

From Jitterbug to Twitter: Motivating Each Generation To Buy Into Your Mission

About the Author



Sherri Petro, President of VPI Strategies, has a keen desire to understand where everyone is coming from -- and to work with it!

Having been a VP at 26, she is acutely aware of generational differences contributing to misunderstandings, miscues and misfires. She is passionate about *leveraging* generational knowledge for better communication and organizational advantage.

Communicating effectively is a most desired skill and yet we mess it up all the time! Whether we are communicating individually -- face-to-face, via landline, cell, e-mail or text -- or collectively through numerous marketing channels, we have *issues*. How can we make a connection to potential board members as well as clients, donors, volunteers, new employees, peers, supervisor, Executive Director or CEO if we don't understand the psychology of their generation and cannot communicate in a way they can hear?

Let's complicate the scenario even further. We are using the same language but we are talking in tongues! The same words mean different things to each generation.

Understanding where each generation is coming from is key to making a connection. We have clues from generational research that tell us what is important and what motivates each. As you create messaging to encourage subscription to your mission in many ways, keep this information in mind.

How would you message to Traditionalists (ages 69-89)?

Traditionalists are frugal and known for giving to national causes who have been around a long time. They believe loyalty is earned. "Earning it" in the same location is also important. If you did something in Los Angeles, that might not be enough to sway the Traditionalist. Achieving your mission in your home town for a number of years holds more weight. Motivated by safety, security and stability, they like conservative imagery, longevity and well-known and much-loved celebrity endorsers.

Their experiences tended to be with a traditional family structure. Image and privacy are deemed important. Known for communicating face-to-face, they appreciate word of mouth as a marketing tactic as well as tried-and-true marketing channels. Their handshake on a deal is as good as law. To optimize your messaging, maximize credibility and relationships.

Suggestions:

- If you make a compelling case for funding or volunteering, talk about how you have earned your reputation and the years of service you have provided.
- If your cause is supported by a well known name from their era, name drop!
- If you have a new offering, dovetail familiar attributes with existing, appreciated products and services.
- Emphasize leaving a legacy with donors and volunteers.
- Mention if your organization has an impressive number associated with it.
 - "We have served over 10,000 families in San Diego."
 - "We've been providing service for 35 years in San Diego."

- Use words and phrases in your marketing campaigns they resonate with:
 - Stability
 - Earned
 - Honor
 - Respect

How do you connect with Baby Boomers (ages 50-68) as you market your mission?

Baby Boomers have given us many clues on how to connect as they have aged. Originally dubbed the *me* generation, they have mellowed with age and yet still continue to transform whatever they touch. They like causes involved in transformation. Buoyed by power, prestige and process as motivators, however, they are also concerned about image and keeping up with the Jones'. Baby Boomers are competitive by nature (they had to be there were so many of them!) and appreciate a good competitive challenge. They also appreciate the back-story since they are process-oriented.

As Boomers age, they are becoming more holistic, spiritual, and are into living more simply after a wild ride of consumerism. They value choice and options. Don't hem them in. Offer a handful of ways they can support your nonprofit but not so many that their heads spin! The 60s have been reawakened, working into their love of a cause and being of service. Leverage that desire and help them see the benefits they can derive from working with you.

They are sensitive to languaging so watch your semantics! They are ambivalent about change so don't introduce it too fast. While some of them will embrace it, others will turn up their noses. To maximize your message, emphasize relationships and status.

Suggestions:

- If you are offering an upgraded service, emphasize the good things from the past that come along with the change.
- Think about creating friendly competition while designing programming (donor and otherwise!).
- Since status is important, mention your organization's accomplishments and awards.
- Use words and phrases in marketing campaigns they resonate with:
 - Options
 - Choice
 - Power
 - Transform
 - Time-saving
- Absolute propositions turn Boomers off. Avoid "never" and "always."
- Tell the story of the organization in your messaging. The Baby Boomer tends to find it interesting while other generations may glaze over while listening.

How do you communicate effectively with Gen X (ages 34-49)?

Gen X is the *don't pussyfoot around* generation. They appreciate direct communication and results. No need to warm them up. Just get to it. Gen X is a bit cynical and appreciates humor. They will want to know how much of the dollar they give will get the result they seek. They listen intently, get the point quickly and make their own decisions. If they decide to join you, expect that they will want to hit the ground running **fast**. Be ready for it. They are not as impressionable as other generations. Facts are facts. They intensely dislike hype and are skeptical. They embrace and value technology as a lifestyle need. Expect more donations from this generation online.

Gen X works smarter and has better work/life balance than Boomers. They can say *no* -- much to the chagrin of marketers and EDs. They want down time and will take it for themselves and their families. They are, however, looking for family volunteering opportunities to teach their children responsibility. They like to create hybrid products and services that match what they need. Products must be effective. To maximize messaging, emphasize results and efficiencies.

Suggestions:

- Avoid being too optimistic, unsubstantiated claims and long stories.
- Be real.
- Add in humor and remove sexism.
- Choose concise copy and messages.
- Use words and phrases in your marketing they resonate with:
 - Results
 - Challenge
 - Work smart
 - Green (but not green-washing!)
 - Flexible
 - Make it your own

What do you encourage Gen Y (33 years old and under) to buy into your mission?

For Gen Y, buying is not to fulfill a need or a want – it's a way of life! Many have also participated in volunteer programs through leadership classes and church activities while growing up. They want to support causes but there has to be something in it for them as they do it. They expect to be courted with technology and have the freedom to choose. It's important to take care of Mother Earth and be green. They tend to choose socially conscious products and services over those that are not. They will choose to work for less if they are happy and can make a contribution.

Gen Y values fun, freedom, friends and family. They want a say whether that be input or feedback. Unlike other generations who might have hoped for happiness, they expect it. They desire different

experiences, stimulation and authenticity. They embrace diversity and see through race, religion and sexual orientation as barriers. Isn't that beautiful? To optimize messaging, maximize relationships and uniqueness.

Suggestions:

- Emphasize cause, community and creativity.
- Be inclusive in imagery and words.
- Use appropriate marketing channels/technology.
- Use words and phrases in marketing campaigns they resonate with:
 - Friends
 - Dynamic
 - Stimulating
 - Flexible
 - Community
 - Socially and environmentally conscious

What universal messages can you use that appeal to something in each generation?

Research shows that while generations have different values, they also have things in common. All generations want to be successful, acknowledged and rewarded. They do not want to operate out of fear, be in conflict, or miss being on the same wavelength.

Clear communication is vital. They do not want to be sold, hood-winked or talked down to. We have an opportunity to create more authentic communication in our marketing.

Suggestions:

- Explore commonalities.
- Review the magic words from each generation and connect the dots. Who needs to hear what?
- Use words that may resonate and have less generationally-defined meanings.
 - Makes a difference
 - Creates impact
 - Fits your needs
 - Solves your problems
- Create a sense of community in your messaging that reaches out to all generations and shows the heart, soul and intellect of your organization – think *whole*.
- Work with a company who understands the generations for clarity on internal and external communications. 😊 (Yes, that's a plug.)