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# PRINTtips

## What Did You Say? Communicating Across Generations



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**B**usinesses and organizations engage in two kinds of communication: internal communications among staff members and external communications between the business and its customers and prospects. Both require selection of a communication style — the specific way the message will be delivered.

Much internal communication is between individuals or small groups in the work place, while external communication is usually to a large audience (though with enough personal data, an external communication can be crafted for a small group or even an individual). Individuals differ in how they receive and share information, shaped by how they prefer to process information — visually (seeing), aurally (hearing), kinesthetically (doing), or a hybrid of reading and writing. Interestingly, an individual's preference for sharing information may be different than his or her preference for receiving information.

When an individual is in a group (say, a participant in a meeting or part of the intended audience for a marketing message), then the individual's generation shapes communication preferences. Understanding these generational preferences is the basis of communicating effectively.

### The Generations

Generational theorists William Strauss and Neil Howe identified a recurring cycle of generations



in America dating from 1584. In the work place and for marketing products and services, three of the most recent are of greatest interest:

- **Baby Boomers, 1943 to 1960.** Born following World War II in a time of increased birth rates, Baby Boomers are widely associated with privilege, a redefinition of traditional values, and the sense that they are a special generation. Currently the oldest workers (retired or nearing retirement, though some will continue to work past retirement age), Baby Boomers value hard work and long hours. As a group, Baby

## What Did You Say? Communicating Across Generations (cont.)

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Boomers enjoyed peak levels of income and so have abundant resources. Baby Boomers can be divided into two subgroups: Traditionals (1946-1954) shaped by the sexual revolution, drug use, the civil rights movement, and feminism; and Generation Jones (1955-1964) whose members have a desire for material success.

- **Generation X (Gen X), 1961 to 1981.** Born after the post-WWII baby boom, Gen Xers were latchkey kids when younger (due to divorced, unemployed parents) and now are highly educated, active, balanced, happy, and family-oriented (belying the slacker, disenfranchised stereotype of youth in the 70s and 80s). In 2012, it was estimated that there were 84 million Gen Xers in the United States, ranging in age from early 30s to early 50s.

- **Millennials (Generation Y), 1982 to 2004.** Strauss and Howe are credited with naming this generation, which has a deep desire to make the world a better place by using existing institutions and building new ones. Generally optimistic, highly social, engaged and team players, and rather moralistic, Millennials are familiar with and use digital technologies and media for communication. However, it has been shown that these characteristics vary by region, social, and economic factors. Affluent white Millennials often exhibit markedly different characteristics from their ethnically diverse counterparts. Millennials have been criticized for believing that participation alone is enough to qualify for a reward and for having unrealistic expectations about the work place. Older Millennials are the youngest workers (early 20s), while the rest are still in school or are children.

Other older generations include the GI Generation (1901 to 1924; also called the Greatest Generation) who grew up during the Great Depression and fought in World War II; and the Silent Generation (1925-1942) who were born during the Great Depression and World War II and fought in the Korean War. These generations are now in their 70s, 80s and 90s. The youngest generation, not yet officially named

but sometimes referred to as Generation Z or the Homeland Generation, begins in 2005 and does not yet have an ending date. This generation is currently being born.

It is important to note that generational preferences are tendencies, not hard-and-fast differences. Early and late members of a generation usually show some variation, with early members showing tendencies of the previous generation and late members having tendencies of the next generation. Also, preferences may be less distinct or even different depending on ethnic and cultural diversity.

### Communication Preferences and the Generational Work Place

According to Paul Storfer, president of HR Technologies, generations have different definitions of the term communication skills. To a Baby Boomer, the term means speaking and formal writing ability, while to a Millennial it means e-mail and text messaging. Baby Boomers prefer hierarchal, rule-driven groups; Gen Xers prefer loose, “as-needed” groups; and Millennials prefer interactive, flat groups with lots of feedback and collaboration. This translates to the following communications styles:

- **Baby Boomers:** top-down, process-oriented where everyone knows what needs to happen. Office space with acoustic privacy and quality meeting spaces.
- **Gen Xers:** information on demand, where the only information shared is that which is relevant to an individual’s work. An engaging work place (fostering a feeling of belonging, ability to connect with others, welcoming environment) that is safe and secure.
- **Millennials:** interactive, to understand what’s going on, why decisions are being made, and to provide input. An engaging work place.

