

Talkin' 'Bout My G-G-G-Generation

I recently attended a seminar on Generational Selling Tactics. It's a topic of interest to a lot of my clients, so I decided to sit in, to see what I could learn and pass along. I think there's a perception in the printing industry—in many industries, for that matter—that everything we thought we knew about sales and marketing has changed over the last few years. The good news is, that isn't true!

The bad news is, it's not as simple as that. Everything hasn't changed, but much has and is changing. Interestingly, though, I think very little of the complaining I'm hearing from printers is directly related to the change that they think they're complaining about.

What does that mean? It's not the new generation that's the problem. It's the last generation. And they've been the problem for most printers for most of at least the last 10 years. The ownership level of the printing industry is dominated by Baby Boomers. The purchasing side of the printing sales equation has become dominated by Generation X. Yes, the fact that there's going to be less printing in the future than there has been in the past can be largely blamed on the rising generation, Generation Y, or as they're also called, the Millennials. But the Y's aren't the ones that are buying most of the printing that is being sold these days. That's those damned X's. (I can say that, by the way, because I'm a card-carrying Boomer—my Social Security card, my driver's license and my AARP membership card all tell that tale!)

Boomer Values

According to Cam Marston, who presented the seminar, there are four generations currently influencing the marketplace. The Matures are the last of the generation that won World War and then came home and started the Baby Boom. The Matures don't have much of an effect on the printing industry, though. They still buy clothes and cars and a wide range of other products and services, but they're no longer dominant in business—and we're a business-to-business industry.

They did teach the next generation their values, though, and important among those values are a sense of teamwork, an appreciation for stability, and respect for a thorough job. The Matures bought and sold on the basis of relationships, and that's how Boomers were taught to buy and sell as well. Boomers still respect stability. It will mean something to a Boomer that you've been in business for 20 or 30 or 40 years. Boomers still like the team concept. When you tell a Boomer that your business strategy is to get to know them and their business and become part of their team, that will very often resonate. Boomers still value a thorough job. If you earn their loyalty, they'll reward you by continuing to do business with you. All bets are off though if you do anything sloppily and let them down!

Here's another interesting application of the Boomers' appreciation of thoroughness. According to Marston, you can communicate with them using pretty much any available media. With very rare exceptions, Boomers have embraced e-mail and even text messaging. But they seem to respond best when the writer uses full sentences and proper grammar. Does that describe you? It certainly describes me!

What should all of this tell you? Simply stated, you should market and sell to Baby Boomers according to Boomer values. There's a flip side to that coin, though. You can't market and sell to X's and Y's the same way. They're different. They have different values. As Marston pointed out, the greatest failing of most marketers is that they market to themselves. So it works on people like themselves, but not so well with all those others.

Generation X Values

The Baby Boom lasted from 1946 to 1964, putting Boomers in the 47 to 65 age range right now. The X's came along over the next 14 years, making them 32 to 46 right now. The X's have been called the most cynical, pessimistic, unhappy and unfriendly generation ever. It has also been said that they don't buy, they stalk—and while a big deal is usually made about the technical savvy of the Millennials (31 and under; 1980 to the present), who grew up with the Internet, from a sales and marketing perspective, it's probably more important that the X's embraced the Internet because it let them shop on their own schedule, with access to huge amounts of information.

By their nature, X's are skeptical. Now, take that to its logical next step in terms of the sales challenge. *If there's anyone an X will be skeptical of, it's a salesperson!* If you try to make friends with them, they'll distrust you. On the other hand, if put enough evidence in front of them that you know what you're doing and that you can in fact help them, they might buy from you, and they might eventually become friends and advocates. Don't expect loyalty from them, though. X's will change suppliers if they find someone they think is better.

That's a bad thing when an X is your customer. It's a good thing, though, when you're on the outside looking in. I have written before about *Solids* and *Liquids*. *Solids* are happy with their current supplier—with their *status quo*—and they're simply not going to change. *Liquids* are happy with the *status quo* too, but they'll talk to you and give you the opportunity to demonstrate that you're better. In my experience, many X's are *Liquids*.

Here's one more important consideration with the X's. They value their time more than they value your product or service. If you can make it easy and efficient for them to buy from you, that gives you an advantage.

Millennial Values

The Millennials are becoming a huge economic force, but as I said earlier, I don't think they're the "problem" for most printers right now. They are, however, the flip side of any problem—an opportunity! It'll be at least a few years before the Millennials become the dominant force in business-to-business purchasing, and that means you have some time to try to change their behavior!

Here's what I mean by that. As a general rule, the younger the buyer, the less likely it is that they'll want to meet with you to learn about your product or service. That behavior is reinforced by their ability to buy all manner of commodity products without human contact. We have to think that printing is different, though, and that's even more important if you're making the transition from "printer" to "Marketing Services Provider." So here's the strategy that I'm recommending. When pursuing a Millennial, simply tell them that while printing may be a commodity, *printers* are not. Tell them that you think it's important to do this sort of business face-to-face, at least in the early stages of identifying problems and providing solutions. Explain that you create value by learning about them, and then applying your expertise to their sales and marketing challenges—or even their seemingly simple printing challenges. Will every Millennial buy that line of reasoning? No. But some of the smart ones will, and I think you'll agree that the smart ones tend to make the best customers.

Now, what does that mean in terms of marketing to Millennials using Facebook and other social media? You can probably use those media to create brand awareness, and to generate some inquiries. You can probably do that more effectively by enlisting current customers as your advocates—the "like" process, which is simply a modern version of word-of-mouth advertising. You probably can't *close the sale* to the degree that you want to, though, without getting face-to-face. That simply means that you have to sell the idea of meeting with you, and you do that by positioning it as a benefit to them and a wise investment of their time.

Cam Marston

Cam Marston really impressed me as a guy who knows his stuff. If you're interested in reading more of that stuff, you'll find a blog at www.cammarston.com, and you can also buy his books there, *Generational Insights* (2010), and *Generational Selling Tactics That Work* (2011). Cam's books are also available at Barnes & Noble, barnesandnoble.com and amazon.com.

PS: You may remember that I've awarded Baby Boomer Points a couple of times in the past for recognizing song titles or lyrics that I've referenced in my columns. Give yourself 10 BBP's if you can name the song that today's title comes from, 20 if you can name the band, and 35 if you can name the song, the band and the album. If you can do all of that, you're probably a Boomer like me!