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Harnessing the Power of a Generation +76



Jason Ryan Dorsey, The Gen Y Guy®, wrote the following cover story for Meeting Professionals International. Jason's talent is teaching business leaders specific strategies and actions that increase the performance of Gen Y employees. For a customized speaking or consulting proposal, and a free DVD, please contact Emily Boyd at BookJason@JasonDorsey.com or visit www.JasonDorsey.com

GEN Y AND YOUR MEETING

BY JASON RYAN DORSEY

UNDERSTANDING THE DESIRES AND NEEDS OF YOUNGER AUDIENCES, CLIENTS AND CO-WORKERS IS ESSENTIAL TO TAPPING THEIR VALUE.

DEFINING GENERATIONS

Not every person in a generation will have all the characteristics common to their generation. Factors such as parenting style and economics can influence people to exhibit very few of their generation's common traits. The following generational descriptions are not a box everyone must fit in, but rather clues on where to start to connect with and lead people of different ages.

Generation X (born 1965-1976)

- Famously skeptical with an attitude of “prove it to me.”
- Tend to be loyal to individuals rather than organizations.
- Likely to Google keynote speakers after a talk to doublecheck the presented facts.

Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)

- Define work ethic in hours per week—and the hours must be seen to count.
- Believe the only path to career success is to “pay your dues”—and not with a credit card.
- Boomers know cool things like state capitals and how to read a map that doesn't talk.

Matures (born pre-1946)

- Have a strong military connection.
- As my grandfather says, “We left a lot of good people behind.”
- Believe in delayed gratification.
- They want to pay cash for everything and save the leftovers.
- Matures will wait in line at a grocery store rather than use the self-checkout lane.

GENERATION Y, my own generation, is increasingly attending global meetings and events. Along with the ever-present iPhone, new definition of “business casual” and Super Bowl-commercial attention span, we bring an entirely different view of what we want from meetings. Just ask, we'll tell you. Or just follow our Twitter feed during your meeting. We usually start typing one-handed under the table whenever PowerPoint starts up.

MEETING professionals who embrace Gen Y's preferences and priorities (which can be done for very little or no money) will find us to be immensely loyal, enthusiastic and engaged meeting participants. In fact, Gen Y's entrance into the workplace is a tremendous growth opportunity for everyone in the global meeting and event industry. Consider the following.

- Gen Y is event-driven. We plan our work schedules around non-work events (like live music and free food) rather than planning events around our work. Our favorite holiday is our birthday, which we celebrate for a month. (P.S.: Mine is in May.)
- Gen Y is drawn to participate in groups where we feel included and valued, but are able to maintain our individualism. It's why we have hundreds of friends on Facebook but like our page to look different.
- Gen Y wants to be part of the solution. We need to see ongoing progress and tangible outcomes, and we loathe wasting time—to us that's worse than watching YouTube videos on a dial-up connection. Wel....come...to...the...mee.....ting....

These and other meeting-centric characteristics are multiplied by Gen Y's sheer size.

My research into generations and how to bridge them for maximum performance shows that Gen Y was born between the late 1970s and mid-1990s. Our first generational defining moment was the Challenger explosion (I watched it in my elementary school's cafeteria), followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall (we heard it fell but didn't know where Berlin was) and the Gulf War (which we watched on CNN over dinner). Our capstone event was Sept. 11, 2001.

Using the 1977-to-1995 birth-year range, Gen Y is 80 million strong in the U.S. and is the fastest-growing demographic in the workplace. The year 2010 will mark

a particularly powerful milestone, as Gen Y becomes the entire 18-to-32 young professional demographic. Meeting professionals are taking notice of the impending generational shift. At the 120 events I keynoted last year, Gen Y was only a fraction of the audience yet its inclusion was a hot topic among the events' organizers. And every meeting professional I worked with had a story about Gen Y. Here is one of my favorites.

The CEO was giving his annual presentation to about 200 employees. In the middle of the talk a cell phone rang in the back of the room. We looked around anxiously trying to see who would leave their phone on during the meeting. Then someone answered the phone and started talking. It was a Gen Yer who then walked out of the room to continue the conversation. His boss later confronted him to ask what could possibly be so important that he would answer his phone during the meeting. He said he had to—it was his mom.

BEFORE you think I'm simply giving my generation a hard time for always wanting to stay connected, I know that the vast majority of my peers would absolutely not answer that phone call—instead we'd text our mom to find out what she wanted.

My research reveals at least three key reasons Gen Y views and participates in meetings differently than previous generations.

