

generation



How To Manage, Market, And Motivate Them

They're your new employees, clients, donors,
and board members. Do you know what drives them?

BY MARK ANDREW MITCHELL AND ROBERT ORWIG

Coming on the heels of the well-known Baby Boomers (those born between 1948 and 1964), Baby Busters or Generation Xers represent 50 million people born between 1965 and 1978. Some demographers extend this period from 1961 to 1981 to encompass those with similar life experiences. If we use that broader classification, Xers outnumber Baby Boomers and have done so since 1980.

The Value of Contradiction

You can't learn anything important about people until you get them to disagree with you. It is only in contradiction that character is disclosed. That is why autocratic employers usually remain so ignorant about the true nature of their subordinates.

—Sydney J. Harris

Twenty-something bashing has become popular among Baby Boomers. Douglas Coupland referred to this as “clique maintenance”: the tendency of one generation to view the following generation as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego.¹ Remember, not too long ago the “generation gap” was the moniker attached by a pre-World-War-II generation to those of the Baby Boom.

Far from the difficult workers they're often portrayed as being, Generation Xers have valuable talents and perspectives to offer the nonprofit sector. To maximize those contributions, however, you must first understand who they are and how they view the world. Most problems between Xers and Baby Boomers are caused by disparate life views. Once you appreciate these differences and treat them with sensitivity, you can easily resolve most such conflicts.

It's always important, of course, to use caution when discussing generalities and stereotypes, and that's especially true with such a diverse and individualistic group as Generation X. Yet such generalities can provide insights, and the stakes in working with this generation are high. Let's take a closer look, then, at members of this younger generation and how best to work with them, market to them, and bring out the best in them.

Just Who Is Generation X?

The “X” in Generation X is a signature of a group that feels it has no identity—or at least none that anyone cares about. Borrowing its name from the title of Douglas Coupland's novel,¹ Generation X has been witness to a great deal of change. Busters grew up during the era of the Pill and legalized abortion, liberalized divorce, a drug epidemic, and new attitudes toward women and minorities.

Unlike generations before them, Xers haven't felt the responsibility of going to war. Nor have they had a war with which to identify. The lack of a unifying event such as World War II, Korea, or Vietnam may have stymied their evolution into a homogeneous group.

The thirteenth generation since the founding of the republic, it's the first generation to grow up with VCRs and video games. Gen Xers are technologically astute, having experienced computers at home and at school.

It's also the first generation to experience a dual-income household (with all the advantages and disadvantages thereof). Xers learned independence at daycare so they're used to being on their own. They're more comfortable with women and minorities in leadership roles since their mothers worked outside the home and they themselves are so racially diverse.

If attendance is the criterion, this is the best educated generation in United States history. A record 59% of high school graduates enrolled in college in 1988 compared to 49% a decade earlier. Unfortunately, only

24% of adults aged 25 to 29 hold bachelor's degrees, not much different from the 22% with such degrees in 1982.² It should also be noted that twenty-somethings seem to be pursuing education for pragmatic marketplace returns rather than the intrinsic value of education.

Research shows that Busters have more positive attitudes about the workplace than either Baby Boomers or the "Silent Generation" (50 and over). More than any other group, Xers report that activities at their workplaces are well coordinated and well managed.³

Xers seek work under different assumptions than prior generations. In *Managing Generation X*, Bruce Tulgan describes a group isolated by cultural factors beyond their control. This group rejects traditional work patterns. Their parents believed it was necessary to "pay your dues" by putting in time that would pay off in the long term. Xers don't agree. They want to see results now. If they invest anything of themselves, it's only for the short term. Yet they want their investment

to pay off in dividends which will help them pursue "a new self-based career security."⁴

Resentment, Rebellion, or Realism?

Resentment, rebellion, and realism are three words commonly associated with Generation X. There's some truth to all three:

Resentment: Busters resent being saddled with (what they believe to be) the outcomes of irresponsible behaviors by previous generations: a cumbersome national debt, America's declining global competitiveness, environmental issues, racial strife, homelessness, AIDS, and divided families.

