



Managing & Motivating the Millennial Employee

By Laura Moriarty

Understanding generational demographics, psychographics, and what drives consumer behavior is foundational for marketers. But your resort's managers and recruiters also need to have a finger on the pulse of what drives employee behaviors.

In his Millennial anthem “Waiting for the World to Change” released in 2006, singer John Mayer captured the zeitgeist of the generation that was coming of age when he wrote, “Me and all my friends, we’re all misunderstood/ they say we stand for nothing, and there’s no way we ever could.” That perception of Millennial apathy still resonates in the minds of some more seasoned managers.

Tell the truth. Have you ever said to another manager, “I’m not getting through to some of my employees. They don’t have the work ethic we did in my generation. I don’t get it.”

Before you hear yourself echo the words of your grandparents and blurt out the cliché, “Kids these days...” followed by an exasperated sigh, let’s take a deeper dive into what affects generational perceptions.

BOOMERS & GEN X

When it comes to youthful apathy, are we really all so different? Consider the previous two generations and similar perceptions regarding lack of motivation or unwillingness to take initiative. Long-haired counter-culture Baby Boomers who were told by their frustrated establishment parents to “get a haircut and get a job” eventually invented the 60-hour workweek. Now Boomers are known for being extremely hardworking and motivated by position, perks, and prestige. They are independent, goal-oriented, and competitive.

Cynical Gen Xers rejected the “live to work” construct in favor of “work to live” hours after witnessing their parents being laid off from stable career jobs in the 1980s. They upended the expectation that they needed to pay their dues and earned the moniker of “slackers.” Formerly stereotyped as an “angry and troubled” generation (think grunge and Kurt Cobain), they are now known for being resourceful, independent, technologically adept, self-sufficient, and relatively socially progressive.

These are only two examples of times when our society hasn’t given its younger generations the benefit of the doubt. With respect to how we feel about Millennials and Generation Z, is history repeating itself?

MILLENNIALS & GEN Z

Millennials are often portrayed, however unfairly, as self-absorbed, lazy, entitled “trophy kids” who jump from job to job. They are the “echo boom,” largely raised by workaholic youth-obsessed Baby Boomers. Rarely at home, many of these guilt-driven parents spoiled their children with an orgy of

Boomers
Born 1946–1964
Aged 52–70
75 million

Gen X
Born 1965–1980
Aged 37–51
65 million

Millennials
Born 1980–1995
Aged 21–36
83 million

Gen Z
Born 1996–2010
Under 21
70 million

consumption including iPods, \$100 sneakers, designer jeans, and laptops. Twelve year olds had credit cards. The upside to this, of course, is that Millennials—the first *digital* generation—are now known for being entrepreneurial, tech savvy, open-minded, confident, and collaborative multitaskers.

“Millennials are able to perform processes and complete tasks with greater efficiency due in large part to their proficient use of technology, said Katie Hunter, Sierra at Tahoe’s marketing manager and a Millennial herself. “Our innate ability to ‘work smart’ rather than hard can be perceived by other generations as being lazy, unmotivated or cutting corners when in fact, if fostered, can be a massive competitive advantage for companies willing to approach old problems or procedures with open eyes.”

As for Generation Z (the children of Gen X), it is the first generation of *mobile* technology, raised in the era of smart-phones. Many do not remember a time before social media. Gen Z will take multi-tasking to a new level—think five screens at once instead of two screens, like Millennials. They are hyper-aware and technology-reliant. For them, being connected is a major life activity like eating and breathing.

Under 21, Gen Zers are our youngest employees. Millennials are often their supervisors. In fact, Millennials are managing workers from Gen X, Boomers, and a small percentage of Traditionalists (3 percent). (See tips in “Millennials Managing More Seasoned Workers,” page 52.)

As generational talent migrates from technologically savvy to technologically proficient to technologically reliant, leadership behaviors and styles are being affected. At a recent management workshop, an emerging Millennial supervisor asked me for some advice. At a team meeting with his staff he had asked one employee to stop texting and to put away his phone. Since being called on this in public, the team member had seemed reserved and detached.

From an organizational standpoint, my suggestion was to set the ground rules in advance of several meetings until they sink in, and ask his workers what they think the ground rules for their meetings should be. On the interpersonal side, the supervisor would want to privately tell that team member that although he corrected him it doesn’t mean he doesn’t ►

value him and his daily contributions. This is where it gets interesting. This supervisor said he did try to make it right by *texting* the team member. He said, “I think that’s the way the world is going—more texting, less face to face.”

While texting has its place, I counseled that we’re in a high-touch business, and that building relationships and interpersonal contact with guests isn’t going to change. I also suggested that engaging in face-to-face communication is something all leaders—especially leaders of emerging generations—need to model so team members can develop interpersonal and social skills, in this case making eye contact and being sincere.