- 1) Gen Y is entering the workforce on average one to five years later than other generations. The reason is simple. Our Boomer parents wanted to make life easier for us than it was for them. Seven college majors and one study abroad class later, we have less real-world experience to guide our actions than previous generations. Many twentysomethings I interview confess they have never been taught how to conduct themselves during a formal meeting or in a professional environment. Effective meeting participation and group communication are learned skills, and many in Gen Y have simply not learned them yet.
- 2) Gen Y has a different set of workplace and real-world priorities than previous generations. We are the only generation in the workplace that has no expectation of lifetime employment. In fact, I've found that Gen Y thinks long-term employment is 13 months—and that includes vacation time. We also prioritize lifestyle and relationships above work. We will move to a new city and then look for a job. Thank goodness for Couchsurfing.com.

- 3) Gen Y expects to be engaged and entertained before, during and after a meeting. We have come of age with handheld technology and 24/7 media that enables us to stay constantly connected, involved and skip the commercials. We expect the same at meetings large and small. Where a planning committee sees protocol we see TiVo.

WHILE these three broader characteristics might seem a disadvantage to the meeting industry, and potentially Gen Y career prospects, each of them can be an asset if meeting professionals take them into consideration. Of course, it's important to consider Gen Y in the context of the other generations sitting in the audience. You can quickly recognize other generations—they take notes in cursive. As your clientele begins to reflect upon Gen Y's emergence, meeting professionals will have a growing challenge: balancing the generation's views about meetings with the preferences of the other three generations likely to be in the audience. More often than not, a meeting tends to reflect the personality of the generation in charge rather than the generation in attendance.

If you choose to embrace Gen Y as a strategic opportunity, and potentially a competitive advantage for your organization, there are three strategies you can immediately implement—each of which can be customized to fit any meeting and adopted for little or no money.

ATTRACT 'EM LIKE FREE PIZZA AT 2 A.M. When it comes to Gen Y, the success of your meeting can be heavily influenced by what happens before your meeting ever begins. The reason for this is that Gen Y decides up-front if they like a meeting or not—often before they enter the space. They base opinions on what they've heard about your meeting from colleagues, friends, past attendees, marketing materials and online commentary. Use this to your advantage by enrolling us in some aspect of the meeting before it starts. This will increase our support and enthusiasm for the meeting and provide you with firsthand information to shape your meeting.

The two questions I've found most important to ask Gen Y when planning a meeting are: What would make the meeting valuable to you professionally and what would make the meeting enjoyable to you personally? Remember, Gen Y values lifestyle above career. If your event can incorporate both, you have a winning formula. To get the most accurate responses, I recommend working with a member of Gen Y to call or e-mail

likely Gen Y attendees. We trust our peers more than any other age group and will provide them with the most honest opinions.

Once you know what your Gen Y attendees want, combine their answers with our big-picture priorities such as: outcome-driven actions, relevance for swift career advancement and interesting people or information. Now you can craft your meeting messaging to fit your Gen Y attendees as snugly as their favorite iPod headphones. Use the following cues for maximum impact.

Similar Others. Feature spokespeople for your meeting who are in Gen Y and look like it. We want to know that people around our age will be in attendance and have some level of influence.

Authentic and Unscripted. Include candid photos, unfiltered comments and homemade videos of people attending your meeting. Behind-the-scenes-style footage is best for YouTube.

Immediately Actionable. List highly specific outcomes Gen Y can use within seven days after attending the meeting. These outcomes should align with our professional and personal priorities. If possible, detail the potential return on our financial and time investments.

Trusted Channels. Spread the word via Facebook, blog postings, RSS feeds, YouTube, LinkedIn, organization or industry young professional groups and by asking Gen Y to forward meeting announcements to friends or colleagues.

Unexpected Teasers. Get creative in your messaging: “5 Reasons Your iPhone Wants to Attend Our Meeting” or “Bring Your Business Clothes, Flip Flops Optional.”

Lifestyle Oriented. Promote live entertainment, food events, onsite competitions, new technology and lifestyle attractions within walking distance. You might even consider an interactive map that shows cool stuff to do within a mile of the meeting.

Things To Bring. Up-front homework can build excitement, especially when it’s non-traditional. For example, ask Gen Y to bring their favorite vintage t-shirt or Ramen Noodles recipe.

Unofficial Handbook. Ask last year’s Gen Y attendees what they wish they would have known before attending the meeting that would have made it more meaningful. Compile these responses into an unofficial handbook. Some of my favorite responses: Get to meetings early if you want to sit with friends, bring more business cards than you think you’ll need and don’t assume coffee will be provided.

ENGAGE LIKE GUITAR HERO Positioning your meeting in a Gen Y friendly way will make attendees want to become more engaged. Build on this interest by

promoting ways for them to connect with other attendees before and during the event. You can do this through social networking sites or by offering a short online survey that matches attendees who have similar survey responses.

