

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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Talking About My Generation: *Internal Communications that Motivate*

The vast majority of us are probably glad to see 2009 sailing off into the sunset. 2010 brings a fresh start for businesses, including some promise for the beginning of a real recovery. The new year also heralds another big change. The flow of Generation Y into the workforce will accelerate into a mass influx, peaking over the next several years, which will bring their numbers to rival those of Baby Boomers in most organizations. This employee infusion will create the most generationally diverse workplace in history, forcing professional communicators to carefully adjust internal communications strategies.

Definitions of the scope of this group vary, but generally encompass those born between 1980 and 2000. In a sense, this creates a situation where Baby Boomers will be theoretically managing or sharing leadership responsibilities with their own children, also known as Echo Boomers – a potent mix of two massive groups. Sandwiched in between are Gen X'ers, a smaller cluster of employees whose careers were launched during a period marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of the computer age.

To this generational melting pot, add one more group, courtesy of the poor economy: Generation U, as dubbed recently by *BusinessWeek*. Generation U is the "un-retired", those who either need to work due to a depleted investment portfolio or have realized they still want to work.

As the broader economy continues to recover, communications executives will need to shape internal messages that appeal to all four groups. Integrating these disparate individuals into an effective, cohesive workforce will take understanding, ingenuity and, most of all, flexibility.

The Wave of the Future

The entry of Gen Y into business represents both the biggest trend and the one with the most obvious long-term implications. It's going to take awhile,

but Baby Boomers and Gen U are moving out. Gen X still has a fairly long career cycle, but the group's numbers are smaller, making its impact on the workplace more gradual.

Gen Y, on the other hand, is coming in numbers that will challenge the dominance of the Boomers. They are bringing thoughts, attitudes, perspectives and skills that have never been seen before. Many Boomers, X'ers and U's have learned, and even mastered, the new digital paradigm. However, Gen Y is the first group to whom the electronic age is second nature. It's the only world they have ever known. Their knowledge of the digital world is inherent and instinctual. It's their language and their cultural reference point. There are other factors that



American Cancer Society: Remembering Those in Need

Gibbs & Soell would like to take this opportunity to say thanks to clients, employees and associates and to remind everyone of this

special time of year -- a time when we reflect, hope, dream and set new goals.

Each year, Gibbs & Soell selects a charity and makes a holiday donation on behalf of its clients and employees. This year, we chose the American Cancer Society, the nationwide health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem through research, education, advocacy, and service. For more information on the American Cancer Society, log onto www.cancer.org



shape them, but this fact alone makes Gen Y perceive the world differently than anyone who has come before.

Who Are These People?

Before you get the idea that Gen Y is a bunch of pampered slackers, take a look at this evaluation by RainMakerThinking, a Connecticut-based research group that studies young people:

- **High expectations of self:** They aim to work faster and better than other workers.
- **High expectations of employers:** They want fair and direct managers who are highly engaged in their professional development.
- **Ongoing learning:** They seek out creative challenges and view colleagues as vast resources from whom to gain knowledge.
- **Immediate responsibility:** They want to make an important impact on Day 1.
- **Goal-oriented:** They want small goals with tight deadlines so they can build up ownership of tasks.

More than any other generation, Gen Y has been raised to believe they can be, do or have anything they want. They are also confident, communicative and connected.

Cross-Generational Communications

Both Gen X and, to an even greater degree, Gen Y view leadership as a collaboration. They aren't "yes-people" and they aren't predisposed to blindly follow someone else's vision. With Gen Y in particular, the expectation is that they will have meaningful input into the decision-making process. One major upside to this trait is that both Gen X and Gen Y are self-starters who can be trusted to work more independently earlier

in their career cycles. These attributes should appeal to Boomer leaders, who value work efficiency and know how to delegate effectively. Gen U employees who've left senior positions to start new careers at the functional level can play pivotal roles as advisers and negotiators.

The challenge in the near term is to manage and mix four generations. One way to do this is suggested by Jon Briscoe, associate professor of management at Northern Illinois University. In an interview with *Smart Business*, Professor Briscoe recommends what he calls "cross-generational mentoring."


Younger workers can learn a lot from the experience of their older colleagues. Older workers can learn about new technologies from younger associates. Instead of top-down mentoring, set up an environment where the generations can share information in a respectful atmosphere that honors everyone's place on the team. Both groups can share expertise in a way that fosters positive relationships and adds to the skill level of the whole company or department.

If there ever was a time for open, direct communications, it is now. Whether one's first concert experience was at Woodstock, Live Aid or on YouTube, the past year's gloomy news surely didn't sound like music to anyone's ears. Sharing the pain must be balanced with the common goal of working toward improvement and success.

As professional communicators charged with conveying critical business objectives, learn what motivates employees by asking questions like:

- What do you like and not like about working here?

- What inspires you to achieve?
- What leadership advice do you have for us?

Then, really listen to the answers, especially those from the newly inducted Gen Y. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Anna Quindlen observed: "The future will be grand because our kids will be its keepers... [This generation] is more interesting, more confident, less hidebound and uptight, better educated, more creative and, in some essential fashion, unafraid." 

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