

Generational Communication

Understanding today's six generations

A Quick Bite Publication

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Generational Communication (2012)

In 1995, when I joined full-time vocational ministry, helping and serving congregations with communication issues, generational communication was a hot topic.

At the time, the “church marketing” conversations were beginning, and as churches talked about pinpointing specific groups of people, it became easy to focus on age. There were some early conversations about gender, but quite frankly no one really wanted to figure out how to reach men and so all the emphasis and all the rage focused on communicating with people around age. I can clearly remember agenda items, books, papers and journal articles all focusing on how churches could best reach people around their generation.

At the turn of the century, two things began to happen:

1. The subject of “church marketing” really became taboo. Pastors didn’t understand marketing and therefore quickly discounted it as evil. It also became a stumbling block to people who wrongly thought of marketing as synonymous with sales. And, certainly, churches aren’t in the business of “selling” (at least in the secular sense, and sometimes it’s too hard for us to think of sales in any other way). So, churches began to back off discussions around targeting, which sent them into a “one size fits all” communication strategy that just doesn’t work.

2. Churches, of all sizes, began to wade into websites as a legitimate communication method. The excitement of websites and e-mail focused everyone off “audience” discussions and onto “methodology” discussions. Let’s face it, the methodology is always changing. What we are learning now, however, is that methodology has a direct impact on audience and on message and on timing. Churches focusing only on methodology are learning that this myopic approach to communication isn’t working.

To this climate, came 2008 when Facebook and social media exploded, especially within churches. (By 2010, more than half of churches – in my database - reported a corporate use of Facebook in promotion). And, the global economic recession also began. The growth of Facebook and its “group and list” networking possibilities again opened the door for discussions around demography like age and gender within churches. The global economic recession caused churches to give a careful eye to good stewardship, especially around communication. Wise churches did not cut back on communication; wise churches began to identify best audiences for ministries, and then creating specific messages for those audiences.

Facebook and the economic recession have reshuffled the deck on church communication – just within the past few years. And, again, we are having thoughts and conversations about the age demographic – about generational communication. Does this mean we are going back to what some referred to as the distasteful conversations of church marketing? Yes, but we are using words and phrases that make it easier to swallow.

Instead of church marketing, we’re talking about strategic communication. Because at its core, marketing is really a strategic understanding of audience, purpose, methodology, timing, and message and the interrelation of all these variables toward helping an organization reach its goals. In the context of the faith community, the goal is to see people in a growing relationship with Jesus as personal Savior.

When we talk about branding, we are really talking about reputation. How strong is the church’s reputation to specific audiences? How far can we extend the church’s reputation into households in our community?

Instead of mass marketing, we’re talking about macro communication. Macro communication involves communicating the same message to everyone, regardless of demography. Most churches communicate and promote from a macro system, and there will always be a need for this system within churches. Where this system breaks down is when

churches only use one method to communicate to that big audience – today, even in macro communication, churches are using a variety of methods, including websites, social media, e-mail, print, video and text-messaging.

Instead of targeted marketing, we're talking about micro communication. Micro communication is when the youth pastor develops his own database of student families, and then communicates specific messages to them, using purposeful communication methods.

And, it's this revival of micro marketing discussions that has returned generational communication to the frontal lobes of church communication conversations.

To be better stewards of time and budget dollars, how can we zero in specific messages to specific audiences – using age as a variable – to avoid waste that sometimes occurs through macro communication? A good secular analogy might be the company that advertises on all radio stations, but can see better return when advertising on a specific radio station to reach a specific audience most likely to respond to the advertisement.

Churches have always, in some part, embraced micro communication around age. Many have small groups that are age-graded; ministries (children, student and senior adult) that are age-specific, and even special methods (senior adult newsletter) that are focused on specific audiences. Even designated senior adult parking reminds us that micro communication is alive and well within our churches.

This paper will focus on the six generations alive within our churches today, some of the nuances of each generation, and a likely message that should be remembered when considering the age-focused audience.

No assumptions

I offer a disclaimer before proceeding with a look at the six generations. This is a generalized overview of generations. Foolish churches and foolish people will make generalizations about how to communicate with people groups within the local church.

I've been in rural churches, where senior adults voiced a desire to communicate by e-mail.

I've been in college communities, where younger adults have voiced a desire to receive church communication by print.

So overwhelmed by the new communication methodology mix, it's not unusual for me to hear more and more people simply wanting a telephone call from a live voice.

Sadly, many churches will create stereotypes related to age and communication, believing senior adults don't communicate by e-mail or don't use Facebook. That's a false and often poor assumption. Many churches, likewise, will wrongly believe that all young adults only want digital communication. There are some churches, and I can't believe I'm writing this, that believe text-messaging isn't a useful communication method . . . by most everyone under 50.

How people approach communication preferences is often related to a person's world view and not so much their age. The senior adult who has lived in the same small community with very little live exposure to the great big world may be slow to embrace digital communication and anything other than print. However, there are a lot of senior adults who lived and worked in places other than their hometown, and many of these have children and grandchildren in faraway places. These senior adults, even if they look and talk like the aforementioned group, are far more likely to be online and using new communication methodology. There can even be people who have a limited world view, personally, but have been forced to adapt to new communications, improving communication with military family, or those who have moved away.

Churches must do the research within their walls and databases, and know how people

want to receive communication. Sadly, many church offices communicate how it's "comfortable" for those working in the office and not for how people in the pew want to receive communication. This failure often results in churches that are in a state of plateau, both numerically and qualitatively. Where relationships break down, discipleship breakdowns begin to follow.

So, don't assume this age or that age communicates this way or that way. Do the research within your congregation, and then adapt the macro and micro systems to build relationships with everyone.