Once Gen Y is at the meeting (which is a good sign, especially if it’s on the weekend), design the schedule so they interact with leadership early and often. Consider seating VIPs at separate tables during meals rather than in one section or sponsoring experiential activities that require attendees of different ages to work together toward a common goal.

FIRST-TIME Gen Y attendees do best at meetings when given the inside scoop ahead of time. As one Gen Yer told me, “Nothing is more embarrassing than wearing the first-time-attendee ribbon and looking young. It’s like a billboard that says, ‘Need help. Have nothing to offer in exchange.’” Rather than a ribbon and breakfast, consider offering a “conference connector” to first-time Gen Y attendees. These experienced meeting attendees meet new attendees at the beginning of the event and share their past experiences, sessions not to miss, tricks of the trade and any other insider information. They can talk again during the meeting or to debrief at the end. To facilitate a healthy connection you can offer a “conference coach” in a small group setting and provide talking points.

If your meeting offers options, use creativity in titles and clearly list the actionable outcomes. Terms like “effective communication” mean different things to different ages. One generation might think effective communication is presentation skills and another might think it’s instant messaging (LOL!). Also, consider highlighting sessions that could be particularly valuable to young professionals who want to outgrow their cubicles.

SHAKE up the typical meeting day. Offer “walk and talks” or other breaks where people can take a walk outside, respond to voice mails or use Yelp.com to find a place for dinner. Consider leaving one session slot TBD and ask attendees to vote online or by phone on the topic they want to discuss. At the very least, set aside 20 minutes or so for attendees to upload their photos, videos and comments to a specific meeting Web site or social networking page. You can even have a contest with the information they upload. One of my recent clients held a high-end dinner during the meeting. The attendee contest: Photograph and upload the best picture of yourself

with a steak. Sounds ridiculous, but attendees thought it was fun, humorous and completely unexpected. The photos also created valuable buzz and were featured at a national meeting.

Of course, technology can help to make your meeting more engaging for Gen Y, but rather than setting up a webinar (which contrary to public opinion Gen Y does not like), designate a “meeting guru.” All you do is provide a cell phone number to which people can text questions about the meeting (and get responses) during the event. It’s like ChaCha for your meeting. If you don’t know about ChaCha you’re probably not in Gen Y, so go ahead and text a question to 242242. I’m not kidding. Try this one: What is Jason Ryan Dorsey’s Web site?

TURN THE MEETING INTO A MOVEMENT After speaking at 1,800 events, I choose to see a meeting as a starting point rather than an ending. If your Gen Y attendees enjoy your meeting, they will see it that way too. Make the most of this by leveraging your meeting into something more: a movement. Now I’m not saying to start a canned food drive, just that the time between meetings can add tremendous value to your actual meeting. As companies and organizations demand a greater return on their meeting investment, you can prove that you bring more to the table than a one-time event. You bring message reinforcement, participant community and ongoing momentum. To turn your meeting into a movement, you need your Gen Y attendees’ e-mail addresses—ask for their top three takeaways from the meeting. You can do this in a survey, but any e-mail correspondence that appears generic will end up in our junk mailbox. Instead, make the e-mail greeting interesting or unexpected, such as “Five Funky Photos From the Meeting. Are you in one?” or “I know you’re busy, but it’s time you tell me what you really think.”

In addition to the feedback e-mail, ask attendees during and after the meeting if they want to form a Move Forward group. This group connects once a month—online or by phone—and members commit to taking one action every month in alignment with the takeaways from the meeting. The other group members share their experiences and support each other. This can greatly increase the impact of your meeting and build excitement for the next one. Members of one Move Forward group I interviewed said that the camaraderie and accountability changed their lives. They

felt connected, inspired and didn’t want to let each other down—despite living in different parts of the country.

To keep everyone in the loop, create a quarterly “Where are They Now?” e-newsletter with updates, coolest project recently undertaken and other attendee adventures. You can include this quarterly update in an existing e-newsletter, but the language and design needs to fit Gen Y. Trade in the flowery prose for bullet points, candid pictures and action lists.

THE FINAL STEP to transform your meeting into a movement is to ask Gen Y to serve on your next event-planning committee. Having a direct line with Gen Y industry peers will add a new dimension to the committee’s conversation. If you can’t let Gen Y play a more active role in planning your meeting, at least let us help you to name it. You can do this via sites such as Namethis.com.

The more input and influence Gen Y can provide to your meeting’s decision makers, the more your meeting will reflect the best Gen Y has to offer. We might even start showing up early...like 9 a.m.

For more information about Jason Ryan Dorsey’s speaking and consulting, please visit www.JasonDorsey.com or call (512) 259-6877 to request a customized proposal.

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