

ASSOCIATION CONVENTIONS & FACILITIES

THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING PLANNING MANAGEMENT
Aug./Sep. 2009 Issue



The Gen Y Factor

Secrets To Attracting & Engaging 'New Age' Attendees

Breaking News

Other Publications

This Issue

On The Cover

By Karen Brost

News & Notes

Scout over, boomers. Glance over your shoulders, Gen Xers. Generation Y is starting to make its mark on the work force, and this tech-savvy, multi-tasking generation has a lot to bring to the table. The challenge for their managers and meeting planners is finding ways to keep them engaged so the organization can fully leverage their skills and enthusiasm.

Going Green

ViewPoint

Just Who is Generation Y?

Features

The answer to that question really depends on who you ask, but Generation Yers, or “millennials” as they are also known, are generally considered to be those born between the late '70s and the mid- to late '90s. Their numbers are impressive. Estimates put the size of this generation around 75 million, which puts them

Career Track

right on par with baby boomers. With numbers like that, it's hard to overestimate their potential impact on association membership.

Archives

Advertising

[2009 Editorial Calendar](#)

[2010 Editorial Calendar](#)

[2009 Rate Card](#)

[2010 Rate Card](#)

[2009 Web Ad Rate Card](#)

[2010 Web Ad Rate Card](#)

[Offices & Reps](#)

[Our Advertisers](#)

Services

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Subscribe](#)



Social networking was king at the ASAE 2009 Annual Meeting & Expo, where attendee Lindy Dreyer tweeted from the Volunteer Lunch.

Photo courtesy of ASAE & The Center

Storied (getstoried.com), has given presentations on Generation Y for ASAE members at the national and local levels. He is also author of the forthcoming book *Believe Me*, which he describes as "...a manifesto on storytelling for visionaries and entrepreneurs, with great relevance to any association in the midst of re-invention."

Some of the words Margolis uses to describe Gen Yers are optimistic, skeptical, tech-savvy, entrepreneurial, naïve, entitled and opinionated.

"As a society and an economy, we have gone through so many fundamental shifts in the last decade," Margolis explained. "This generation in many ways is like the poster child for a lot of these issues that organizations and associations are dealing with right now. They have to do with interpersonal relationships and communications...sort of the new way of doing business.

"Gen Yers are both incredibly tech-savvy and have a real pop culture sensibility," he noted. "Those two characteristics are places of real power and expertise for them. There's a huge role reversal where you have the young ones in the family who are the experts. They're hardwired for it.

"What that does is set the stage for a wide range of interpersonal dynamics as Generation Y enters the work force," he noted. "They want and expect to be treated as peers. They're incredibly social by their very nature. You hear a lot about tribal identities and the advent of social networking."

Letty Kluttz, manager of education for the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) in Alexandria, VA, described some of the ways she has addressed the topic of Gen Y in her educational programming. "One of the conferences where we have more Gen Y represented is our staffing management conference for recruiters and staffing professionals. This year we had two sessions. One was on retaining Gen Y and one was on recruiting Gen Y. Those were our two most highly attended sessions. It is something that is very pertinent to our membership."

Diane Thielholdt is co-founder of The Learning Café, an organization that specializes in solving issues relating to today's four-generation work force. Her Seattle, WA-based company recently completed a study entitled "Engaging a Changing Work Force: Study of Four Generations." The four generations they studied were the silent generation or traditionalists (1933–1945), baby boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1976), and millennials, or Generation Y (1977–1998).

Thielholdt offered some insights into millennials. "They were a very wanted generation of children," she said. "They've been very focused on. They've been paid attention to. One-third of them are only children. As a generation, they have been given the message that they can be anything they want to be or do anything that they want to do." She also noted that three out of five Gen Yers surveyed believe they can be president.

"They've had very high expectations for themselves, and they, in turn, have very high expectations of others," she stated.

Michael Margolis, a New York-based consultant, and president of Get

Margolis offered a note of caution, however, when trying to understand this generation. “These are huge generalizations and categorizations that you need to take with heavy grains of salt. We’re talking about some of the general patterns.”

Dues? What Dues?

While paying dues is certainly an important part of belonging to any association, Gen Yers aren’t interested in paying that other kind of dues. “Gen Yers believe in equanimity. They want to be treated like everybody else,” Margolis explained. “They are not interested in face-value judgments like, ‘Oh, well, you haven’t paid your dues yet.’” He explained that Gen Yers don’t care that you’ve been around 20 or 30 years, and they definitely do not want to hear people say, “You don’t know what sacrifices I’ve been through to get where I am, and you’re going to have to do the same thing.”

“There’s a real intolerance for that,” Margolis said. Thielfoldt agreed. “I would say that’s at the top of the list of things to not say (to Gen Yers). That gets a big red circle with a line through it. Those expressions are meaningless to them. At the same time, do they need to acquire some wisdom? Certainly.”

Margolis continued, “They see the complex world we live in and know there are a lot of challenges. Gen Yers are saying, ‘All right, let’s roll up our sleeves and let’s get to it.’ They’re looking for environments where they’re invited into the conversation.

