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The Compassionate, Happy, Upbeat American

Despite signs of an ugly national mood, a majority of Americans embrace the positive labels of "compassionate," "happy" and "optimistic." We break down findings by age, gender, income and marital status.

Executive Summary

Much has been written about the cynical, disillusioned American. Consumer confidence is down. Trust in individuals and institutions is at historically low levels. Charitable contributions are only slowly rebounding from the depths of the past recession. The political and social discourse is acerbic, unforgiving and, in many cases, downright cruel. The American psyche seems pretty grim.

But when you ask Americans to label themselves, you get a different story entirely. Americans see themselves as compassionate, happy and even optimistic – a far cry from some of the labels others have given them.

This paper, the first in a series, explores this phenomenon, just one of the findings from our new study of American Relevance.

The study is based on an online national survey of n=1,007 Americans in the late summer of 2012. The research was designed to shed light on how Americans see themselves, what things they value, and what interests them.

▶ **Americans believe themselves to be both compassionate and happy**. Over two-thirds (68 percent) of Americans said that "compassionate" is something that strongly applies to them. 58 percent of Americans say the label "happy" strongly applies to them.

▶ At the same time, Americans appear to **have weak ties to notions of spirituality and idealism**. Just over one-third of American said that "spiritual" (38 percent) or "idealistic" (39 percent) strongly applied to them.

▶ **Women** are more likely than men to label themselves as compassionate (72 percent vs. 65 percent) and happy (60 percent to 55 percent).

▶ **Marriage** had one of the strongest correlations with self-described happiness.

▶ Both **happiness and optimism appear to "peak" at the $75-$100k** income level and drop considerably once one gets into the much higher income brackets.

▶ In the aggregate, **Gen Xers** were the **most likely to embrace the combined labels of compassion, happiness and optimism**.

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The Gen X group was also the group that most identified themselves as "leaders," "ambitious," and "risk takers."

American Relevance: Compassionate and Happy

In a key section of the study, we asked Americans to look at 10 different characteristics or labels and indicate (on a 1-10 scale) how much the labels applied to them. The labels included:

- Ambitious
- Compassionate
- Focused
- Happy
- Idealistic
- Leader
- Optimistic
- Risk-taker
- Politically conservative
- Spiritual

The characteristic respondents embraced most strongly was compassion. Over two-thirds (68 percent) of Americans said that "compassionate" is something that strongly applies to them (they chose 8, 9 or 10 on the 10-point scale). Next was the label "happy" with nearly three in five (58 percent) saying "happy" strongly applied to them. Third was "optimistic." Half of the Americans surveyed said this strongly applied to them.

The mystery of compassion has received considerable academic attention lately. Authors such as Jonathan Haidt have explored it from the political psychologist's perspective in "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion."

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Stanford University has launched The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education whose mission is to "conduct rigorous scientific studies of compassion and altruistic behavior." Stanford has even launched "compassion cultivation training" classes.

Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama ("[My religion is kindness](#)") has been charming American crowds even as the country carries on a daily conversation, in the context of the presidential election, on just how compassionate taxpayers can afford to be.

While the investigation of compassion continues, marketers have known about the power of compassion for some time.

Why are organizations such as the former Christian Children's Fund (now ChildFund International) or St. Jude's so successful? In part, because they directly appeal to Americans' aspiration toward compassion, if not their compassionate nature itself. In the cases of these organizations, the object of compassion is children. But we see appeals to compassion in many arenas, from business to politics to cause marketing efforts.

Successful campaigns are often those that make the most effective appeal for compassion towards the "other" – whether that "other" be a person, a principle or the environment around us. Personalization combined with empathy and action is nearly always a winning combination.

This near-universal aspiration toward compassion can say a lot about what and how people make sense of what is *relevant* in their lives.

At Brodeur Partners, we examine relevance of a brand, candidate, product or cause through the ways that it is practical, how it stimulates the senses, how it invokes values/emotions, and how it appeals to community impulses. Compassion cuts across all four categories in interesting and compelling ways.

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- Empathetic actions can be **practical** ways of gaining favor with others.

- Compassion appeals to values of **fairness** and **equity**.

- Altruism is universally valued as a contribution to the common good of **communities** and clans.

- Finally, since emotions and senses are inextricably linked, compassion engenders an emotional and **sensory attachment** that not only captures the imagination but creates a visceral connection with another.

How happy are we?

The fact that Americans also identify themselves as "happy" may seem equally surprising given the current economic environment and political discourse. Regardless, that's what respondents said.

For all the moaning and complaining and cynicism around us, 58 percent of Americans say the label "happy" strongly applies to them. Then there's another 38 percent of Americans who are somewhere in the middle on the happiness scale. Only 4 percent suggest that "happy" doesn't apply to them.