### Communication Style and Marketing

For marketing applications, it is important to use appropriate language and communication tools, ranging from handwritten letters to social media

## What Did You Say? Communicating Across Generations (cont.)

channels, for each generation. Here are some tips for effectively engaging each generation.

**Baby Boomers:** Though Baby Boomers have embraced communications technology like the Internet and mobile phones, they also still like face-to-face interactions. And because Baby Boomers are relationship- and team-oriented, they take the time to build rapport and show a personal interest. When making a presentation, keep it casual and conversational rather than formal. Allow time for questions. Ask for input. Use the phone or e-mail to set up face-to-face meetings and to follow up.

Baby Boomers still love direct mail (which was used heavily beginning in the 1980s) and print. They often use the Internet to conduct research prior to making a buying decision, so be sure your web site has objective information.

**Gen Xers:** This generation grew up with personal computers. Independent and self-motivated, Gen Xers approach communication less formally than Baby Boomers and rely heavily on e-mail. Gen Xers value directness, so be straightforward, get down to business, and avoid too much small talk. When making a presentation, begin by saying what you need or expect (the “bottom line”). Be well prepared. Ask how to move forward.

Gen Xers expect their involvement and action to yield benefits and will quickly leave if that is not the case. Their loyalty must be earned. Gen Xers use the Internet extensively, especially to conduct research. They use search engines intelligently so be sure your web site scores high in search engine optimization. Because this group is very busy with family and work, Gen Xers are a challenging group to reach and are subject to information overload.

**Millennials:** Growing up with the Internet and 24/7 communication, Millennials think and act differently from other generations. Their social structure is complicated and tribal, and they are committed to change and fragmentation. Millennials have blurred the line between work



and personal life, with social web sites frequently updated to record their activities and thoughts.

Millennials take naturally to multitasking and prefer mobile phones and text messaging. They trust peer opinions more than advertising. To communicate successfully with Millennials, use every technology communication channel (Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter), and be scrupulously honest. Because this generation likes to manage the communication process, dishonesty or lack of transparency will be found out and the culprit subsequently ignored. Take a positive, collaborative approach and ask for ideas and input. Do not regard a Millennial as inexperienced or childish.

### How We Can Help

Because our job is to help our customers communicate with their customers, we've been studying generational differences for a while. We continue to use print and direct mail to communicate with Baby Boomers. We have created marketing campaigns based on social media or a combination of direct mail and social media. We have added services such as mobile website creation, and we have learned how to modify a marketing message so it will have appeal across generations. If you would like more information about putting our expertise to work for your business or organization, call us at 513-248-2121, fax us at 513-248-5141, email us at [info@techgra.com](mailto:info@techgra.com), or text us at 513-702-9370. It will be our pleasure to help you learn from our experience.

*“Here are some tips for effectively engaging each generation.”*

*“... we've been studying generational differences ...”*



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## Use Each Media Channel...

*“... use language in each media channel appropriate for the most likely audience ...”*

**T**o handle the differences in communication preferences among generations and individual learners, use language in each media channel appropriate for the most likely audience for a specific channel.

Begin with your web site. Design it so that the layout, structure, and content are intuitive, simple, and fast to navigate — qualities appreciated by all users. Use the home page to provide general information, then offer increasingly greater amounts of information and detail in subpages. This will satisfy the research needs of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, while allowing Millennials to multitask and speed through the site.

For Baby Boomers, design a direct mail campaign that points to the web site. Augment this with a complementary e-mail campaign tailored for each audience segment (Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial).

Use the language, features, and benefits that will appeal to each segment and include metrics to help measure response by audience type.

By paying attention to the communication preferences of each generation, you can increase the effectiveness of your marketing efforts.