“One of the lessons for a lot of associations today is that the actual solutions to the growing challenges are not simple,” he continued. “There’s no single party that has the answers. If you’re really going to look at systemic solutions within an industry or field, it actually requires bringing a wide range of stakeholders to the table and having these conversations. Even just an admission at an association leadership level that we don’t have all the answers is a huge first step.”

Keeping it Real

“What’s important for associations is the broader theme of authenticity,” Margolis explained. “Gen Y has a really high ‘BS’ radar. They read right through things. What Gen Yers are looking for is ‘Can I trust this messenger? Can I trust this association?’”

Thielfoldt stated, “For many of us who have stood in front of a group of people, we got a certain amount of respect and credibility simply because we were at the front of the room. That’s changed. It doesn’t really matter how many letters come after your last name or how many different titles you have. For





Michael Margolis
President
Get Storied
New York, NY

“They see the complex world we live in and know there are a lot of challenges. Gen Yers are saying, ‘All right, let’s roll up our sleeves and let’s get to it.’ They’re looking for environments where they’re invited into the conversation.”

Photo courtesy of Jason Lewis

millennials, it becomes about ‘What am I hearing that is beneficial to me?’ They want to be challenged, and they want to be stimulated.”

Telling Their Own Story

Gen Yers also bring a whole different style of learning to the work force. “They’re very multisensory in their learning styles,” Margolis noted. He explained how common it is for this generation to be listening to their iPods while they text message and watch TV. They have a desire to experience and take in information from multiple inputs. There’s a thirst for knowledge, but there’s also a thirst for bite-sized ways to communicate. “The other half of the equation is that Gen Y is what I call ‘the story generation’ because they live and breathe to tell their story,” Margolis explained. “The means of story production have been democratized. Between my blog, my digital camera, my Facebook profile, Photoshop and You Tube, if I have a story, there’s a million ways to get it out there. “There’s a huge opportunity for an association to use that theme of storytelling,” he continued. He suggested that association officials ask themselves, “How do we tell our story in a relevant manner for the age that we live in? How do we talk about the past, present and future in a way that shows continuity and in a way that shows the future is still unwritten?” Gen Y doesn’t want to be told what the answers are, Margolis said.

“It’s a fundamental shift in attitude,” he added. “There are a lot of organizations that are used to this paternalistic command and control. They need to represent the collective voice.”

Gen Y-Friendly Meetings

So how can planners take all of this insight into Gen Y and translate it into better, more effective meetings? “I would challenge them to really take this story theme even further,” Margolis stated. “Think of your events like a story. Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end.

“You want to start your story (event) in a way that people can orient themselves, and start to feel comfortable. As you take them into the middle of your event, you want them to self identify. You want them to feel that they belong in this story, and ultimately to come out the other end feeling like they have the opportunity to write the next chapter.” If they don’t see that opportunity, he noted, Gen Yers are more likely to pick up their ball and go play elsewhere.

Thielfoldt offered a number of factors to think about when designing a meeting or conference to attract Gen Yers. “Maybe you have to advertise in a different way. You have to have different offerings, different ways of engaging them when they get there. They’re very much about their peer group, so they may not be interested in being part of an association meeting where there aren’t people who look like them. One of the ways to appeal to them is to use their peers to do the promotion.

“It really comes back to how you recruit them,” she continued. “Are you recruiting them online? Is your Web site killer? Are you using technology? Are you e-mailing them? Are you texting them to stay connected? When you advertise and promote things, do you use the social networks as a way to reach them?”

Margolis cautioned that these tactics have to be well thought out. “What I’m not advocating is that we’ve got to be hip to Gen Y, so we have to get a Facebook page or launch something in Second Life (a 3-D virtual world). You can use them as effective tools, but you can’t confuse the tactic with the strategy. You have to start with the strategy. How can we become more relevant to members of all ages?”

Thielfoldt noted that a meeting that will appeal to Gen Yers will probably look different than traditional meetings. “They’re not interested in 450 PowerPoint slides. It’s not the firehose approach to downloading information. They have an action orientation toward learning. They want to be actively engaged. The meeting pace needs to be quick. Maybe even meeting schedules need to be rethought in terms of what’s the start time? What’s the end time? How are the breaks built in? How is technology part of the meeting?”

She also recommends keeping attendees moving. “Don’t keep them in their seats. Get them working together. Have dialogue groups, have interaction, use polling, use technology as part of the meeting. They’re impatient. You’ve got about 10 seconds to get their attention. That means whoever gets up there first has to be pretty darn good,” she laughed.

Immediacy Matters

SHRM has also taken the needs of Gen Y into consideration by changing the way they present conference materials. “We used to provide our presenters’ slides on CD in peoples’ conference bags when they arrived onsite at the conference,” Klutz noted. “Now we’ve moved that to an online experience so attendees can go online ahead of time and print out the slides that they want for the sessions they want to go to. That is certainly something Gen Y is used to. They want to have the immediacy. It’s much more user-friendly to them.”

