Generational Perceptions:
Workers And Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Today's workers and consumers consist of four generations of individuals raised with very different technologies and lifestyles. How does this affect attracting and retaining individuals as workers or consumers? Generational differences of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y may influence their values and preferences. Why will understanding these dissimilar perceptions be important? According to Murphy (2007), "different perspectives on issues like work ethic, leadership, and authority can cause conflict, frustration, and misunderstanding if not managed well" (p.18). In a recent "World of Work Survey" (2008), the older and younger generations noted little or no interaction with the other. This is not conducive to a cooperative environment where working with and learning from one another can be vital. Understanding what appeals to the generations as consumers is also critical for organizations. Targeting specific generations for their preferences and reaching them through media that is suitable to their style is an important marketing trend (Marconi, 2001). Customizing for these dissimilar cohorts will require knowledge of their particular attitudes and inclinations. Understanding these different perceptions will enable improved communications for the workforce and the consumer. This paper seeks to clarify some of these differences.

Keywords: Generations, Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Workers, Consumers

INTRODUCTION

Generational Perceptions: Workers and Consumers

oday's workers and consumers consist of four generations of individuals who were raised with very different technologies and lifestyles. How does this affect attracting and retaining individuals as workers or consumers? Generational differences of individuals may influence their values and preferences (Smith & Clurman, 1997). According to generational theorists, people who have experienced similar environmental conditions, such as political events, economic situations and technological changes, will have related outlooks (Marías, 1970; Smith & Clurman, 1997). This paper will clarify some of these differences.

Generations at work

Traditionalists

The oldest cohort of workers are Traditionalists born before 1946 and are described as dutiful and loyal (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Smith & Clurman, 1997). They were raised through world wars, rationing and radios. Most came from homes with the father as the only breadwinner while the mother stayed at home (Hill, 2004). This hard working and formal group are noted to be "slow to embrace anything new," and distrustful of any change (Williams, 2002, p. 3). There are 12.5 million still working and they account for 8% of U.S. workforce (Murphy, 2007). For Traditionalists, work was not considered a way towards self-fulfillment, just a necessary means to earn money (Smith & Clurman, 1997).

Baby Boomers

Born from 1946 – 1964, Boomers had good economic times, television, civil protests and Vietnam. Unlike their Traditionalist parents who held jobs for life, Boomers wanted to find their own way and willingly changed jobs or created new businesses (Marconi, 2001). They are said to value being seen at work and working with others (Hicks & Hicks, 1999). Many equate work with self-worth but may also be "shifting their value of money and things to the value of time" (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 83). Some may fear technology and need strong encouragement and clear instructions to learn new skills (Hendrick, 2005). It is speculated that recent economic downturns will put off Boomers' retirements and keep them in the workforce (Beinhocker, Farrell, & Greenberg, 2008).

Generation X

This generation, born 1965 -1980, is the first generation of workers who are computer literate, most having used technology since grade school (Losyk, 1997). Brought up with MTV and video games, these latchkey children of hard-working Boomer parents were independent at an early age (Tapscott, 1999). This may have affected their desire for freedom and autonomy in the workplace (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002) and flexible work schedules (Cordeniz, 2002). Accordingly, Gen Xers "struggle to understand why it's so important for someone to see … if they are getting the work done satisfactorily" (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p.114).

Generation Y

The newest workforce generation, born from 1981- 2000, has been raised during years of exceptional wealth in the United States. Generation Y, according to generational researcher and consultant Cam Marston (2005), "feel entitled to life's rewards without paying their dues" (p. 93). Their school and social experiences have been guarded and strict. Many of Generation Y shifted from supervision at school to adult supervised activities and have had less free time than any other generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They are said to have "helicopter parents" who hover over them (the over-involved Boomer parent) (Sacks, 2006).

