

The Generational Divide

PMM5 Postscript[™] Number 26

Background Information: Knowing the audience is a cardinal rule for savvy meeting managers. Only with a clear understanding of who is attending the meeting will a meeting manager be able to select the right venue, plan the food and beverage and, importantly create a program that resonates with the target audience. Sandra Strick is the author of Strategies to Embrace the Adult Learner in *Professional Meeting Management*[®], fifth edition (Chapter 18). In that chapter, she delves into:

- Characteristics of adult learners
- Adult learning principles
- Various learning styles (visual, kinesthetic, auditory)
- Elements of the learning environment
- Generational differences in adult learners

PMM5 Postscript[™] Use: This PMM5 Postscript[™] explores that last topic, generational differences, in more detail. Abundant information exists about the generational differences in the workplace. This issue will build on that body of literature and research to address the challenges these generational differences create in meetings. The PMM5 Postscript[™] also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Describe the generations.
- Identify events that influenced the generations values.
- Describe how the various generations view work and meetings.
- Compare and contrast how the different generations view teams and teambuilding.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 18, Strategies to Embrace the Adult Learner
Author: Sandra Strick, Ph.D.



Name your Generation

How are generations determined? There is no set range of birth years that determine a generation. People who bridge two generations and may show characteristics of both generations are also known as "cuspers." Strick identifies the following generations (Strick, 2006, pp. 253-257):

- **G1 Generation** born between 1901 and 1926. This generational is not actively represented in the workplace or meetings.
- **Silents** were born between 1927 and 1945 and grew up during war and reconstruction. Many in this generation worked for the same employer, or at least in the same field, their entire professional career. They thrive on stability, and are cognizant of rank and titles.
- **Baby Boomers**, born between 1946 and 1964, comprise a majority of today's workers. Most are team-oriented and driven individuals who work hard to further their career, raise a family and care for aging parents.
- **Generation X**, born between 1965 and 1981, are a vast contrast to prior generations. Often labeled as skeptical, they're independent and, unlike Boomers or Traditionalists, aren't afraid to switch jobs or careers several times in an effort to continue gaining experience and knowledge.
- **The Millennials** were born between 1982 and 1994 and are just beginning to enter the workforce. They are expert multi-taskers and are always looking to balance hobbies and volunteer activities with work.

The generations begin to "divide" over differences in values and experiences which affects their perceptions about everything — including meetings.

Value Alignment

How people react to life is very dependent upon individual experiences. Experiences shape and filter perceptions. Key events form the personality of a generation. These seminal events occur in early formative years before people reach adulthood and include world events, like wars, depression, economic prosperity; technological change; politics; and social norms like social equality and family structure.

Not every member of a particular generation will share everything in common with other members of that generation. However, the vast majority of a generation's members will possess many of the generations' overall traits, characteristics, and values. Use this list or others like it to find kernels of truth that foster understanding rather than simply continuing stereotypes.

Typically, each generation has the following values:

Silents

Dedication/sacrifice
Hard work
Law and Order
Delayed reward
Duty before pleasure

Baby Boomers

Optimism
Health and wellness

Personal growth
Youth
Work

Gen Xers

Diversity
Thinking globally
Balance
Self-reliance
Pragmatism

Millennials

Sociability
Morality
Street smarts
Diversity

Where the Divide Occurs

The ideals, values, traits, goals, and characteristics held by generations are increasingly different from one another. While generational differences have always existed, starting with the Baby Boomers, each generation now shares less in common with previous generations. And each generation is less interested in embodying or carrying forward characteristics of the previous generation.

Some of the common dividing characteristics include areas like:

- Communication styles and expectations
- Work styles
- Attitudes about work and life
- Comfort with technology
- Views regarding loyalty and authority
- Acceptance of change

Differences of opinion in these areas overflow into expectations about meetings and events. Meeting managers create more effective meetings by accommodating generational differences.

How Generations Meet

The workplace and expectations have greatly changed. The way the younger generations view work is vastly different from Baby Boomers and especially Silents. Consider a few differences which also impact expectations about the workplace and meetings:

- Structured vs. Flexible
- Job specific, clear delineation of duties vs. Many duties, cross training common
- Worker as instrument vs. Worker as human resource
- Labor intensive vs. Knowledge intensive
- Hierarchical vs. Participatory
- Education is completed vs. Life-long learning
- Focus on product vs. Focus on customer service

In each example, Silents or Baby Boomers work in environments promoting the first value. Whereas, Gen Xers and Millennials expect workplaces with the second attribute.

Meaningful meetings for the younger generation will:

- Be customized to their needs
- Increase their skills, knowledge — even though they do not expect to stay with the same organization
- Provide information quickly in a variety of formats and methods
- Contain a larger element of entertainment and be fun
- Include sources of knowledge not exclusively limited to management and experts
- Use technology as an integrated tool

Meaningful meetings for Baby Boomers and Silents are what meeting managers have been delivering! Broadcasting of information, often in a creative way, to generations accustomed to listening and absorbing a single feed. In addition, successful meetings are marked by:

For Silents

- Courtesy and respect
- Not overly combative and argumentative, but instead more analytical and inclusive
- An opportunity to gain training and skills that will enhance their value to the company

For Boomers

- Efficient, factual, accurate, and thorough; they want to know the “why” behind everything
- Visionary and bold, exploring new possibilities
- Social, with lots of human interaction

Bridging the different expectations is challenging. However, the truth about all generations is that no one likes to feel that they are not contributing or that a meeting did not answer the “What’s in it for me” question.

