The art of generational communication

By Leigh Andrews

19 Nov 2015

The days of drawing out the same, static message to communicate with all your consumers have come to an end, especially with the growing realisation that different generations have different communication styles. Lindy Drake, Marketing Manager of INOVO, explains how to get this right.

© Cathy Yeulet – 123RF.com

Millennials, the younger work set, are often seen as tech-distracted and called 'digital-first'. That's why many companies have focussed on the rise of social media and schooled themselves in the art of digital disruption, but most have forgotten that different customers want to be contacted in different ways depending on their age.

Simply put, baby boomers don't want your business to send them an SMS, chat message or worse, a tweet, whereas millennials would much prefer this over the more disruptive phone call.

It's a brand new playing field - luckily you don't have to go in blind. Drake shares some advice below on how to communicate most effectively with your customers across the generational divide...

1. Is there scientific proof of a generational divide?

Drake: Much research has been done into the so-called generation gap, but, for the purposes of marketing, marketers have identified different age-groups by their lifestyle patterns, preferences and consumer habits. So a millennial (aged between 16 and 34), also known as Generation Y, will respond differently to certain kinds of communication than a Generation X consumer would. This is essentially behavioural psychology mixed with sociology.

It was originally proposed by Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim, who published an essay called "The Problem of Generations" back in 1923. Mannheim's theory was that contemporaries who go through major historical events together can develop similar ways of looking at the world and similar ways of coping with it - ways that differentiate them from their forebears, according to brittonmdg.com.

The use of generalisations can be problematic, of course, but if you reduce it to the similarities, you can extrapolate useful patterns of behaviour and a common set of beliefs and attitudes that will influence how you communicate with different generations - whether it be your workforce, peers, customers or target markets. It is also important to remember that while

a 20-year-old and a 32-year-old are both Gen Y, they might be at completely different life phases, so you will always need to customise your approach and segment your market accordingly.

2. So interesting. Share a few basic generational communication differences to note in the workplace.

Drake: Studies indicate that Gen Y and Gen Z (born after 1985) prefer to communicate with both people and brands using digital channels like web chat, WhatsApp, email, social media, SMS and apps over other more traditional channels such as phone and in-person.

As continual learners, Gen Y require regular feedback. Unlike their Boomer or Gen X bosses who were happy with an annual performance review, millennials prefer constant mentoring and coaching - all with a view to supporting their goals of personal growth and professional development. Unlike generations before them, millennials tend to prioritise meaningful work over profit and personal reward. These differing attitudes and motivations all need to be considered when devising work incentives or marketing campaigns targeting Gen Y consumers.

3. How does this tie into technological changes to communication?

Lindy Drake

Drake: While new technology has driven communication channel preferences in both Gen Y and Gen Z, both groups have also grown up playing games - whether on their mobile, a gaming console or Facebook. With this mind, technology companies have developed programs that appeal to Gen Y by using the gaming principals of reward, competition, social recognition, mastery, and immediate feedback through gamification to drive employee engagement and improve business outcomes. This technology has been particularly successful in contact centre environments where employee engagement is typically very low, and as the face of the business, agents have a direct impact on the customer experience. Ensuring that contact centre agents are well-trained, productive and engaged ultimately leads to less customer frustration, an enhanced brand reputation and more referrals and sales.

4. How can businesses adapt to these differences? Share a few tips for more effective communication with customers.

Drake: As communication preferences change, it is no longer enough to provide in-store or email- and phone-based customer service. To avoid alienating two entire generations (Gen Y and Z), digital channels shouldn't just be supported by businesses, but also measured and integrated with other, more traditional support channels like email and phone to guarantee a single customer view. At every touchpoint, a customer experiences a brand and not a channel within a brand, as it is often viewed - the sooner organisations begin to realise this, the sooner they will begin to satisfy and delight two generations of customers.

Any business that offers telephonic customer support can also use the Gen Z and Y preference for digital channels to their advantage. As any contact centre manager will tell you, the cost of servicing a customer over the phone is exceptionally high. Introducing self-service options like USSD or SMS for balance or statement inquiries or using a web self-service portal won't just drive down service costs, but also use familiar technology and preferential channels to improve the overall experience for both Gen Y and Gen Z consumers.

Traditionally, social media has been managed by marketers and digital agencies. The problem with this approach is that all support queries need to be sent to the customer service department and then fed back to the agency or marketing department, which leads to response delays. Because the response or resolution time is not measured in conjunction with other customer communication channels, it is difficult for a company to maintain good service levels across the board. As social media becomes a more popular contact channel for generations of consumers, businesses need to adapt the way they approach customer service and think about how each interaction contributes towards the overall customer experience.

Neither Gen Y nor Gen Z trusts mainstream media as much as their predecessors did, so social media, where word of

mouth is key, and bloggers, particularly influencers or key opinion formers, become important people or channels to target.

5. How does this affect marketing campaigns aimed at specific demographics, like stay-at-home moms and grandparents?

Drake: While stay-at-home moms could be a variety of ages, grandparents are easier to target as they are typically part of the Baby Boomer generation, currently aged 51 to 70. Research indicates that Boomers never like to be labelled as "elderly", "old", "senior" or even "mature". Instead, 40- or 50-year-old models are often used in advertising targeting consumers in their 60s, and phrases like "You've still got it" are used to rekindle a sense of youth and nostalgia.

This approach to targeting Boomers doesn't just apply to advertising and marketing, but also to product or user interface design. If you bought the new iPhone 6S, you would have noticed that Apple offers a "zoomed" or standard view of the screen at set up. The "zoomed" view is clearly an accessible alternative for those potentially older consumers who suffer from poor eyesight, yet it is positioned as a matter of preference. This is an excellent way to successfully cater for a generation that, unsurprisingly, does not want to be reminded about their age.

Seems it may well be time to rethink your communication strategy. Click here for more on marketing to millennials and here for insights into the rise of the 'silver surfer' or online baby boomer.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

- #Loeries2020: Behavioural economics as creativity, but not as we know it... - 24 Nov 2020
- #DI2020: Ignite your inner activist - representation through illustration - 27 Feb 2020
- #DI2020: How Sho Madjozi brought traditional Tsonga *xibelani* into 2020 - 27 Feb 2020
- #DI2020: Silver jubilee shines with Department of Audacious Projects launch - 26 Feb 2020
- #BehindtheSelfie with... Qingqile 'WingWing' Mdlulwa, COO at The Whole Idea - 26 Feb 2020

View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com