How well does the label "happy" apply to you on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 meaning "doesn't apply at all" and 10 that it "totally applies"?

	Pct.
Top three 8-10	58%
Middle five (3-7)	38%
Bottom three (0-2)	4%

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By this measure, Americans are astoundingly happy – or at least aspire to be.

There is, however, a curious "gap" among seniors when it comes to self-identified happiness and the measure of optimism. Those aged 65 and over are the age cohort most likely to say they are "happy" with over two-thirds (68 percent) saying this label strongly applies to them. However the 65-plus group is, along with the 55-64 age group, among the least likely to label themselves as "optimistic."

How well do these labels apply to you on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 meaning "doesn't apply at all" and 10 that is "totally applies"?

	Happy	Optimistic	"Gap"
18-29	53%	50%	-3%
25-29	53%	49%	-4%
30-44	61%	52%	-9%
45-54	59%	54%	-5%
55-64	54%	45%	-9%
65+	68%	47%	-21%

Perhaps the gap reflects the hard reality that older people have less (in terms of sheer time) to look forward to. Either way, it bears further investigation.

Compassionate and happy vs. idealistic and spiritual

One might think that given Americans' intense affiliation with the "compassionate" and "happy" labels that it would naturally follow that

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Americans might also attach themselves to other feel-good labels such as "spiritual" or "idealistic." Not so.

Just over one-third of Americans said that "spiritual" (38 percent) or "idealistic" (39 percent) strongly applied to them. Americans' self-identification with the label of "spiritual" is particularly weak with nearly one in five (18 percent) ranking in the lowest category (a score of 0, 1, or 2 on the 10-point scale).

How well do these labels apply to you on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 meaning "doesn't apply at all" and 10 that is "totally applies"?

	Compassionate	Spiritual	Idealistic
Top three (8-10)	58%	38%	39%
Middle five (3-7)	38%	44%	54%
Bottom three (0-2)	4%	18%	7%

In short, the data suggests that there is a large group of Americans that are – or at least would like to think they are – both compassionate and happy in a direct way, not in an abstract way. That is, while large groups of Americans associate with notions of "idealism" and "spiritualism" a much larger group of Americans tag themselves with the label of "compassionate" and "happy."

One interpretation: Americans may be comfortable "loving their neighbors as themselves," but don't need metaphysical support.

Female, married and middle class

Which Americans are most likely to describe themselves as compassionate, happy, and optimistic?

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- First, women are more likely than men to label themselves as compassionate (72 percent vs. 65 percent) and happy (60 percent to 55 percent).

- Second, marriage had one of the strongest correlations with self-described happiness. Fewer than half of single people (48 percent) strongly labeled themselves as "happy" compared to more than two-thirds of married people (68 percent).

- Finally, when it comes to self-described compassion, happiness and optimism, there is a clear bell curve on income. Those making $75,000 to $100,000 annually were, by far, the most likely to describe themselves as compassionate, happy and optimistic. In fact, compassion, happiness and optimism appear to "peak" at this income level and drop considerably once one gets into the much higher income brackets. Our findings confirm results of an earlier **Princeton study** that pegs $75,000 as the magic number for happiness

In sum, our study hints at why a declining middle class is a problem for America. The married, middle age upper middle income ($75,000 to $100,000) are by far the most compassionate, happy and optimistic. While poverty is debilitating, our study suggests that six-figure wealth doesn't necessarily equate to self-perceptions of compassion, happiness, and optimism.

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How well do these labels apply to you on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 meaning "doesn't apply at all" and 10 that is "totally applies"?

	Total	<$25k	$25-50K	$50-75k	$75-100k	$100-150k	$150k+
Compassionate	68%	61%	71%	70%	74%	62%	70%
Happy	58%	51%	57%	60%	69%	53%	55%
Optimistic	50%	41%	51%	52%	61%	49%	45%

Gen X: Upbeat and Ambitious

Our study also saw interesting generational patterns in self-labeling.

Interestingly, the self-identification with "compassionate" is a constant across generations, dipping slightly only with those over 65 years of age. But while the over 65 group is the group that least identifies with "compassionate," this group of aging boomers are – by far – the most likely to consider themselves "happy."

But perhaps the most interesting group in this study was neither the Boomers nor the much written about Gen Y or Millennial crowd. Rather it was the 30-44 Gen Xers.

▶ In the aggregate, Gen Xers were the most likely to embrace the combined labels of compassion, happiness and optimism.

▶ The Gen X cohort was also the most likely to identify themselves as "leaders"(47%), "ambitious" (45 percent), and "risk-takers" (33 percent).