According to a generational comparison of workplace attitudes, Generation Y, "want total flexibility in how they operate" (Harris, 2005, p. 48). This techno-literate group may require a "new flexibility, multi-tasking, running numerous projects or programs concurrently, and working with different people" (Alch, 2000, p. 6). They prefer to learn through multimedia presentations (Nicholas, 2008). They download podcasts and music, can take photos with their phones and text message one another in their created messaging language (McCasland, 2005; Nicholas & Lewis, 2008). They are accustomed to relating and collaborating with others through technology and "may be intolerant of those who are technologically challenged" (Murray, 2004, p. 106).

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Outlook	Practical	Optimistic	Skeptical	Hopeful
Work Ethic	Dedicated	Driven	Balanced	Ambitious
View Of Authority	Respectful	Love/Hate	Unimpressed	Relaxed, polite
Leadership By…	Hierarchy	Consensus	Competence	Achievement, pulling together
Relationships	Self-sacrifice	Personal gratification	Reluctance to commit	Loyal, inclusive
Perspective	Civic-minded	Team-oriented	Self-reliant	Civic-minded
Turn-Offs	Vulgarity	Political incorrectness	Clichés, hype	Cynicism, condescension

Figure 1: Generational perspectives, Source: Raines & Ewing, 2006

Working together

Why will understanding these variations in perceptions be important for the workplace? According to Susan Murphy, Ph.D. (2007), "The generations have different perspectives on issues like work ethic, leadership, and authority "(p. 18) (See Figure 1). Interestingly, there are some similarities between Traditionalists and Generation Y, such as civic-mindedness, as many of the younger generation are familiar with volunteer work and are more socially responsible and concerned about community services (Allen, 2004).

These differences, though subtle, can cause conflict, frustration, and misunderstanding if not managed well" (Murphy, 2007, p. 18). In a recent "World of Work Survey" (2008), 66 % of Veterans (Traditionalists) and 51% of Boomers said they had little or no interaction with Gen Y colleagues. Similarly, 67% of Gen X and 71% of Gen Y workers said they rarely interacted with older workers. This is not conducive to a cooperative environment where working with and learning from one another can be vital.

The workplace will reflect these variations in attitudes. Management consultant and author Gregory P. Smith (2008) described the workplaces of the older generations, Traditionalists and Boomers, in comparison with the ones attractive to the Generation X and Y workers as shown below (see Figure 2).

Traditional workplace	New Generation Workplace
• Security from the institution	• Security from within
• Promotions based on longevity	• Promotions based on performance
• Loyalty to the organization	• Loyalty to the team
• Wait to be told what to do	• Challenge authority
• Respect based on position/title	• You must earn respect

Figure 2: Workplace comparison, Source: Smith, 2008

Identifying and understanding these expectations of the workplace will be a challenge that must be met by management. "When managers and coworkers do not understand each other's generational differences, tension increases and job satisfaction and productivity decreases" (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 65).

Generations of Consumers

Targeting specific generations for their preferences and reaching them through media that is suitable to their style is an important marketing trend (Marconi, 2001). Customizing for these dissimilar cohorts will require knowledge of their particular attitudes and inclinations.

Traditionalist consumers are said to be resistant to trying new products (Smith & Clurman, 1997). Many prefer sales by mail for reasons that include their disappointment with the loss of good customer service and their trouble with transportation. This makes catalog and television sales a natural fit for them. According to one study (Eastman and Iyer, 2004), Traditionalists of higher income levels will use the Internet for purchasing products online. Once financially conservative, they are now willing to spend money on themselves - even to splurge on now or never big-ticket items (Generational-Targeted, 2007). Traditionalists also represent 31% of domestic travelers with 53% of them retired travelers and 45% of them employed travelers. Group travel is often preferred by this cohort group. Their favored activities are shopping, visiting historic places and museums, attending cultural events and festivals, and gambling ("Executive summary," 2008).