Further, many Busters believe that Baby Boomers are getting a "much better deal" than their generation will receive. This well-educated group enters the workforce

HINTS FOR WORKING WITH XERS

- Point them in the right direction, then get out of their way.
- Give them proof that you and your organization are reliable and trustworthy.
- Make their assignments interesting and meaningful.
- As much as possible, act as their partner or mentor, not their boss.
- Earn their respect by being fair, competent, and consistent.
- Build a rich information environment, and provide plenty of feedback.
- Give them short-term projects with clear-cut goals.
- Don't just tell them what is going to happen. Tell them why.
- Tap into their interest in computers and sophistication about information technology.
- Spend time one-on-one with them, but be sure it's quality time. Xers hate the idea of "face time" or simply "getting your card punched."
- Give them a chance to help others and "make a difference."
- Avoid stereotypes and cultural insensitivity.
- Adopt a team approach, in which all employees have input into decisions that affect them.
- Be open, honest, and accountable for your personal actions and those of your organization.
- Use a participatory rather than authoritarian style.
- Treat each person as an individual. Remember that no one strategy will work with all people, regardless of their generation.

at a time of great downsizing of traditional entry-level positions and limited promotional avenues for their skills (unlike generations before them). Generation X may be the first group in U.S. history unable to achieve a higher standard of living than their parents. They resent having opportunity seized from their grasp.

Rebellion: Frustrated by bleak economic and career prospects, Xers have spurred a rebellion of sorts. The “battleground” is today’s workplace. The targets of their hostilities are their Boomer managers and co-workers.⁵

Realism: Most Xers have a pragmatic approach to life. They view their role as renovators of the American dream. They reject material possessions in favor of intangibles—a rich family or spiritual life, a rewarding job, the chance to assist others, and the opportunity for intellectual enrichment. They see their work as a vehicle to provide for leisure, family, lifestyle, or experiential learning. It is this practical outlook and refocusing of values which may, in fact, turn out to be their strongest asset:

“Maybe the twenty-something generation does have trouble making a decision or a statement. Maybe they are just a little bit too cynical when it comes to the world. But their *realism* may help them keep shuffling along with their good intentions, no matter what life throws at them. That resignation leaves them with no illusions to shatter, no false expectations to deflate. In the long run, even with their fits and starts, they may accomplish more of their goals than past generations did.”⁶

Managing Generation Xers

If you haven’t yet encountered Generation Xers in your paid or volunteer workforce, you soon will. Xers will be a major force in the nonprofit sector for years to come.

The question is: *Will this force be disruptive or will it fuel your organization into the next century?* Effective management of this group will be critical to your organization’s future. Some suggestions:

Prove Your Competence.

Generation Xers tend to be cynical, especially about workplace performance. They suspect their senior colleagues of playing politics, protecting the status quo, and withholding information. Before they trust a co-worker, they need proof of credibility. They’re quick to spot hypocrites and view them with contempt.

Thus, the most critical factor in motivating Xers is to be competent yourself. You must have a strong self-image based on knowledge and skill. Part of such strength is recognizing and being open about your

imperfections. Xers will respect you for admitting your weaknesses as long as they sense your underlying capability.

Make It Interesting.

To motivate the Generation-X volunteer or paid employee, you must provide interesting, meaningful work. This computer-literate, information-savvy generation has the ability to process data more rapidly than other groups. You can use these skills best by challenging them with interesting assignments, giving them the tools and training they need, and then allowing them the “space” and latitude to succeed.

XERS HAVE VALUABLE TALENTS AND PERSPECTIVES TO OFFER THE NONPROFIT SECTOR.

Give Good Reasons.

Put effort into carefully explaining expectations and boundaries *before* the Xer begins a project. Xers want to be left alone to accomplish the assigned task, but they want to know *why* they’re doing it.

Focus on Relationships.

Perhaps more than any other group within the organization, those fresh from college require a strong relationship-based approach. The Generation Xer, though independent, still thrives under close relational contact. While not rejecting authority per se, Xers expect to work in a participatory environment and in partnership with their supervisors.

Linda Potter, a management specialist for Wendy’s, warns that managers must interact far more with Xers than they’re used to doing. Though they like to work alone and hate to be scrutinized, Xers crave personal attention and feedback from managers. In fact, it has been suggested that what Generation Xers really need is a surrogate parent.

Being a parent may be going too far, but do act as a caring mentor rather than a boss. Show your Xer employees that you care about them and their personal life. Be careful (especially if you’re a Baby Boomer) that they don’t see you as rigid or self-absorbed.

Be Fair.

As you manage Generation Xers, be sure to enforce behavior codes consistently. Xers become discouraged if

CHEAP & EASY RECOGNITION SECRETS

Here are some ways to provide the feedback Generation Xers crave:

Brag Time: Allow time during meetings for managers to brag about the job employees did on specific projects. Make staff meetings celebrations of success.

Congratulating Memos: Write employees personal notes of congratulations for excellent performance.

Mentors: Ask employees to serve as mentors for new employees.

Bright Ideas: Encourage employees to present their ideas or program possibilities to management.

Ask Employees: Ask employees how you can best show your appreciation. What recognition would they like from you?