SOCIALIZING YOUNGER WORKERS

While there’s no question that Millennials and Gen Zers have exceptional characteristics to offer businesses, certain interpretations of how to be successful in the workplace and their expectations of what they want in return may not always jibe with internal cultures and guest expectations.

And for good reason. Entry-level team members coming into their first jobs may need to learn not only how to load a chair, prep vegetables, fit a boot, or ring up a pair of sunglasses, they often need to be socialized into our high-touch cultures before they can comfortably converse with a guest. Managers need to dislodge the permanent grip some team members have on their electronic devices, address body language created by text neck, underscore the expectation that they make eye contact with guests and each other, and run interference with helicopter parents.

Ask any manager or recruiter about impressions they’ve formed of younger workers and you’ll hear stories that would be worthy of a hidden camera show. Near Lake Tahoe, one applicant arrived in a bathing suit right off the beach, then told the interviewer to “chill” while he answered a text. The applicant didn’t think he was being rude, but it certainly stunned the interviewer.

I recently heard another story about a young applicant named Jessica who was flabbergasted that she’d “have to work a *whole six hours* in one day.” Once she was hired as a restaurant hostess, Jessica had to be told repeatedly to put away her phone at the podium so she could anticipate guests’ needs. When she failed to comply, her manager asked her to come in early the next day to talk about her performance. Jessica brought her mother with her. Naturally, hiring managers are becoming proficient at gently convincing a hovering parent that they need to wait outside and that the employment relationship doesn’t include mom and dad.

WORKFORCE UNREADINESS: WHY ARE THEY SO UNPREPARED?

Many of the traditional teenage jobs that would have



Courtesy Aspen Snowmass

prepared younger workers for their first jobs with your resort were unavailable during the great recession (December 2007 through June 2009). During the slow recovery, jobs like grocery store bagger and stocker, cashier, barista, fast food worker, dishwasher, cook, lawn care provider, and pizza delivery guy/gal were occupied by older workers who wouldn’t and *couldn’t* budge.

The term “failure to launch” describes the tendency to continue living at home while being doted on by overindulgent parents. In a tough economy, some launched and boom-eranged right back again, resuming a heavy reliance on their parents. Some have delayed typical adulthood rites of passage like moving out, getting married, or finding a “real” job.

Jessica’s reliance on her mom and addiction to technology and isn’t unusual. What could be wrong with instant access to friends, social media, and having a parent on speed dial? Many younger workers have become accustomed to parents intervening to solve every problem. Consequently, they may struggle to make decisions independently and have limited coping skills.

Neuroscientists have discovered that the prefrontal lobes of the brain—which are involved in planning, developing reasoning, and decision-making—continue to develop well into the late teens and early 20s. Limited coping skills and physiological development can impact the ability to assimilate into your resort’s culture quickly. ►

TACTICS FOR IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT

Mayer's lyric, "We see everything that's going wrong with the world and those who lead it/we just feel like we don't have the means to rise above and beat it," is still somewhat prophetic. Being underemployed, working at jobs that pay less than a living wage, and a dearth of housing opportunities continue to be a challenge for many employees.

Although the unemployment rate for 18 to 34 year olds has fallen from 12.4 percent to 7.7 percent since 2010, their prospects for affordable living have decreased, a pressing concern in our resort communities. Furthermore, nearly 13 percent of young college graduates are currently *underemployed* (working at jobs that don't require a college degree or are part-time, though wanting full-time work), compared to 9.6 percent nine years ago, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Concurrently, ski industry HR leaders report that they are seeing the most impressive crop of qualified candidates in many years. Don't start celebrating yet. Just because we land them doesn't mean they will stay. (See "Onboarding: What Went Wrong," pg. 52.)

Some younger workers attribute their apathy to a lack of empowerment. They may feel like they have no real power to change anything and so they do nothing at all rather than attempt a seemingly futile endeavor. When my nephew was 22 years old, he quit a ski area job after one month, explaining, "It's so random. What's the point?" After some translation, I learned he felt he was regarded as just a number, and that the work wasn't meaningful or leading to anything more.

Sierra's Katie Hunter echoes the need to make work more meaningful by empowering young minds and encouraging them to have a voice. "The opportunity to inspire creative thinking and problem solving to update archaic operations is at our fingertips," she said. "Managers who motivate Millennials by stimulating our desire to have an impact on the work we do will reap the benefits and ultimately create a work environment where we can be recognized for our contributions and thrive."

It's no surprise that Millennials need regular recognition and feedback on performance. Instant gratification has been fostered since they were children racking up video game points or advancing levels, tallying totals of social media "likes" and the dopamine rush from the pings of incoming texts.

