



PRINTtips



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Communicating Across the Generation Gap

Did you know that there are now six generations interacting with businesses and organizations as purchasers? Whether you call them customers, clients, donors, investors, subscribers, or any other name, each generation was shaped by what was going on in the world during their childhood and teenaged years. Those events influenced each generation's thinking, including the values they hold, their expectations for behavior, and the way they like to communicate. And this has implications for crafting a marketing message and approach.

The Generations

According to leadership coach Bea Fields, president of Bea Fields Companies in North Carolina and co-author of *Millennial Leaders: Success Stories from Today's Most Brilliant Generation Y Leaders*, here is an overview of each generation:

GI Generation – birth years 1901-1924

- **Significant world events:** World War I, Roaring 20s followed by Great Depression; birth of Boy and Girl Scouts; invention of vitamins; changes in telephone use (telephone calls made using an operator until about 1911 when rotary dial telephone became commonplace; first transcontinental telephone communication).
- **Characteristics:** achievers, believers, inventors



- **Values:** simplicity, uniformity, cooperation, leadership, saving the world
- **Communication preferences:** face-to-face, rotary dial telephone, handwritten letters
- **Communication obstacles:** e-mail, FAX, cell phones, texting, social networking

Traditionalists – birth years 1925-1945

- **Significant world events:** Great Depression; war (World War II and Korean War); G.I. bill; teletype service initiated
- **Characteristics:** waste not/want not, loyal, patriotic, faith in institutions, hierarchical thinking

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“Communication preferences: face-to-face, formal typed or handwritten letters”

“... social networking, blogging, texting, technophobia”

“... expanded technology via computer use...”

- **Values:** logic, loyalty, discipline, tradition, family, leaving a legacy
- **Communication preferences:** face-to-face, formal typed or handwritten letters
- **Communication obstacles:** e-mail, FAX, cell phones (use for emergencies only), texting, social networking

Baby Boomers – birth years 1946-1964

- **Significant world events:** Vietnam War; move to suburbia; color television; street drugs; assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King; civil rights protest and movement; Woodstock; touch telephone; first video phone
- **Characteristics:** hard working, keeping up with The Joneses; idealistic; questioning authority; climbing the corporate ladder; highly competitive; the first “me” generation
- **Values:** hard work (70-hour work weeks), getting ahead, being noticed, becoming famous, money, freedom, being “me”
- **Communication preferences:** telephone, face-to-face, FAX, e-mail (lots of it), group/team meetings, cell phones (for talking, not texting), neighborhood street parties
- **Communication obstacles:** social networking, blogging, texting, technophobia

Generation X – birth years 1965-1978

- **Significant world events:** expanded technology via computer use; dot.com boom and bust; Sesame Street; beginning of “melting pot” syndrome; AIDS epidemic; climbing divorce rates; latch key syndrome kids; MTV; first cellular phone; Apple and Microsoft as tech giants
- **Characteristics:** “reality bites”, skeptical of higher institutions, cynical about marriage and life, fiercely independent, questioning everything, tech savvy, globally concerned
- **Values:** independence, freedom, friends, mobility, security
- **Communication preferences:** to choose

the communication method and frequency, e-mail, cell phone, texting, blogging, instant message, online forums

- **Communication barriers:** face-to-face communication, formal letter writing, team discussion (prefer one-on-one), difficulty communicating up or down a generation; some barriers with social networking

Generation Y – birth years 1979-1997

- **Significant world events:** September 11; high speed Internet access; overnight delivery; the Information Age; You Tube; “everything and anything goes” pop culture; helicopter parents and birth of self-esteem movement; Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings; cell phone mania; invention of Facebook, and other online social networks
- **Characteristics:** open and accepting of diverse backgrounds, very concerned about social and global issues, worldly, knowledge workers, team players, multi-taskers, “me”, impatient, need for speed and thrills
- **Values:** live first/work second, speed, information/knowledge, friends, fun, saving the world, creativity, simplicity, balance
- **Communication preferences:** texting, online social networks, e-mail (only for work and school), instant message
- **Communication obstacles:** face-to-face, telephone, professional or even casual letter writing

Generation Z – born after 1997

- This is the rising generation. Not yet adults, Gen Z has not yet been profiled. Generation Z has never known life without the Internet, computers and mobile phones and because of this, they are used to instant access and satisfaction. They are being given cell phones at an early age, making their primary means of communication texting, online communities, and social media.

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Since generations repeat themselves after 80 years or four generations, some demographers believe this generation will look like the G.I. Generation. Generation Z will be shaped by the current recession which will likely make them frugal, socially conscious and value integrity.

Using generational preferences for marketing

Today's communications technology enables marketers to pick from a number of tools to reach customers, including telemarketing, direct mail, opt-in e-mail, and messages to mobile devices. By understanding the communication preferences of generations, you can select the method your target audience is most likely to prefer, as well as tailor content to each generation.

But be aware that each generation blends into the next, meaning that preferences exist on a sliding rather than absolute scale. What this means is that the best strategy is to be proficient at all forms of communication.

- Don't neglect personal and business correspondence. The GI Generation, Traditionalists and early Baby Boomers value letters, both handwritten and typed.
- Don't abandon the telephone. The GI Generation, Traditionalists, Baby Boomers and Gen X still use the telephone. Just remember to call Gen Xers on their cell phones.
- Become comfortable with face-to-face communication. Only Gen X and Gen Y are truly uncomfortable with face-to-face conversations.
- Become comfortable with technology. E-mail, blogging, text messaging, instant message, Facebook and Twitter are here to stay.
- Learn how to speak in public. There will be times when a public speech is necessary. Think of the "elevator speech", a 30-second description of who you are and what you do.



And if you are very comfortable with new communication technology, remember that most of your target audience may not be. As evidence, consider research published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in July 2011. Author Aaron Smith reports that although 83% of American adults own cell phones, only 42% of those are smart phones, which translates to 35% of cell phone users. Smart phone adoption is highest among Americans between ages 18 to 44.

How we can help

If you are struggling with all this new information, know that you are not alone. Since our job is to help our customers communicate with their customers, we've been studying generational differences for a while.

We haven't abandoned print because it is still valued by the GI Generation, Traditionalists and Baby Boomers. But we've added additional services such as web site creation and administration (both desktop and mobile), and we're using social media for our marketing to develop our skills. Even more importantly, we have learned how to modify a marketing message so it will have appeal across generations.

If you would like more information about putting our expertise to work for your business or organization, give us a call. It will be our pleasure to help you learn from our experience.

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Generation Y



*"A score of 51 or
higher means the
chances are better
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Generation Y, sometimes called The Millennials, currently is the youngest generation to emerge as customers and workers. Born between 1979 and 1997, they are now in their late teens to early 30s and are predicted to be the next big generation. They were raised in a consumer economy using the tenets of the self-esteem movement where everyone won and everyone got a medal. They are predicted to share many characteristics with the GI Generation (sometimes called The Greatest Generation).

In 2010, the Pew Research Center developed a 14-question quiz to predict how closely a person's values, attitudes and behaviors resemble the typical Millennial. A score of



51 or higher means the chances are better than 50-50 that there is a match.

If you would like to take the quiz, it is available online at <http://pewresearch.org/millennials/quiz/>.