

Special Report

Communicating with Young People

May 2008

How Does the Next Generation Think About the Future, and Should You Change Communication Strategies for This Group?

They are known today as “Millennials”—the 18 to 28 year old children of the “go-go baby boomers” and beneficiaries of a world that has been defined by remarkable advancements in technology, increased globalization of economies and markets, and a heightened awareness of issues of cultural diversity and the value of social networking.

Millennials comprise 25% of our current population—a segment larger than any other in history—and as such represent a vital target market, workforce, and political body.

Based on the unique demographics and experiences of this group, traditional means of communication may deliver less than effective results. New tactics and strategies are needed to successfully penetrate the Millennial community.

Who Are Millennials?

The thought of dealing with and adapting to Millennials, who are often characterized as impatient and skeptical, may seem challenging, if not overwhelming.

However, the emergence of this community as an influential body within American society has made working and communicating with them a necessity. Millennials can be viewed from a number of different perspectives, including:

As Individuals

Risk averse, clever and resourceful, Millennials leverage their comfort and experience with technology—existing and emerging—to build, maintain and tap into social networks that define their daily lives. They are intensely focused on openness and information sharing, and are connected 24/7 through diverse technologies and on-line networks.

Having grown up as the children of “helicopter” parents, who frequently insulated them from failure, frustration and pain, Millennials see themselves, and expect to be treated, as special members of society. They are uniquely confident, expect that everything is negotiable, and remain socially conscious while they appreciate diversity.

They demonstrate a strong resistance to harsh criticism and demand absolute flexibility in their lives.

Millennials are very cause-centric and issue driven. They appreciate the fragility of the environment in which they live and are willing to invest themselves to make positive changes for the future. Accordingly, Millennials are more willing to engage with those who openly and actively support their causes.

As Potential Employees

The days of the buttoned-down executive who is happy to have a job are past. Millennials, as future members of the workforce, are a different breed. As observed by Morley Safer in a recent 60 Minutes segment, Millennials “want to roll into work with their iPods and flip flops around noon, but still be CEO by Friday.”

In order to remain competitive in the future, businesses must understand and find ways to attract, motivate and retain these inexperienced, yet well-educated and highly opinionated, prospective employees.

Millennials see work as a means to an end rather than as an end in and of itself.

While they respect authority and appreciate clearly articulated rules of engagement, they also demand work-life balance. As such, they expect their employers to provide flexibility in work hours and physical locations so that their personal needs can be fulfilled concurrent with their job responsibilities.

Not appreciating harsh criticism, Millennials want to be mentored rather than bossed. While they demonstrate a solid work ethic, they have been criticized for lacking personal initiative and are generally considered to fear ambiguity. Millennials want to know why they are doing a specific task as opposed to just how to do it.

These young workers also believe strongly in the concepts of collaboration and teamwork, but expect that the work they perform be meaningful rather than mundane. In short, they want to contribute in a material way despite the fact that they may lack practical experience in the tasks they are undertaking.

While many demonstrate non-traditional attitudes about their value to a business—especially an unwillingness to pay their dues the way prior generations have—the value they offer in terms of technical savvy, focus and a desire to succeed is worth an employer’s efforts to adapt to them.

As an Emerging Political Force

Having already witnessed the dot-com crash, terrorism, war, climate change, and devaluation of the U.S. dollar, Millennials appreciate the tenuous nature of the world that they are inheriting and are mobilizing to drive changes.

Savvy politicians recognize the strength that this group wields as a collective voting bloc, and many are now actively courting them as collaborators for change.

Obsessed with the need for stability and security, Millennials understand the power of social networking and are well prepared to leverage their strength for causes in which they believe. Political promises of change are insufficient. Instead, these young voters demand tangible demonstrations from candidates, together with the opportunity to participate in the solution.

Millennials have little to no faith in the current political establishment and firmly believe that they have the ability to ensure that necessary changes occur.

Millennials are our future, the way “baby boomers” represent the present and the post-war “builders” defined our past.

Millennials live in a dramatically different world than their parents and grandparents, so old forms of communication are not readily accepted. Communication strategies and tactics must change to attract the interest of this emerging community. Technology must be leveraged and messages must be clear.

How Do Millennials See the Future?

