

Generation Y – challenge or opportunity

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Like many other sectors that attract lots of young people, PR is experiencing the trials and joys of a new generation - the so-called Generation Y. These twenty-somethings are challenging the way things are done and behaving in ways that leave their bosses and older colleagues lost for words.

Most managers these days are aware of the term 'Generation Y' (those born since 1980) who have been entering the workforce in the last few years. The common stereotypes bandied around are that they are demanding, over-confident, self-centred and spoilt. Whether you subscribe to that view or not, you will probably agree that this generation is making waves and providing a certain amount of challenge for managers and HR professionals.

We did a survey of HR managers recently and asked them if they saw Gen Y as a problem or an opportunity. A slight majority (52%) saw Generation Y as a problem, the rest viewed them as an opportunity. These are professionals whose job it is to find and keep great talent. So what could be the explanation for why 52% see them as a problem? Could it be explained by one of the following:

- They are hiring the wrong Gen Ys
- They are failing to help them to thrive
- They are judging them on their behaviour rather than their intentions (more on that later)
- They need to re-look at their ways of managing and their company culture

Whether you believe that Gen Y is a problem to be solved or an opportunity to grasp, they are here to stay and cannot be ignored. And what is more, you will undoubtedly have some Gen Y clients by now. Even more reason to get inside the heads of these people, understand them and find ways of working together productively.

We'll come back to this later.

First let's take a step back and look at why Generation Y is different.

Generational theory says that our age, experience and the conditions that we grew up in all shape us and influence our values and behaviour. For example, I was in my mid-to-late teens during the Winter of Discontent. I remember Thatcherism and 3 million unemployed. Most of the men in my family had had the same job for life. The conscious and unconscious messages I picked up about work were that it was scarce, when you got a job you damn well hung onto to it, you put up with filing and photocopying for the first year even

though you had a good degree and you certainly did not challenge authority.

Generation Y have grown up in a very different world, therefore inevitably their values and conditioning is different. They have grown up in good economic times and with the internet which has brought them the ability to connect and collaborate with people all over the world. They have experienced 'helicopter parenting' with parents who are very involved in all aspects of their life and decision making, and they have the confidence to believe that they have any number of possibilities open to them.

The result of all this for employers is a group of people who is not too concerned about respecting the hierarchy (they talk to who they feel they need to regardless of their position or status), who challenge assumptions and who want constant attention and feedback. It is easy to see why this is causing a certain amount of conflict in the workplace.

This true story illustrates how easy it is for conflict to arise between the generations. A young high-flier in an ad agency emailed the CEO to tell him that he disagreed with a decision that he had taken. The CEO responded immediately saying "I have run this company for x years and I think I know what I am doing". The young graduate replied by saying "I realise this is an uncomfortable conversation but I am not the only one who thinks this" And he went on to give reasons and rationale as to why he disagreed with the decision. The CEO, although he had always said he welcomed feedback, 'open-door' policy and all that, was indignant at receiving this email from this young upstart.

I spoke to the graduate and asked him what he was thinking about when he sent the emails. He told me that he thought the company was great, cared about it and didn't want to stay silent when he thought a mistake was being made. It did not occur to him that he may annoy his boss and their bosses by going over their heads and emailing the CEO direct. He did not know that the hierarchy and your status in it was such a big deal. He couldn't understand why he received such a terse reply from the CEO. I had to explain to him that this fifty-something boss grew up in a very different time when you didn't not challenge the boss. By emailing in this way he had spoken to the person not the position. Gen Xers and Boomers were conditioned into speaking to the position not the person.

This was a clear case of each person judging the other on their behaviour not on their intentions. And of not understanding the rules of the other's game.

Having worked in the field of organisational change for fifteen years I firmly believe that there are many assumptions and practices in the workplace that need challenging. And much of what Gen Y is challenging needs to be challenged. Like the idea that you have to speak to a position not a person and the 9-5 culture for people who really don't need to be in the office during those times.

So I would argue that they present an opportunity for companies – in fact if you are to understand and reflect your changing client demographic then Gen Y are your only chance of doing that. They can help you to understand the changing preferences of the young generation.

Of course there are people of all generations who don't work hard enough. But it is dangerous to stereotype them all in that way. Most of the young people I meet in my work are hard-working, they are more than happy to work long hours and at weekends when needed but expect some flexibility at other times, they are creative, energetic and have a lot to contribute. Sure they can be a pain because they are not afraid to ask the difficult questions and challenge the status quo. They also need an understanding and some guidance as to how companies operate and that their colleagues undoubtedly see the world differently. Each generation needs that understanding of the others if all of them are going to thrive. I am not arguing for pandering to Gen Y. I am arguing for more dialogue that creates understanding. And let's remember that it's the Boomers who have created Gen Y – their style of parenting has produced a confident generation who see few barriers.

The key of course is to create a workplace where all generations can thrive and do the best work possible. According to our global research, most of what Gen Ys want from work are also things that Xers and Boomers would quite like too but have been conditioned not to expect. Perhaps some of the consternation towards Gen Y is merely a touch of envy!

The challenge to the PR industry and all other sectors that employ young people is to make sure they hire the good ones, give them good leadership and create a culture where they thrive. Or as Steve Jobs said "a place where they can do the work of their lives".

This piece would be incomplete without a word on the economic downturn and what effect it will have on Gen Ys attitudes.

Some companies I speak to point out that they are keen not to repeat the mistake made during the last recession where cutbacks were made on graduate recruitment and development because they are still suffering from a resultant skills gap. The fact that the global talent pool is shrinking due to demographic changes means that they are even keener to keep investing in skills and to be seen to be doing so. As to whether tough economic times will change Gen Ys behaviour – our recent research suggests that Gen Y believe that talented people will always get jobs and their only behaviour change will be not to leave a job without having another lined up.

And of course their behaviour may change in the short term but fundamental values don't change.

My advice to managers now is to think of Apple or Google – they have created companies that respond so well to the new consumer and their changing preferences. Their leaders and culture nurture creativity and their business produces products and services that their customers want to buy. They understand their customers well because they employ people who are just like their customers.

Who are your customers and how are they changing? At least some of them will be Gen Y. Given that they are a generation that is less susceptible to and tolerant of PR messages I would argue that the PR industry needs Gen Ys more than many others do. How else will you stay relevant?

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