

Connecting with Generation Y

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With the excess generational marketing we are bombarded with, it's easy to get confused: *Whose who?* Let me introduce you to Generation Y. Generation Y is constituted of those born between 1982 and 1995: ages 12 to 24. The oldest are recently out of college. The youngest are still in grade school. And, there are nearly 80 million of them. Generation Y has become the most dominant generation of Americans since the baby boomers (60 million) who happen to be their parents.

If you have wondered why the culture is centered on today's youth, it's because this youth generation already spends \$170 billion a year of their own and their parents' money. What matters to them matters to existing and upcoming corporations, if they want to stay in business, that is. And, what vacates their pocket books is everything digital.

They are sometimes known as the "Echo Boomers" or the "Millennium Generation." These kids are heavily immersed in a digital world. They are considered multi-taskers not only because of their diverse digital resources - razr cell phones, iPods, MySpace, music downloading and instant messaging - but because they have the know-how to design their own websites and blog pages - all at once - web degree or not. This is the first group to be raised in a classroom full of computers. And, because of their digital knowledge and beyond, they consider themselves elite, "special" in fact.

"They are more protected," says Historian Neil Howe. "They regard themselves as collectively special, because of the time in which they were raised. They came along at a time when we started re-valuing kids. During the '60s and '70s, the frontier of reproductive medicine was contraception," says Howe. "During the '80s and beyond, it's been fertility and scouring the world to find orphan kids that we can adopt. ...The culture looked down on kids. Now it wants kids; it celebrates them."

And, because they view themselves as "special," their difficulties will be unique as well, especially in the working world: They have been rewarded for participation rather than achievement; so, they don't have a firm grasp on what they are good at. They will expect to be praised daily and rewarded much sooner for much less, i.e. raises quickly as well as prompt promotions. And because of their short attention span – spurred on by their multitude of options and program involvement – they have a difficult time thinking long-term rather than short-term. Instead of reflecting, they expect immediate gratification.

In their working world, both employee and employer loyalty are non-existent because of major corporation scandals such as Enron. Younger workers are also less likely to be obsessed with work; they are more interested in preserving their quality of life; and, as for attire, business dress is becoming more and more casual, with flip flops, polo shirts, and cropped pants (Families and Work Institute, 2005).

This generation is sometimes characterized as "Generation X on steroids." They are more extreme and impulsive, marked with underage drinking and risky behavior... "Antidepressants, prescription medication and other behavior-altering drugs, such as Ritalin, [making] Gen Yers the most medicated

generation in history” (National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives Newsletter, January 2006).

As more prescription drugs have begun to circulate, abuses of such substances have also increased. Although Generation Y experienced the implementation of the D.A.R.E. program (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), drugs such as ecstasy and marijuana are mainstream and even “typical.” As a result, Generation Yers are identified with cynicism, skepticism and pessimism. In fact, they may be numbing themselves to newer societal threats: Their major historical events are the Columbine school shooting in April 1999, 9/11 terrorist attacks and the current Iraq War.

In terms of religion, “23 percent of Generation Y, like Generation X, do not identify with a religious denomination or don't believe in God. This is more than twice the number of nonbelievers among baby boomers, or those born between 1946 and 1965” (Reboot Jewish organization).

In regards to cultural views, the Reboot study found that Generation Y was “more liberal and progressive” than older generations, both in political leanings and on social issues such as homosexual “marriage.” Gay rights and non-traditional gender roles have become more widely accepted, as well as further tolerance for racial and cultural differences from past generations.

This generation also tends to be overachieving, which brings with it high pressure to perform. “They have been heavily programmed. The kids who have had soccer Monday, Kung Fu Tuesday, religious classes Wednesday, clarinet lessons Thursday. Whose whole lives have really been based on what some adult tells them to do,” says Dr. Mel Levine, a professor at the University of North Carolina. “This is a generation that has long aimed to please. They've wanted to please their parents, their friends, their teachers, their college admissions officers.” And, in a generation of overachievement, there is high competition for even the most mundane employment positions. This generation carries with it a number of unique, unknown and upcoming disappointments.