In addition, Millennials and many Gen X team members are frustrated by stagnant upward mobility. A highly competent employee is a highly committed employee, until you start taking them for granted.

Meet them where they are. Check off what you are currently doing:



We assess competencies to develop technical and interpersonal skills.



We provide fast-paced interactive training opportunities.



We give them a real big something to own by exposing them to cross-functional teams, committees, problems to solve, and projects using newer technology platforms.



We are inclusive. We invite everyone into the tent. No one is left out.



We keep them in the loop of what's important at work, let them know their opinions count, and act on their suggestions.



We encourage them to seek leadership opportunities outside of work with nonprofits, associations, and charities that closely align with our mission.



We find ways to rotate them as attendees into management and strategic meetings, and have conversations with them about *why* we do *what* we do.



We help them learn what and how we do what we do (ski area nuts and bolts).



We fast track high-potentials with "intern rotations" through departments.



We pay our people competitively.



We instill pride in our brand.

Millennials need to align the mission and purpose of your resort with their own values. Many of our positions are lifestyle jobs that many people at lower elevations envy. But lifestyle jobs can be perceived as a tradeoff for the amount of cash compensation that can be earned elsewhere. Highlight the other currencies that come with our lifestyle: your green initiatives, charitable giving, and community presence (see "It's a Lifestyle Job," Pg. 52).

We're lucky that in our industry brand pride is easy to foster. All of our resorts provide a purpose worth getting up for in the morning: *We help friends and families reconnect in a safe and healthy mountain environment where they'll create memories that will sustain them until they can return again and again.* What we do is a privilege.

THE GOOD NEWS FOR MILLENNIALS

According to population estimates released in April 2016 by the US Census Bureau, more than one in three American workers today are Millennials. This year they surpassed Generation X to become the largest share of the American workforce. Now that the leading edge of Millennials is 35 ▶

Millennials Managing More Seasoned Workers

- Don't make assumptions or stereotype
- Acknowledge the age difference
- Tell them you value their experience
- Show humility as you earn respect
- Use them as mentors

Onboarding: What Went Wrong

(Why you're frustrated with me and I'm frustrated with you)

- I wasn't welcomed within two weeks (orientation and onboarding)
- I wasn't coached on body language expectations and welcoming phrases to enhance the guest's experience
- I wasn't trained on the technical parts of my job adequately
- I wasn't engaged (given a sense of belonging and purpose of the organization)
- I didn't get the culture (the unwritten rules)
- I was mismatched from the beginning
- There is no retention plan (Don't forget about me!)

It's a Lifestyle Job

- Offer ski and ride breaks
- Host frequent and fun themed parties
- Have instant recognition scratcher cards
- Give away raffle prizes—lots of SWAG
- Share pro forms—sweet deals on equipment
- Offer discounts on F&B, retail, rentals, and lessons
- Give out dependent passes and reciprocal pass privileges at other resorts
- Host free pizza nights during early season when workers aren't getting enough hours

years old and they have also surpassed Baby Boomers as the nation's largest living generation, are they really still waiting for the world to change?

If so, they won't be waiting much longer. Michael Berry, NSAA president, stunned the audience of resort GM's and owners at the national conference in Nashville when he said, "In the next five years, 3,000 years of experience is walking out the door." While some Boomers have been sidelined because of the recession and are just getting their financial houses back in order, many leading edge Boomers (in their mid-60s to 70 years old) have been plotting their retirement from current occupations to move on to something else that resonates with this stage in life. At the peak of their mature, professional abilities, they are self-actualized and want to leave a legacy.

Mayer's predicative lyric, "One day our generation is gonna rule the population" is on the immediate horizon. Millennials are rising and in the coming years, starting now, opportunities abound.

What about Gen X? Have they had upward mobility opportunities? The oldest Gen Xer is now 50. GMs are about half and half Gen X and Boomers, with outliers on either side. These percentages likely mirror your current senior staff age ranges. Conduct an audit on your own resort's demographic data and you'll likely find a majority of your mid-management staff is Gen X, and some of them are on deck for senior management positions. Millennials are being nurtured in the pipeline.

CHANGING THE WORLD

The checklist suggestions for engaging and retaining Millennials work for every generation. The truth is, we *all* want to feel a sense of purpose and belonging, to do what we have the talent and skill to do well every day, to feel we are making progress along the way, and that we're enjoying the ride, bumps and all.

More than you might think, you know your Millennial workers and how to empower them. As managers, find ways to bring out their positive attributes and celebrate their unconventional characteristics. Doing so will cultivate their loyalty and commitment to your company. When they feel valued, challenged, and rewarded they'll be ready to move beyond the apathy of "waiting for the world to change" and start changing the world. **N**

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Courtesy Aspen Snowmass