And remember these “Four Rs” to help motivate Generation Xers:

Reason: Explain the “why” in your policies and practices.

Responsibility: Give them the power to act.

Relationship: Allow the opportunity to interact with others.

Recognition: Give specific feedback that is valued by the employee.

More secrets can be found in *101 Recognition Secrets: Tools for Motivating & Recognizing Today's Workforce*, available at local bookstores and through Performance Enhancement Group, 301-654-8449.

managers put up with continued poor performance by anyone or show capricious, inconsistent behavior.

Provide Targets.

With a high need for instant gratification, Xers do best with short-term projects. They also like to work toward attainable, measurable goals. Break large undertakings into smaller activities to give them lots of successes.

Improve Team-Building Skills.

Generation Xers are highly individualistic and diverse—ethnically, culturally, and attitudinally. Teams are an excellent way to draw upon the full range of their differences. Xers are especially suited to the participatory, community-building nature of teams.⁷

Handle Fringe Members Carefully.

Some people in *any* generation have poor work habits, lack loyalty, and have trouble assimilating into the group. How you handle this minority of your employees (in this case, the “fringe members” of Generation X) may be what sets you and your organiza-

tion apart with respect to good management practices. You must be able to handle these “non-conformers” effectively. Other employees will be judging your efforts.

Marketing to Xers

In addition to your Generation X workers, you need to pay attention to your Generation X clients and donors. When marketing your services or seeking dona-

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tions, target your message to Xers' special characteristics. Consider:

Ask Them to Get Involved.

Volunteer participation rates are higher among Xers than any other societal group. They have a strong interest in building a collection of meaningful experiences rather than an accumulation of tangible goods, and volunteering helps them do so. The best way to recruit young volunteers is simply to ask them; they're four times more likely to volunteer if asked, a recent report shows.⁸ You can also attract young volunteers by offering short-term assignments with flexible hours and clear-cut goals. Once they begin volunteering for your cause, they are much more likely to donate to it and support it in other ways.

Suggest Ways to Improve Life.

Xers disdain the excesses of the '80s and resent paying for the "sins of the past." They want to repair the situation they inherited from generations before them. Rather than change the world, they want to fix it. Thus, they're especially interested in such causes as improving the environment, reducing homelessness and racial conflict, mending broken families, helping people with AIDS, and bettering the quality of life. Show them how supporting your organization will address such issues and lead to a better, more worthwhile life for themselves and others.

Be Accountable.

Generation Xers are more concerned with accountability than other groups. They won't support a cause unless they're sure it's fiscally responsible. Keep meticulous records, and open them to public scrutiny. Provide proof that you use funds wisely.

Provide a Sense of Community.

This generation prizes friendship above all else. Give them projects they can do with their friends and family. Emphasize the friends they will make and the community they will build.

Go High Tech.

Give this computer generation plenty of ways to connect with your organization through e-mail and the Internet. Put information on the World Wide Web. Offer them ways to donate through the Internet and electronic funds transfer (EFT).

Be Sensitive to Diversity.

Tap into this group's diversity by making an effort to reach minority groups. Take care to avoid stereotyping and insensitivity to minorities, women, and people with alternate lifestyles. Develop listening and problem-solving skills geared to people from other cultures, and become adept at cross-cultural communication.⁹

The Final Challenge

Members of Generation X have much to offer your organization. They have the team-building, information-processing skills needed in today's workplace, and they're eager to make a difference in the world. They are energetic, philanthropic, and enterprising. As they make their mark on the American landscape, your ability to meet their needs will determine your success in the marketplace. Your challenge is to tap into their creativity, spirit, vitality, diversity, and idealism to improve your organization. ■

Footnotes

¹See Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

²Based on statistics compiled in March 1993.

³See *HRFOCUS*, 1995.

⁴From *Managing Generation X*, by Bruce Tulgan, CA: Merit Publishing Company, 1995.

⁵Note the article "Generational Tension in the Office: Why Busters Hate Boomers" by Suneel Ratan, *Fortune*, October 4, 1993, pp. 57-70.

⁶From *Time*, 1990.

⁷For more on team-building, see "Teams—the Essence of Quality," *Nonprofit World*, May-June 1995, *The Team Building Tool Kit*, and *The Compleat Facilitator*, available from the Society for Nonprofit Organizations (800-424-7367).

⁸This Independent Sector report is summarized in "Nonprofit Briefs," *Nonprofit World*, May-June 1997. Also see "How to Reap the Benefits of Youth Volunteerism," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1993.

⁹For tips on cross-cultural communication, see "Meeting the Challenge of Diversity," *Nonprofit World*, July-August 1992.

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