Baby Boomer consumers have no time to read lengthy marketing efforts so you need to capture their attention in seconds, or lose them ("Generational- Targeted Marketing", 2007). Creating products, services and marketing methods aimed at this cohort, representing a large segment of the population, is a noticeable trend in the United States and many other countries (Coleman, Hladikova, & Savelyeva, 2006). Marketers target rich nostalgia

accompanied by music (Elvis, Beatles, Supremes, Temptations, Doors, etc.) and positive images of today without distancing other segments (Marconi, 2001). [Picture the ad with Dennis Hopper on the beach for Ameriprise Financial throwing away the book that would try to define the generation, stating that "dreams don't retire" and how he can't picture "you playing shuffleboard" to the tune of Spencer Davis Group's "Gimme Some Lovin."]

Boomer travelers are 45% of the domestic market and the biggest spenders. They think of travel more as a necessity rather than an extravagance, consider themselves as special and young (use the terms 'experienced' or 'educated' rather than 'mature') and will pay for luxury. They want interactive cultural, fun experiences in similar age groups with expert leaders. Their preferences can range from mentally and/or physically challenging activities to do-nothing spa pampering. Boomers want the research done for them so travel plans are quick, easy and convenient (Ross, 2007).

Generation X consumers demand an honest, straight-forward approach and expect you to deliver on your marketing promises ("Generational- Targeted Marketing", 2007). A marketing segment that was almost missed because of their angry persona - not to be defined by anyone, marketers finally profiled them as affluent outsiders, disdaining authority (similar to Boomers) and technologically well prepared. A segment that tends to hang out in groups, advertising geared towards couples is not a requirement. Loud music and fast images, however, are important (Marconi, 2001).

Many Gen Xers travel for business and have particular demands. Some of these are designer beds, flat screen TVs, gaming consoles (for power relaxation breaks), free high-speed wireless internet desks for working on laptops, DVD players, 24-hour fitness and business centers, fresh gourmet coffee, healthier breakfast options, pub-style social areas, luxury showerheads with plenty of water pressure and high thread count sheets (Florio, 2007).

Gen Y consumers have been influenced by brand-conscious Boomer parents since an early age and remain loyal. They associate brands with companies that stand behind their products and it gives them important peer recognition ("Generational- Targeted Marketing", 2007). They prefer brands identified only with them such as Phat Farm, Mudd, Enyce, Paris Blue and In Vitro. Not as cynical as Generation X, they enjoy logo-imprinted clothing and accessories from their own music, films and brands (Marconi, 2001).

Gen Y already account for 9% of business travelers, a sizable 75 million portion. Like their closest cohort, Generation X, they have some similar wants and then some. Multi-use lobbies, WiFi chairs, and check in pods that allow clerks to step out and interact are being designed for hotels to attract this group. In their rooms they want flat screens that hook up their laptop or iPod to watch movies or rehearse their PowerPoint presentations, beds facing a window, brick walls and concrete floors. Some hotels are even catering to entertaining this interactive cohort by hiring staff members that can double as writers, dancers, and artists by night (vanDyk, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Generational attitudes have a strong influence on the perceptions of people in the workplace and as consumers. Understanding generational likes and dislikes will help recruit, train, retain and motivate workers as well as attract and persuade consumers. The educational world also must consider the generational differences for students as consumers and collaborators. The expectations of students from various experiences is as important as knowing how to sell to different segments. Traditionalists and Boomers may need additional encouragement with technical matters. Wagshal (1997) noted to teach Gen Xers with short bits of information. In Oblinger and Oblinger's "Educating the Net Generation" (2005) topics including communication, technology, virtual work spaces, access to CD/ Internet study guides and designing curricula for Generation Y are discussed. Whether education, management, or sales, clearly, a knowledgeable picture of the generations will be instrumental in many areas of life. This paper identified some of the differences of the generations and how it affects their opinions. "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." ---- Henry Ford

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. A.J. Nicholas is a full time faculty member of Salve Regina University teaching undergraduate courses in Management including Organizational Behavior, Business Communications, and Business Research. Dr. Nicholas also teaches a undergraduate and graduate Human Resources classes on campus and an online version. Research interests include generational studies focusing on Generation Y, work/life balance, teleworking and service learning.

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NOTES