Beyond The Wow Factor

“I think that this particular age group is looking for something fresh and new,” said Joe Wenke, managing partner of Xperience Communications, an event marketing company headquartered in New York.

Wenke stated that while using new technology can certainly add excitement, it still isn’t enough. “We have to tell a human story about how this will change their lives. You have to show the audience something that they’re not going to get anywhere else, which is a reason to attend your conference or meeting. You have to make that personal connection. How is it going to affect me, change my life, help me work smarter or connect better?”

Keeping Them Connected

“We’re increasingly trying to break down the barrier between the people on the stage and the people in the audience,” Wenke continued. “I think, and this is also true of Gen Y, that people are interested in participating and feeling connected. They’re not that interested in seeing the traditional talking head for 20 or 30 minutes. What we’ve been recommending increasingly to clients is instead of having the



Diane Thielfoldt
Co-founder
The Learning Café
Seattle, WA

“They’re not interested in 450 PowerPoint slides. It’s not the firehose approach to downloading information. They have an action orientation toward learning. They want to be actively engaged.”

traditional proscenium stage with someone standing behind a podium, let's have a kind of town-hall environment. Let's do theater in the round. Let's get the audience involved. Let's do questions and answers. What we're trying to get to is a more participatory experience where again there is some connection between what's being presented and the audience. They're not just being talked to." Wenke also explained that audiences have a higher expectation for the quality of communications due to their constant exposure to television, movies and the Internet. "One of the challenges that conferences have is that the speakers aren't always up to that level.



Joe Wenke
Managing Partner
Xperience
Communications
New York, NY

"You have to show the audience something that they're not going to get anywhere else, which is a reason to attend your conference or meeting. You have to make that personal connection. How is it going to affect me, change my life, help me work smarter or connect better?"

"It's important to work closely with the presenter," he said. "Find out what the presenter's strength is, and let them speak out of that strength. Sometimes it's being conversational, and not giving a speech." Wenke has even used actors to present some segments of the organization's message just to keep the audience engaged.

"What we try to do is structure a presentation around different moments that you can remember and relate to and create an experience that's different from one that you would get elsewhere. It needs to be engaging and visually stimulating. A presentation should, by and large, be limited to about 20 minutes," Wenke noted, "but within the 20 minutes, you might have four or five little vignettes that have an impact that keep the audience's attention."

Making it Even More Meaningful

Gen Yers are looking for meaning in other ways as well. "I would call them a giving generation," Thielfoldt said. "They've grown up with community service. They are interested in whether the organization or association that they're part of gives back. They're interested in whether you're green, whether you're about sustainability."

SHRM chose a member of Gen Y to head up its green initiative. "I think that generation is more attuned to it than any other generation," Kluttz stated. "That was also the impetus for putting our conference handouts online. We haven't provided paper handouts for years, and CDs are not exactly biodegradable."

Kluttz shared a few more examples of SHRM's green initiatives. "When we were in Chicago this past June, we donated all of our extra conference bags to schools. We also donated our signs, the poster boards, to an organization there that recycles them to schools so they can use them for art projects."

Engage Their Strengths

Thielfoldt strongly advises associations to tap into the skills of Gen Yers. "Their ability to use technology to mobilize, to make things happen, seems to me to be something that organizations need to pay very close attention to. They are very collaborative, and that's a great strength."

"They are driven by that social identity," Margolis said. "You do not want to ask them to do something by themselves. It's an important factor as it relates to events and meeting planners."

So, the question remains: Is there a danger to planners of focusing too much on the needs of Gen Yers

at the risk of ignoring the other generations? According to Margolis, the answer is “no.” “My argument is that if you can satisfy Generation Y and you do it in an authentic manner, you can satisfy everyone. They really are the new standard.” **ACF**

What Makes Millennials Tick?

In order for planners to connect with ‘new age’ attendees and meet their expectations, they need to get inside their heads. When The Learning Café conducted a survey of the four generations that comprise today’s work force, they wanted to find out two things. First of all, “What keeps you motivated, satisfied, or productive?” And secondly, “What causes you to disconnect, be unhappy or ineffective?” Here’s what they learned about Generation Y (also called millennials):

Gen Y’s four main motivators:

Challenging, stimulating and varied work. They want to work on a variety of projects that allow them to learn and use new skills rather than being assigned “grunt work.”

Pay. Their high self esteem gives them high expectations, and if they feel their pay is too low, they feel undervalued. As a practical matter, this generation may also be paying off school loans.

Career growth learning and development. Gen Yers, or millennials, need to know how the tasks they are being assigned now will fit into the “big picture” of their overall career.

Enjoyable work environment. This generation is all about interacting with their peers, so they don’t want to be isolated. They want their work environment to be fun.

Conversely, this generation is demotivated by four factors: boredom; a lack of respect or recognition; an inability to learn, grow and develop; and having a bad boss. “When talking about their boss, if they were going to change the name for that person, it would be ‘coach’ or ‘friend,’?” said Diane Thielholdt, cofounder of The Learning Café. “That gives us some insight into how they want to be managed. They want to be managed just as they were coached on the soccer field from the time they were five years old.” — **KB**