Consider yourself introduced to Generation Y. This may be the world that you and your friends have grown up in and inhabit, your children or your grandchildren. The question is: Based on the world they have grown up in, live in and their resulting unique worldview, how can we best connect to and reach this generation with the word and love of Christ? There is an obvious need for a Savior in a world full of drugs, terrorism and unemployment. How can we introduce them to a personal relationship with their Savior?

Tips:

- Keep your website up-to-date and cutting-edge. This group is more likely to check out your church or organization on-line than to talk with someone personally. If they like it, they will be back. If not, they won't. Look at myspace.com and popular band websites for design ideas.
- Offer free downloadable sermons on your website. This group is more apt to begin listening if the sermon is offered on their preferred medium – the web- at their leisure.
- Host open on-line forum discussions on relevant topics: cultural, social and political topics. Do *not* make this a lesson time or personal blog page, but rather an open arena for questions and two-way dialogue.

- In-person forum discussions are also suggested. Find a common meeting ground like a coffee shop. Hosting this at your church will greatly lessen your turnout.
- Advertise your website, as well as your upcoming events on-line.
- When you invite your Generation Yers to any event, make it an open invitation. They've grown up in teams (sports teams, programs, social herds, etc.). Invite them as well as their friends. Your chances for turnout will be far greater the more comfortable they are with the prospective environment.
- Remember: This group is full of overachievers. Don't offer childish events. Provide a challenge: Intelligent conversation or community help. This generation is focused on building up society rather than rebellion like the Generation Xers. (Violent crime among teenagers is down 60 to 70 percent. The use of tobacco and alcohol are at all-time lows. So is teen pregnancy.) "Causes" that assist others will actually attract Generation Yers – religious or not.
- In personal conversations, focus on building people up with your words – speak in positives – rather than degrading others. Casting judgments on any particular person or group will turn your evangelism moment into a verbal debate.
- Talk about the positive attributes of living a life with Christ. Let them know that they can trust Him to provide for their needs: A job in a high-competition world; protection and security in times of terrorism; worth and value, no matter what they have or do not have; physical fulfillment and a spouse for marriage; and, full rewards in heaven.
- For any event, free food never hurts!

Resources:

Kroft, S. (2005, September 4) *The Echo Boomers: Steve Kroft Reports On The Children Of The Baby Boomers*. Retrieved April 9, 2007, from http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/01/60minutes/main646890_page2.shtml.

Neuborn, E. (1999, February 15) *Generation Y: Today's teens--the biggest bulge since the boomers--may force marketers to toss their old tricks*. Retrieved April 9, 2007 from http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_07/b3616001.htm.

Wetzstein, C. (2005, April 12) *Generation Y embraces choice, redefines religion*. Retrieved April 9, 2007. <http://www.washtimes.com/national/20050412-121457-4149r.htm>.

Yan, S. (2006, December 8) *Understanding Generation Y*. Reviewed April 9, 2007. http://www.oberlin.edu/stupub/ocreview/2006/12/08/features/Understanding_Generation_Y.html.

Practice:

Nothing can beat a one-on-one relationship, but making use of the digital era that Generation Yers have grown up in and live in can assist us in connecting with them initially. This is where most of their introductions take place, their plans are made, where they read their advertisements and receive their

referrals. They live in a different day-in-age; and, if we are able to keep up with them, we will have the best opportunity to reach them!

Congregational and Organizational Evangelism:

Review your visibility on the web! Do you have a website for your church or organization? No? Get one! Is it outdated? Renovate it.

Can't afford a web designer? Ask a Generation Yer in your congregation to help. Then, give them designing freedom.

Personal evangelism:

Activate an account on myspace.com – it's so easy! - and put together a personal profile that highlights your love for God. Use your blogging pages to share your testimony: How has God changed your life? Your page is viewed hundreds of times each month.

Take advantage of witnessing opportunities via text messaging:

1. Send a mass text out to your entire phonebook with "Merry Christmas!" "Happy Good Friday!" And "Happy Easter!" on these holidays. Your Generation Yers are sure to have text messaging and your note may lead to questions about this Christ-centered day.
2. Text messaging is also an uncomplicated, spur-of-the-moment way to invite. "I'm heading off to a BBQ...wanna come?"

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