

Some Thoughts on Millennials

By Chris Bruhl

The future is already here.

Globalization, climate change, the knowledge economy, barbell-shaped demographic distributions, digital technologies—all dynamic and impactful, shaping tomorrow with a certain amount of urgency. And all ignored at our peril or embraced to our benefit.

All true, yet not new. All of these headline-drivers have been with us for decades.

Millennials aren't new, either. True, their relative youth makes them natural early adopters of the new, whether it's technology, fashion, or slang. But, it's worth remembering that "early" doesn't equal "only," just like "disruptive technology" doesn't always mean "progress" or "end of life as we know it."

The point of this word play isn't to suggest that Millennials are a media-hyped, pop culture bubble, because 76 million Americans (vs. 54 million Gen Xers) are a force to be reckoned with. And they are, in fact, quite different in many ways from the Gen Xers and Boomers who preceded them. But, being different from your predecessors isn't unique. Xers differ from Boomers. Boomers differ from the Greatest Generation.

Being different isn't what makes Millennials so important to us in the economic growth, community stewardship profession. It's *how* they are different, magnified by their sheer number that makes them one of our profession's central challenges and opportunities.

Millennials aren't merely "net natives." They're also climate change natives, globalization natives, gender and racial equality natives, and a bunch of other "natives" as well.

Their values, so brilliantly captured and explained by John Zogby in his latest book (with co-author Joan Snyder Kuhl) *The First Globals: Understanding, Managing, and Unleashing Our Millennial Generation*, may differ from their elders and may not yet be persuasively represented in traditional political and cultural settings. But those values, leavened by increasing career experience and family responsibilities, will prevail.

Matured Millennial values are the inevitable outcome of our nation's latest battle between the threatened status quo and fearful agents of change, currently fought in proxy arenas of faith, culture, science and politics. Predecessor generations continue to struggle with worsening polarization—and to vote our nation into a form of policy paralysis.

Millennials have remarkable consensus on some of their predecessors' most heated arguments, while their own fissures are



harder to identify. As they progress more deeply into the voting age population, they will, through the simple mathematics of market share, increase their impact. Issues now considered electoral hot buttons will be tipped into the settled category, at least for a decade or two.

Their size makes it essential that we understand and reach out to Millennials – although not at the expense of the other two generations in our three-generational culture. Boomers and Xers must adapt to the forces that have shaped the Millennials because they're reshaping us. At the same time, we need to help the "natives" navigate the "legacy economy" while working to integrate all three into the larger workforce, marketplace and society.

Heavy Chamber Stuff

In a recent meeting convened by ACCE in Burlington, Vt., (with a great job of hosting by Lake Champlain Regional Chamber CEO Tom Torti!), 30 CEOs and young professional staffers spent a weekend with provocative thought leaders. We met some exceptional young professional leaders from Hartford and Burlington, and engaged in a series of valuable, candid conversations. A short, but powerful list of ideas about the relationship between Millennials and chambers—currently somewhat tenuous in many communities—emerged. ▽

Thanks to notes from ACCE's Ian Scott, here are the group's consensus conclusions in bold type. My perspective on context follows each:

- **We must brand and market the value of the chamber's role in "making connections."**

Early career individuals are stronger in personal connections than professional ones. The chamber offers the opportunity to accelerate the network development process, and provide facilitated access to specific people of interest. One-on-one connectivity, often called "concierge service," is effective and necessary to help overcome members feeling like outsiders and the chamber being perceived as irrelevant.

- **Make sure your organization has a staffer who "gets" social media, not just one who knows how to use the tools.**

The term "net native" is especially relevant here. Social media are enabled by technology; they aren't the technology itself. Culture change within our organizations, not merely training in techniques, requires role models who live and work with social media as the norm, not the newfangled.

- **Use social media for meaningful engagement; use the platforms to solve problems with your network. A good social media strategy should be 10 percent content and 90 percent engagement.**

That means fewer repetitive announcements, less telling and selling, and a whole lot more questions, comments, bite-sized messages and immediate responses.

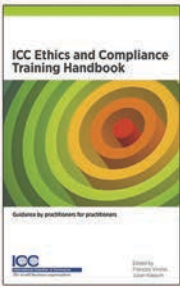
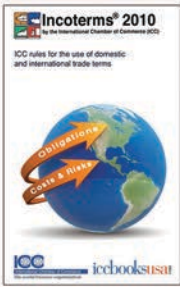
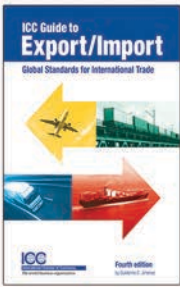
- **Audit all communications; embrace different messages to different audiences across different platforms.**

We all process information and express thoughts and feelings differently. Today's digital technology options let us choose among media. Millennials will use their smart phones for Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook postings, while Boomers will use theirs for email and telephone calls. (Quaint, right?) Our organizations need to fluently use all of these channels – and more.

- **Reframe the chamber's policy priorities through the lens of millennial values; leverage their values to help accomplish priorities.**

While the customer may not actually always be right, huge market segments always matter hugely. Reframing priorities through a soon-to-be-dominant segment makes survival sense. In order to reframe without pandering or condescending, see the next point.


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• **Consider assembling a panel of young leaders to focus on input and action. Incremental steps are better than endless discussion.**

An organized group with a formalized role that can see a direct connection between decisions, actions and results is an effective way to engage Millennials. Millennial frustration with process may simply be youthful impatience; “endless” discussion may actually be thoughtful exploration of options. (Or am I unduly affected by my own millennial YP kids?) It may be that too many of us are too process-focused, too risk-averse, and too devoted to engaging the biggest investors to fully appreciate the disruptive change that the Millennials are bringing. Engaging them on their own terms, but on our own initiative, is a healthy way to be inclusive, responsive and open to innovation.

• **Distinguish services/messaging for Young Professionals vs. Young Entrepreneurs. There’s lots of overlap, but these audiences have different needs and expectations.**

Aspirations, appetite for risk, knowledge needs and much more differentiate YP’s and YE’s. Like gender or ethnicity, common “Y” characteristics don’t equal uniform interests and needs.

Millennials seem to have the planetary perspective that we’re all in this together. That’s why Zogby and Snyder Kuhl call them “First Globals.” Change driven by demographics is inevitable. A chamber’s ability to help direct the resulting economic and social outcomes is not.

Do we Boomers and Gen Xers “get it” the way Millennials do? Do we welcome them into our culture and leadership, or do we make them wait? Do we embrace their expectations or fight harder to prevail in a chamber version of the politics of base mobilization? And, just as importantly, do we engage Millennials in ways that allow them to learn as well as lead? Do we adopt a deliberately developmental approach to their inclusion in our membership, while respecting and celebrating the contributions they are already quite capable of making?

These choices, and many others, are ours to make. Those fortunate enough to have participated in the Burlington conversation left energized. All of us, in every community and every chamber, have the opportunity to kick off our own conversations.

Let’s get started. ☑



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