

Something to Think About



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COMMON CENTS

I get a lot of questions, and have a lot of conversations about the future; that just goes with the territory. Invariably, and I am not being hyperbolic, there will be some discussion about the so-called Millennial Generation. After all, according to demographic experts, there are more Millennials than there are Baby Boomers. So, I suppose any discussion about the future has to at least make mention of the largest generation in our nation’s history.

However, people my age and older have a hard time getting our collective head around Millennials. Just how do we attract them to our businesses, churches, and other organizations? How do we market to them? What products and services do they want? Truly, the amount of research conducted on trying to compartmentalize this group of young people is staggering.

Perhaps I have so many sour grapes, because I don’t really remember anyone going out their way to determine what my generation, Generation X, wanted. Heck, we didn’t even get a real name, just a letter: X, which denotes anonymity or, dare I say, invisibility. In so many ways, we found ourselves at the back of the line, and told to get after it.

We were, and are, a whole decade or more of Orwellian Winston Smiths clogging up the works between the Baby Boomers and the Millennials. Now, get back to work.

Now, I have read a pretty fair number of studies and articles on Millennials, and know more than a few. When I add up all the research, personal experiences, and anecdotes, I come up with the following: Millennials are generally idealistic, optimistic, and want to change the world for the better. Every other characteristic kind of stems from those primary, related points.

You know what? That sounds a lot like young people have been, and should be, in this country for a long time. I mean, if anyone had bothered to ask me the same questions, back in the day, I would have given pretty much the same answers, in general, and the gaps between my use of technology and my parents’ generation was about as wide as Millennials and theirs.

Je suis un Millennial.

With that said, I would argue the biggest difference between Millennials and every other generation that has come before them, since the dawn of time, is their world is far smaller. They will compete for jobs not just with each other, but with people from, literally, around the world. They will also compete with technological advancements which will make them redundant at every step along the way. Their future will be more competitive than any man has ever seen, and this will ultimately tamp Millennial idealism, or at least change its complexion.

It is one thing to come out of college talking about soft skills and societal woes, but it is quite another to be 40+ and waxing about those things while the competition is eating your lunch. I liken it to the person who says: “I like eating [pick your favorite animal protein] but I could never kill an animal myself. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

Hey, when your spouse and kids are crying because there isn’t enough food to eat, you will gladly do whatever has to be done to some poor unfortunate bird, fish, or other critter. While the expression goes “necessity is the mother of invention,” I would counter with: “necessity is the killer of naiveté

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The greatest discovery of my generation is that man can alter his life simply by altering his attitude of mind.

James Truslow Adams

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and false prophets.” This reminds me of a quote often attributed to Winston Churchill, although there appear to be many variants of it throughout history:

"If you're not a liberal at 20 you have no heart, if you're not a conservative at 40 you have no brain."

The point of this is: Millennials will eventually come to the same basic conclusion every generation has before them: there are no other ways of getting what you want accomplished other than hard work, taking risk, and being more creative than the next person/worker/country. This applies to the corporate world, academia, religion, and even politics.

No, this doesn't mean they will necessarily lose all their supposed idealism and optimism, far from it. It simply means reality and pragmatism will temper it. Those people who railed against income inequality and poverty in college will soon be the ones wondering 'just who in the heck FICA is, and why is it taking all their money.'

With this all said, let me give you a Millennial moment I had this week.

I am on the finance committee for my church. This past week, the head of our operations came to us to request some funds to buy energy regulators for the HVAC units which currently don't have them. We installed some on the systems which supply the sanctuary and the day school a few years ago, and the results have been very favorable. Suffice it to say, the original regulators have way more than paid for themselves, and he wanted to go ahead and put them everywhere.

In looking at the numbers he provided, this was a no-brainer. While I don't anticipate future savings will be as great due to the law of diminishing marginal utility, they should pay for themselves. I mean, we should spend X now, and have the things pay for themselves in about 2 years, with an expected average life in excess of 5 years. Done, particularly since we aren't making terribly much of anything on our deposits right now....we can either use the money to save money, or we can keep it in the proverbial coffee can. We chose the former, and there really wasn't much debate.

While this might seem obvious to a lot of people, not so long ago, this committee would have debated an expenditure like this for some time. After all, it wasn't an insignificant amount of money. Today, we had proof what the first 2 regulators had accomplished, so why wouldn't we be willing to use the technology to save even more money with the remaining 5 needed?

I give you this story for a reason: the differences between the generations have a heckuva lot less to do with idealism and optimism than the research would suggest. We have all been there, and done that. I can't think of a single person I know in Generation X whose primary purpose in life is to intentionally harm or impoverish other people. I have never met anyone, of any age, who relishes in income inequality and disenfranchising people from society. While they might be out there, I doubt there are very many who would rather have an inferior product or service for the same amount of money. In essence, I don't think I have ever known anyone who would tell you their primary goal(s) in life were to be a greedy son of a, uh, gun, an overall mean-spirited piece of, um, garbage, and a misanthropic jerk.

Nope.

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Something to Think About Cont.

I would argue the biggest difference between generations has been and will continue to be the willingness to unconditionally adapt new technologies. To that end, you will have people which straddle generations, and even some which are part of another generation mentality, if not chronologically.

So, what generation are you?

Are you baffled by contemporary technology? Do you still actively use a phonebook, and does your phone still plug into the wall? Do you still hold up the line at the grocery store by writing checks? Do you ask the cashier not to cash it until, say, Friday, hoping you can play the float a little? If so, perhaps you should consider yourself a member of the Greatest or Silent Generations, even if you wouldn't otherwise qualify.

Is technology a useful tool to accomplish what you want to do? A useful means to a necessary end? Do you have both a landline and a cell phone? Do you miss your flip phone? Do you use your credit card at the grocery store, but only to get points? Maybe you would be Baby Boomer.

Or, is technology whatever we can dream up, to help us achieve what is only constrained by our imaginations? Do you wonder why anyone would have a landline, and not even know what a phonebook is? Do you use Apple Pay or a similar payment method at the grocery, and are baffled when a retailer doesn't offer such a thing? Well, that might make you more a Millennial than anything else.

....but...but...but what about Generation X? Where do they fit into the equation? Hey, we don't actually exist, just like the name implies.