world around them. Road travel is so perfect because you get off the beaten path and you can find passion projects and things you want to do—whether it's hiking new trails that have never been found before or going to Harvest Hosts, which are wineries and farms that are farm-to-table or organic and they allow camper vans and RVs to hook up on their properties. They do tours and there's a lot of rich and interesting things for people to explore there.

Road travel provides for this rich tapestry of photography and posts and sharing links of how you can go and do these things with other people that they post on Instagram or Snapchat or whatever channels that they use to express themselves. Travel has really changed from being a solitary activity in a way because you can build a community on social media.

YP: How important is Outdoorsy's social media presence?

JY: Massively important. Instagram is the best articulation of our brand voice and has our best selection of types of vehicles, road trips, and influencers that are leading the charge and showing the best of what road travel has to offer. All of those people and places on our Instagram are vehicles rented on Outdoorsy or renters and owners that are out there helping to shed light on what RV and motorhome travel can actually be.
YP: Could you tell me more about Outdoorsy's hashtag #NeverIdle, which has over 6,000 posts?

JY: #NeverIdle was our first hashtag and rallying cry when we first launched Outdoorsy. It was so perfect for both the owner and renter side. On the owner side, 18 million RVs sit around in people's driveways for 350 days a year. Don't let those things idle. Put them to work. There are roughly 40 million people that want to go to national parks in the U.S. alone. Give those people access to renting your vehicle while you're not using it and make great money. And then on the renter side, #neveridle works because Millennials want adventure. They want the outdoors. They want to be social and are obsessed with new horizons. So #neveridle just fit so perfectly to capture that sentiment as well as become a great rallying cry on the owner side.

YP: Could you tell me your community meetups?

JY: We host community meetups across the U.S. Our first one in Canada will be in September but last night's was just outside of Austin. We do four meetups a month in different states and cities where we invite owners and focus on educating them on everything they need to get them on their way. We bring beer and, because we were doing this last one in Texas, we brought barbecue.

We also learn a ton from all the owners. They tell us the features that they want to see and what their renters are saying they want. It's an open dialogue between owners and ourselves. We learn, they learn, and we just drink beers and have a good time, which is part of the whole reason why we started this company in the first place: to be outdoors.

YP: Do you have any predictions for what's next in the travel industry?

JY: One of the things that I personally love the notion of is autonomous RVs. When people talk about autonomous vehicles, there's a lot of fear. But when you think about RVs, camper vans, and recreational travel, imagine how beautiful it is if you're going slower because there's real speed limits around those vehicles. Not only are you actually on the road traveling but if you don't have to focus and concentrate on doing the driving and you're just literally absorbing every second of the scenic route.

YP: What have you learned about appealing to young consumers and what advice do you have for other brands?

JY: We were lucky because the general trend and movement is out there, so young people flocked to Outdoorsy more so than older people did. For example, our Instagram channel and content feed has been driven by all the cool young people that are out there doing this stuff. So they actually helped us with a lot of the great imagery, trip recommendations, places to go, and adventure content. That then became the baseline of the content we wanted to write about.

That's how young people and Millennials demonstrate what's important to them: through the content that they're pushing out. It's got to be new. It's got to be unique. It can't be advertising content to be real and authentic. So we basically are lucky enough to be able to coast on that general reality for young people. That was really helpful. Also, young people are just so marketplace-minded. Whether it's Wag or Rover for dog-walking, grooming, or boarding services, Uber for getting around town, or Outdoorsy for their weekend road trips. Marketplaces are the currency for a lot of young people and so we fit naturally into that space.

To answer your second question about advice for other brands, you have to build really good products that offer value, make them simple and easy through apps and online communication, and provide ways for young people to interact with your company, your communities, and your brand online. There's no quick-win way to do that. You can't attract...
young people's interest by throwing up stock photography of young people. It doesn't work that way. You've got to be a part of their lives, doing things that also represent what they're telling you is important to them, giving back to communities, and trying to champion causes that solve problems in the world related to the environment or to mental and physical health and well-being.

Jennifer Young, Cofounder & CMO of Outdoorsy

Jen had moved from New York after a high octane marketing career to be closer to family, while Jeff Cavins had left a Silicon Valley company he had led for six years. They wanted to do something profound yet simple to understand and fun. And they wanted it to be great for users. They wanted to do something that fit Jim Collins’ tenant: “the essence of profound insight is simplicity.” It had to serve their passionate interest in outdoor experiences. Having discussed their ideas over countless hours with select insiders, family and friends and of course with their co-founders, they knew in their gut that connecting people with outdoor travel was what they needed to do. Outdoorsy was born. This interview has been edited and condensed.

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