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In fact, our study paints an intriguing picture of the thirty-something and forty-something cohort – a group many marketers have deemphasized in the last few years: When viewed in the aggregate, they appear to be the one age group that balances an association with ambition and leadership together with ideas of compassion, happiness and optimism.

Conclusion

Much is made about American individualism. Our study is a reminder that Americans also identify with compassion. Even the most strident aspire to be kind-hearted and emphatic. Moreover, Americans still like to think of ourselves as happy and upbeat; this, despite all the scary economic news and acrimonious political rhetoric.
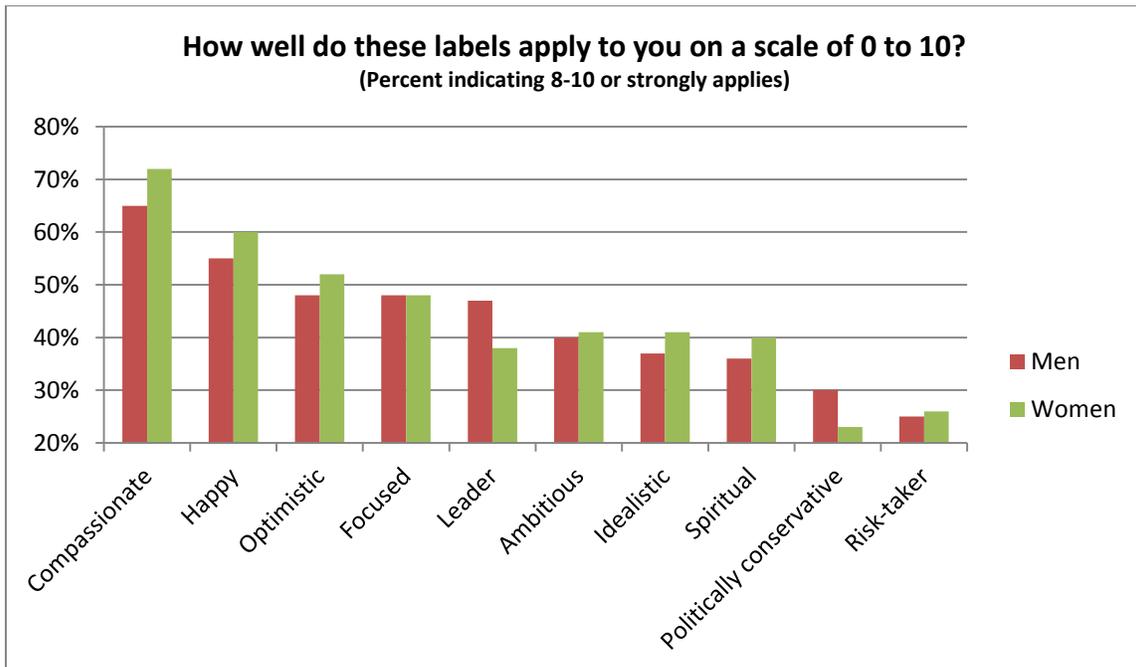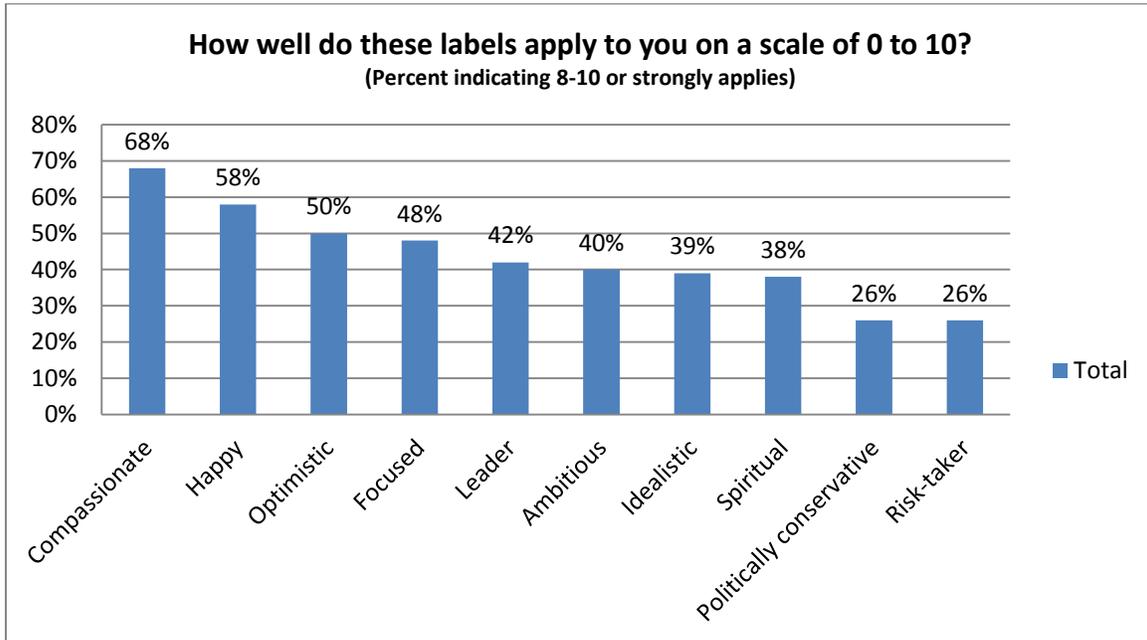
There lies the challenge for businesses, leaders and brands. How – in the midst of all the political, social and economic difficulties - do we help people be and act on those ideas and ideals that they strongly self-identify with? How do we make compassion simple? How do we make happiness expressive? How do we tap into the optimism of things half full?
