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How to reach, engage and create programs for different generations—and why it matters

Generations Are NOT One Size Fits All

By Phil Goodman

Genergraphics is the study of generations, their mindsets and the influence they have. It's also the brainchild of Phil Goodman, whose work in the field is well regarded and based on a 25-year compilation of generational research, case studies and defined statistics. Goodman has been able to help Fortune 500 companies accomplish goals by tailoring their marketing messages to specific generations.

The gist is this: Baby Boomers do not have much in common with Echo Boomers. Echo Boomers have different interests than their Gen-X parents. Members of each generation carry the influence of the times in which they grew up, and they remain true to that mindset for their entire lives, preferring different foods, clothing styles and music.

What does this have to do with meeting planners? Understanding these principles can help planners create conferences that engage and meet the needs of attendees from different generations—generations that don't work or play the same way and don't necessarily want the same things. Goodman's approach has much to offer savvy planners, as well as hoteliers hosting meetings.

As meeting planners and hotel sales directors, do you consider generational differences when organizing a conference or incentive? How much thought do you give to the generational mix when selling a concept to a corporate group or association, or planning nightly social functions during multiday meetings? Considering generational differences when preparing program content for annual, sales or technical meetings and before hiring speakers and presenters, for example, is very important. If you do not, you are likely to engage only a portion of your attendees.

What is a generation anyway? It is a group of people who can be identified through shared events, both social and historical. A person's generational mindset is created between the ages of 12 and 17, which is when the biggest changes occur physically and mentally. It is important to note that a person's generational mindset has nothing to do with his or her personality.

Many factors influence each generation. Technology is one example. Sequential technological developments influence each generation's mindset, and those who don't keep up are left behind. A sequential technological development that is shared by each generation is its main form of communication (i.e., Gen-Ys and texting). In the sequential technological development of communication, there must be a phone to be able to send voice messages, then to be able to text and then to be able to send videos over the phone. These changes occur over time and influence how a particular generation communicates.

It's not the technology that makes the generation, however; it's the generation that makes the technology. Bill Gates is from the Baby Boomer generation, the generation that developed computers and cell-phone technology. Interestingly, it's not the Boomers who wholly embrace that technology; rather, it's the Gen-Xs and Gen-Ys who create the frenzy for advanced cell-phone technology. That's not to say Baby Boomers don't use or like cell phones. Of course they do. But the average Boomer doesn't use *up-to-date* technology. It's younger generations that demand the next innovation.

Understanding the mindsets of the generations is crucial—especially the ones you do not belong to. The following is a brief description of the three generations that impact meeting planners and the hospitality industry today.

The Baby Boomer Generation

Born 1946–1964, Boomers are 76.5 million strong. It is the largest and most heavily chronicled generation ever. This is the generation whose parents, having lived through the Depression and World War II, wanted to give them so much. Some researchers interpret that as "spoiled."

Boomers are the adult teenagers of the 1960s and '70s. They retain a youthful and individualistic mindset. Still active and involved in business, family and community, this generation will not be empty-nesters in their 50s or 60s. Boomers will work into their 70s and possibly early 80s. They have fear of living beyond their retirement funds.

Boomers are not as tech savvy as Gen-Ys and -Xs, but neither are they technologically challenged.

Research shows Boomers are not brand loyal.

The Boomer generation is the largest grandparent travel group in the United States, and is a large segment of the business travel industry.

Generation X

This generation of 46 million who were born between 1965 and 1976 is sandwiched between Baby Boomers and Echo Boomers. They live in their own cocoon, in the shadow of two huge gen-

Case Study: How Harrah's/Harveys Used Genergraphics

When Steve Lowe, director of in-market sales for the western region of Caesars Entertainment, wanted to promote Harrah's/Harveys Lake Tahoe, he turned to Goodman's Genergraphics insights to help.

To market across the generational aisle, Lowe collaborated with Goodman to develop a series of targeted ads. One trans-generational effort featured a collection of shoes, each linked to a Tahoe activity and designed to appeal to a different group, such as high-heel pumps to promote the nightlife scene to Echo Boomers. Other shoes—like hiking boots and sandals—were intended to appeal across the generational spectrum.

Other ads honed in on one specific group. For boomers, the resort created an ad evocative of the cover of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album, with the national sales team in the iconic walking pose of the band. Another, featuring Lowe reading a text message in "text speak" ("ttyl," "tnx," "wuz ^"), was aimed at Echoes and Gen Xs.

Beyond marketing, Harrah's/Harveys staff also began tailoring meetings to the generational attitudes of attendees. Since Boomers grew up using paper, for instance, the resort provides handouts in binders to groups composed primarily of this generation, like those in the real estate or mortgage industries. Conversely, since Gen-Xs and Echoes are more comfortable with digital media and technology, staff e-mails PDFs of agendas to those attendees' laptops and smart phones.

These efforts have paid off by appealing to the unique mindsets of different generations. "Genergraphics is not about knowing your market; it's about knowing who your market is," Lowe says. In the case of Harrah's/Harveys, knowing the who has made a critical difference.

erations, and are the most diverse and multiethnic generation to date.

This generation is strongly independent, resilient, self-reliant, individualistic, creative and has great adaptability. Gen-Xs need to see the purpose in everything they take on and have a strong desire for a life with backup plans "just in case." They also have lack of trust in large institutions.

Many had divorced parents and working moms. This is the generation of so-called "latch-key kids," the first to regularly go to day-care centers. Raised with television, radio and personal computers, this is also the most entrepreneurial generation in American history.

Gen-Xs want new challenges and the opportunity to build new skills, and they expect immediate and ongoing feedback. They desire fun in the workplace and are pragmatic in their approach to getting things done. They have fluid careers, frequently moving laterally in their work or even starting a different career.