How Generations Get Informed

Different generations develop different learning styles and habits. Consider how differently generations grew up as it relates to their acquisition of information and entertainment:

- **Traditionalists:** Radio
- **Baby Boomers:** TV – all 5 channels!
- **Gen X:** PCs, multiple channels of TV including programming specifically focused at their generation, games
- **Millennials:** Integrated computers through the Internet, access to vast amounts of information
- **Generation Z (those born after 1995):** Customized information and entertainment (i pods), text messaging, instant messaging, instant access to people (cell phones)

The learning styles and habits of younger generations have been strongly affected by their use of technology. Mark Prensky, in *Digital Game-Based Learning*, calls the younger generations the Games Generation. He notes the Games Generation’s (Prensky, 2000):

- Need for speed
- Need for connectivity

- Need for activity
- Capacity to randomly access and parallel process a variety of information simultaneously.

The Games Generation (and younger people) possess a comfort with technology, especially computers and the Internet. And in meetings they respond better to information given at a quicker pace, containing a high level of interaction and providing choices and options. Robert Throckmorton, co-founder of Strategic Human Resources, states, "Especially with the Y generation [also known as Millennials], this cohort is used to more entertainment and technology and bells and whistles" (Dolezalek, 2007).

Baby Boomers and Traditionalists approach information logically and in a linear fashion. They are accustomed to hearing information from a reliable authority. They grew up reading information.

Boomers are on a quest of personal growth. They also seek information for personal gratification. Traditionalists learn because it will help their company. They are the last generation to operate in that paradigm.

Savvy meeting managers will insure that meeting messages are sent in various ways to appeal to all generations.

How Generations Team

A paradox of teams is that the more diverse a team is the better the resulting decisions. Also true, the more diverse a team, the more difficult it is for people to function as a team. So while diversity promotes better decisions, the same diversity challenges team dynamics.

Effective teams, including those with members from different generations, will value different views, encourage active listening, decrease ambiguity among team members' roles, support the sharing of expertise and share recognition and appreciation. The different "views" that may come into play on a team including the following:

- **Traditionalists:** Respect authority, adherer to rules, prefer explicit direction and value conformity
- **Baby Boomers:** Are team oriented, look to build consensus, believe in a participatory process and value involvement
- **Gen Xers:** Are informal, pragmatic, are not consumed by work or winning and value informality
- **Millennials:** Are optimistic (like Boomers), focused on end results and achievement (not necessarily the process), have a global senses of duty and value autonomy.

Whether forming teams to brainstorm or solve problems, executing a teambuilding experience or attempting to get everyone on the same page during a meeting, these different viewpoints affect how groups perceive:

- Rules
- Established processes
- Change
- Non-verbal cues — Boomers are the "show me" generation and body language is important. Younger generations communicate more readily rely on communication mediums that don't contain any non-verbal cues (email, text messaging).

- Sharing of information
- Stereotypes — One generation may typify another teammate as being self-absorbed, negative, cynical, rigid, or impatient

Without generational awareness, intergenerational teams can easily become de-railed. Plan accordingly and use generational knowledge as a way to foster more knowledge about each generation as well as build better teams. Ask all team members to:

- Know their assumptions. Be mindful of how assumptions influence interactions.
- Avoid generational jargon. Speak in plain terms and avoid idioms that are not widely understood.
- Appreciate the strengths. Instead of harboring frustration over differences, focus on the positive attributes.
- Get to the bottom line. Like all difference, generalizations about generational differences should be used only as guidelines to help you understand what might be preventing understanding. The goal should be to move from general categories to forming an understanding of the people themselves.

Summary

We live in a world marked by globalization. The United States' population is extremely diverse. This diversity encompasses several characteristics including:

- Ethnic diversity
- Cultural diversity
- Gender ratios
- Age distribution
- Physical capabilities
- Experience

Understanding the audience from a generational perspective is one way to create more compelling and effective messages through meetings and events. Meeting managers should keep the audience in mind whether planning the agenda behind the scenes or for anyone who will be in front of a diverse audience.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. For each generation cite 3 – 5 seminal events that impacted that generation. For example, the Vietnam War affected Baby Boomers.
2. Language affects our reality. Many people know what it means to go "clockwise" around the table to introduce ourselves at meetings. Traditionalists, Boomers and Gen Xers know about analog clocks (clocks with faces). Millennials inhabit a digital world where clocks don't have hands. They may not know what "counterclockwise" means. What other language differences exist between the generations? Cite terms, concepts, slang or lingo that varies for each generation.

3. Continuing to build on the clock example in question number two, digital clocks provide more precision. Think about how different people would respond to the questions "What time is it?" Would they say "about 20 minutes to 12." or "It's 11:42.?" A younger generation accustomed to digital clocks expects precision and up-to-the-minute information. How does this expectation impact meetings?
4. Discuss issues that a meeting manager must consider when planning a meeting accommodating three generations in the following areas:
 - Handouts
 - Presentation materials
 - Technology available on site
 - Furniture in overnight rooms
 - Room amenities
 - Registration processes
 - Marketing materials
 - Start and end times
 - Use of humor
 - Social interaction

References

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