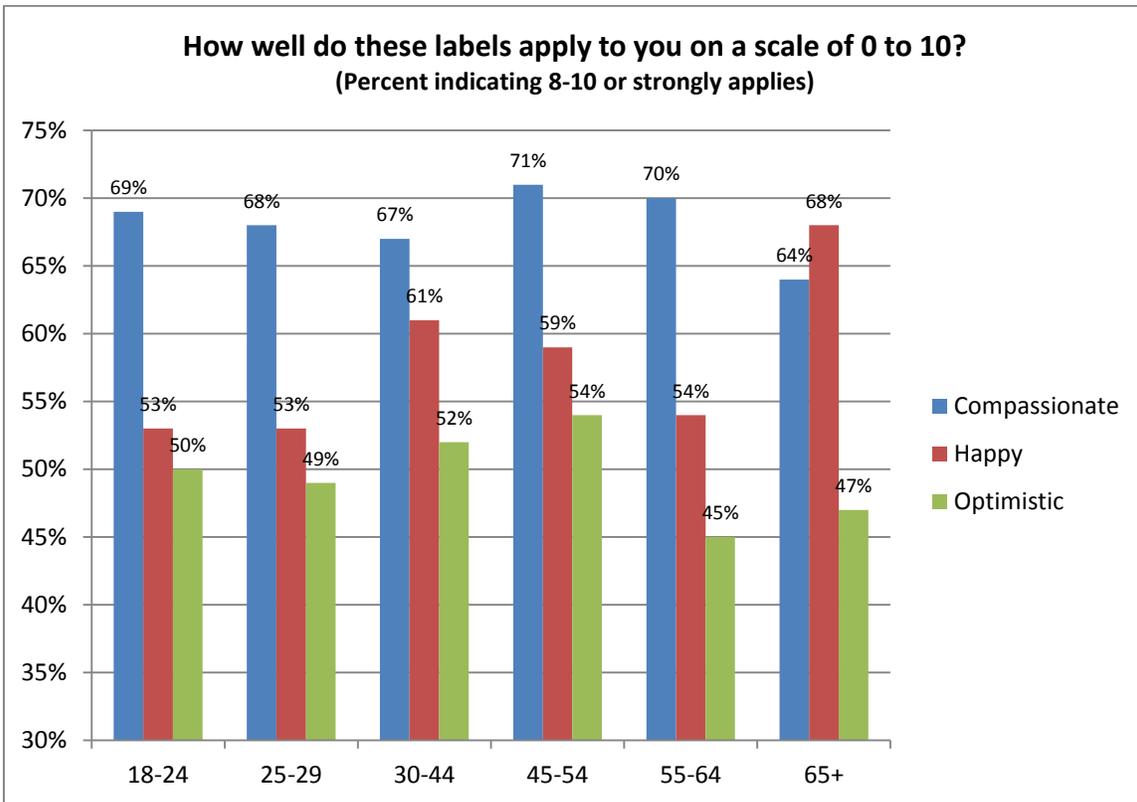
These self-administered labels change with age, income and lifecycle. Our study suggests that some of the most upbeat and ambitious Americans are neither the emerging Gen Y nor the affluent Baby Boomers. Rather it is the often ignored middle class, Gen Xers.

We will explore these and other implications of our research as part of our ongoing investigation into relevance. We encourage you to visit our blog for ways that the findings in this paper, and others stemming from our research into American Relevance, can make your communications programs more successful.

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Appendix:
Relevant Data Tables

How well do these labels apply to you on a scale of 0 to 10?
(Percent indicating 8-10 or strongly applies)

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How well do these labels apply to you on a scale of 0 to 10?
(Percent indicating 8-10 or strongly applies)

	Leader	Ambitious	Risk-taker
Total	42%	40%	26%
18-24	47%	42%	25%
25-29	36%	40%	27%
30-44	47%	45%	33%
45-54	44%	42%	23%
55-64	36%	32%	18%
65+	40%	36%	22%

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