Millennials have learned to play video games and tackle other new technologies without reservation or fear, and see themselves as being uniquely skilled to mold their world into a shape that offers more promise and security than the one created by past generations.

A Different Mindset

Simply put, Millennials have a different mindset about the world in which they live. They are inherently more positive than negative and believe that they can and will make a difference in dealing with such global challenges as pollution, poverty and cultural conflicts.

They value team wins over personal victories (despite being accused by older generations of being self-entitled and self-expressive). And perhaps most importantly, they value taking action over speaking words. So, rather than debate who’s to blame, Millennials simply move to correct problems as quickly and effectively as possible.

What does this all mean for the future?

This techno-comfortable, information-sharing generation will accelerate the globalization of markets and investments by continuing to support emerging technologies and community learning opportunities.

Socially, Millennials will seek to expand the green movement further into becoming part of daily life. Every individual will be pressured to take action to fix the environmental abuses of prior generations.

In the political and legislative spheres, Millennials will intensify calls for unity and change for the good of the whole versus the benefit of a few. They are likely to challenge such traditional institutions as political action groups, industry lobbies and other centers of influence that they see as working counter to their objectives.

Strategies for Effective Communication with Millennials

Millennials have the ability to instantaneously share both good and bad experiences with others and can move popular sentiment at the stroke of a key.

Accordingly, effective communications—both in terms of the message and means of delivery—are of utmost importance for individuals, entities and industries that seek to interact commercially, politically or otherwise with this emerging power bloc.

The Message

For Millennials, the most effective messages are those that are open, honest and aligned with the issues that are most relevant in their lives.

Messages that promote the status quo are routinely dismissed due to this group's general dissatisfaction with the world they are inheriting and their demand for change.

Messages that offer an experience and allow Millennials to actively participate in defining the future—be it for a product, a service or otherwise—are well received and acted upon. Millennials want to experience life differently than predecessor generations and are positively influenced by communications that promote their view of what life should be and invite them to help define a “better” future.

The Delivery

As children of the digital age, who have never had to deal with a laptop not fitting into a backpack or an Internet-free world, Millennials use diverse forms of technology to communicate and consume information. Their comfort with email devices, Instant Messaging, social networks, open-source information databases and other forms of electronic communication make them barely responsive to messages delivered through other means.

Successful communicators with the Millennial set—whether companies or presidential candidates—utilize blogs, text messages, email, Twitter, YouTube, Podcasts and other electronic media tools to get their messages out.

For many, references to such vehicles (perhaps other than email) are unfamiliar, if not somewhat intimidating. In reality, however, these devices offer new and exciting ways to quickly convey information to others. In fact, data suggests that 30% of organizations expect that social media tools, including those described below, will significantly trim customer service costs in the future. And, 58% further recognize that using the Web and its tools to partner with customers, including the Millennial segment, will have significant positive impact on their business.

One of the most frequently used forms of on-line communication today are Blogs. These personal on-line journals can be accessed by others to view private commentaries on a virtually unlimited array of topics. In fact, more than 100 million blogs exist globally today and are readily located through standard searches engines like Google.

In a similar vein, Podcasts are vehicles used to proactively deliver constantly updated public content to on-line subscribers. According to recent surveys, more than 36 million Americans have already downloaded and consumed information from Podcasts via such programs as iTunes (Apple's music and video discovery/download service) or such websites as CNBC.

Google's recently acquired YouTube site hosts user-generated videos and other audio material, again for Web access viewing. Statistics reveal that 135 million Internet users in the U.S. alone already spend an average of 204 minutes a month each watching online videos. This represents a 66% increase over 2007.

Twitter, on the other hand, is an alternative social media service through which users stay connected with one another in real-time by answering a single basic question, "What are you doing right now?" And, through text or instant messaging, people similarly maintain on the spot communications by simply typing messages to one another.

In each of the instances above, communication is fast and relatively inexpensive compared to traditional means, and as such, is favored by Millennials.

As intuitively visual learners and efficient multitaskers, Millennials carry and utilize a collection of electronic communication devices to stay connected—from Blackberry's and iPhones to laptops. However, they are diligent in the way they filter out messages (e.g., spam) that have little or no relevance to them. So, while the means of delivery is critical to attract the attention of the Millennial, the message itself is of overriding importance. In essence, the message and the delivery mechanism must both be appropriate and compelling.