Gen-Xs tend to outspend Boomers on travel and entertainment.

Gen-Xs do not want to spend a lot of time in meetings. They want to get in, do the work and move on to the next thing.

The Echo Boomer (Generation-Y)

Born between 1977 and 1994, there are 72 million Echo Boomers. They were raised by their parents to be seen, heard and *featured.* They feel special because they were told they were special when growing up. As a result, they're highly confident and they expect praise.

This is the first global generation and the first high-tech generation. Technology and being ever connected have been a major part of their lives almost since birth. Echo Boomers grew up with the Internet and it is their source for news, information and entertainment.

This is a generation highly adaptable to change and capable of processing information quickly. Gen-Ys are good multitaskers. As a generation, this group finds institutions irrelevant and does not respond to traditional marketing methods. Echo Boomers are individualistic and inventive. They like to rewrite the rules and celebrate diversity. They're very team and group oriented, but they expect structure in the workplace. The Echo Boomer places a big emphasis on authenticity, real or imagined. The experience is an essential means to provide it.

This generation prefers texting and staying in constant contact with friends and family via social media and mobile devices. Eighty percent of 18 to 28-year-olds use text messaging daily. This means that text messaging is much more effective in reaching this generation than e-mails, which Gen-Ys use less frequently.

Embrace Generational Differences & Use Them

One way for planners to start using Genergraphics to create more engaging programs and events is to understand what each generation responds to. There are many elements in a meeting that can be impacted by generational preferences and proclivities. To start, how do you make the content of programs so engaging that your intended participants are motivated to sign up? Knowing what the various generations will respond to can help.

Boomers and Gen-Xs, for example, will want to know how the meeting or event will help improve their knowledge or skills, and they'll want to be guaranteed a good time when participating in the social agenda of the event.

Echo Boomers must have a compelling reason to attend a meeting or event. Once there, they like to interact and actively participate. This generation is

Boomers know that aging is inevitable, but growing up is optional

"WE'VE GOT FOUR IPADS, THREE PCs, TWO TYPEWRITERS AND A QUILL PEN. DOES THAT COVER EVERYONE?"

also likely to tell their friends and business associates about their experiences—a good thing.

When it comes to delivering information to each generation, how you do it matters, too. Boomers still embrace paper (including note taking during meetings), while their younger counterparts are all about technology. If you're sending out pre-meeting information to Gen-Xs and Gen-Ys, you probably want to send it to their iPads and smart phones via e-mail and texting, respectively.

Entertainment and food may be the most obvious areas for planners to consider—and the ones where planners can have the most fun and be creative. Every generation is attached to its own music. Boomers still like the music of the '60s and '70s, while Gen-Xs prefer groups that were popular in the 1980s. That's not to say this is the only music that either generation likes, but there is a comfort level with familiar, beloved music that can get attendees relaxed and in a positive mindset for networking and, ultimately, business.

Speakers can also have more appeal for one generation than another. Those who reference cultural icons or TV shows of the 1950s and '60s may engage Boomers but probably not Gen-Ys. Do some research before booking a speaker. Ask the agent or agency about the makeup of the audience where potential speakers were particularly successful. Keynote speakers, in particular, set the tone for the entire meeting and a speaker who resonates with the majority of the audience will do a better job of laying a foundation for a successful conference.

As for food, research shows that Gen-Xs gravitate toward more exotic hors d'oeuvres—foreign cheeses and smoked salmon, for example—as well as microbrew beer and organically grown fruits and veggies, while Boomers are satisfied with less trendy fare. Echo Boomers, on the other hand, also known as the "Whatever" generation, will be ecstatic if you put them in the foyer with free Wi-Fi and all the sushi and sake they can handle.

If you have a group that includes a mix of Boomers, Gen-Xs and Echoes, consider a reception area that is subdivided by generation—rooms or sections of rooms featuring the food, beverages and music favored by each particular generation. Attendees will move from room to room and as they co-mingle, it will help promote cross-generational understanding and team building. The better we understand who our co-workers are, the better we work together.

The same, it turns out, is true for meeting industry professionals. The better planners and hoteliers understand the attendees at their meetings, the more successful the meetings will be. SM

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How to Apply Genergraphics to Meetings

Every planner knows the best events appeal to the greatest number of attendees. Not surprisingly, the same holds in integrating the Genergraphics philosophy. Here are some specific ways to engage different generations; drawing from each approach will help ensure a unilaterally appealing meeting.

Boomers

- Boomers are the easiest to cater to because they've dictated content for years. To keep this group happy, retain some conventional elements, like trade-show features and lectures.
- This is a generation that has historically appreciated acknowledgment for a job well done. Unlike other generations, Boomers respond very well to traditional awards ceremonies.
- Boomers embrace technology, but they're often most comfortable with hard copies of event information and schedules that they can physically carry with them in notebooks or binders during a conference.

Gen-Xs

- Since Gen-Xs favor a strong work-life balance, they may not respond well to meetings that last several days or take them too far away from home. On the other hand, they often appreciate those that allow them to bring their families along, or that are conducive to pre- and post-meeting vacations.
- Since Gen-Xs like to learn independently, they may respond well to educational materials handed out before sessions take place.
- To motivate this group, you need to be precise and believable for them to respond to your message.

Echo Boomers

- This group is civic-minded and values work that means something. Environmentally conscious events will satisfy Echo Boomers, as will those with CSR and volunteering elements.
- Echo Boomers are highly collaborative and will respond well to small discussion-based educational sessions. Similarly, they may enjoy discussing issues pre- and post-meeting in online event communities.
- Boomer planners may wince at the thought, but consider encouraging Echo Boomer attendees to text, tweet and post to Facebook or Twitter during educational sessions. This will not only keep them engaged, but promote your meeting content to others.