The Six Generations

For the purpose of this paper, I am borrowing from www.marketingteacher.com and its presentation of the Six Living Generations in America. I am adding my own insights to this copy toward a goal of helping churches understand how to best communicate – generally – with these audiences (2012).

GI Generation (Born 1901-1926 – age 86 and older)

These are the children of the World War II generation, fighters during World War II, and who were young during the Great Depression. This is the generation often regarded to as "The Greatest Generation," a phrase coined by national journalist Tom Brokaw. Brokaw argued that, "these men and women fought not for fame and recognition, but because it was the right thing to do. When they came back (from war) they rebuilt America into a (world) superpower."

The Marketing Teacher website says, "Their Depression was The Great One; their war was The Big One; and, their prosperity was the legendary Happy Days."

Many of the great suburban community service clubs were born by the parents of this generation, but really found traction with this generation after World War II. They knew teamwork, they had the resolve to overcome problems, they were assertive and often energetic towards community progress. From the website: "Their value system was grounded in personal integrity and near-absolute standards of right and wrong."

This generation, knowing the hardship of The Great Depression and World War II, understands how to do without, and believes in avoiding debt.

Within our churches, this generation has outlived the average life expectancy of most adults. In many cases, they will now be living in nursing or healthcare institutions, and their relational network pool is shrinking considerably. It's my observation that they want to invest in a few deep relationships rather than continuing to expand relationships with new people. They are retiring out of organizations and involvement. In most cases, their preferred method of communication will be print, but really they want the personal touch of a visit or a telephone call.

The wise church will minister to and love these members, stay inter-personally connected to them, remind them that the church loves them, and send a message that, "You are important to us." But, this group should not hold the church back from exploring new communication approaches. All too often, I hear lazy church leaders say, "We aren't going to do this or that because 'senior adults' aren't on board with us." My impression is that this generation no longer cares church programming as long the interpersonal touch from the church is very real. They like to be in the loop, but they are beyond needing to influence the loop.

Silent Generation (Born 1927-1945 – age 67-85)

TIME magazine named this generation in 1951. While some of the older members would be more like those in the GI Generation, many within the Silent Generation were children

during World War II. This generation has the unfortunate position of being born within two significant generations – The GI (their parents) and the Baby Boomers (their children).

TIME magazine named this generation by reporting, “(This generation) is waiting for the hand of fate to fall on its shoulders, meanwhile working fairly hard and saying almost nothing. The most startling (attribute) is its silence. With some rare exceptions, they are nowhere near the rostrum . . . they are a still, small flame . . . (this generation) does not issue manifestos, make speeches, or carry posters.”

The late William Manchester, an author, biographer and historian, was harsh in his description of this generation, writing, “withdrawn, cautious, unimaginative, indifferent, unadventurous and silent.” I liken them to the Middle child of three children – trapped between two big personalities and therefore often choosing to just be quiet, and go with the flow.

History has been a little kinder to this generation, pointing out that many artists, including musicians, movie stars and entertainers, were born within this generation. In the book, Generations, by William Strauss and Neil Howe, it’s reported that “an artistic generation is born from crisis” much like The Great Depression and World War II would have been.

The Marketing Teacher website reminds us that the Silent Generation was the first “television” generation, were the first to experience the suburbs, rock and roll, and, yes, softcore pornography. Discussions of Civil Rights began with this generation. Most of the women stayed home to raise children, but those who did not were teachers, nurses and secretaries. Men were loyalists to the corporation, and kept a job for life. Marriage was for life; divorce was a scandal. In retirement, this generation proved to be the most free-spending in history, but remained grounded in near-absolute values shared by their parents. They are disciplined, self-sacrificing and cautious.

And, they like to read, especially newspapers.

While, overall, this generation prefers print and interpersonal relationships, younger segments of the audience are embracing new digital communication like online shopping, social media, e-mail and even text-messaging. These new conformities allow them to stay connected to children, and especially grandchildren, who have moved away.

It’s my opinion that this generation is the one most misunderstood within today’s church. They are capable of learning new tricks, and churches should not discount they won’t or can’t simply because of age. The message for this audience is, “We want you involved with the church, and we want you with us where we need to go. Stay in step with us, and let us help you stay in step.”

Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964 – age 48-66)

Baby Boomers represent the largest generation, and the generation serving in key leadership within most churches. So, it’s very important to understand this generation and how they approach life and church.

Baby Boomers have two sub-sets: Revolutionaries from the 1960s and 1970s, and the Yuppies “Young Urban Professionals” of the 1970s and 1980s. Within both sub-sets, there’s a focus on the “me” and generally members are both self-righteous about personal beliefs and members can be very self-centered.

From Marketing Teacher, here are some characteristics of Baby Boomers:

- "Rock and roll" music generation.
- Ushered in the free love and societal "non-violent" protests which triggered violence.
- Self righteous & self-centered.

- Buy it now and use credit.
- Too busy for much neighborly involvement yet strong desires to reset or change the common values for the good of all.
- Even though their mothers were generally housewives, responsible for all child-rearing, women of this generation began working outside the home in record numbers, thereby changing the entire nation as this was the first generation to have their own children raised in a two-income household where mom was not omnipresent.
- The first TV generation.
- The first divorce generation, where divorce was beginning to be accepted as a tolerable reality.
- Optimistic, driven, team-oriented.
- Envision technology and innovation as requiring a learning process.
- Tend to be more positive about authority, hierarchal structure and tradition.
- One of the largest generations in history with 77 million people.
- Their aging will change America almost incomprehensibly; they are the first generation to use the word "retirement" to mean being able to enjoy life after the children have left home. Instead of sitting in a rocking chair, they go skydiving, exercise and take up hobbies, which increases their longevity.

This group is about change, chasing trends and keeping in step with what other churches are doing. Some may not like change within the church, but as a generation they will value teamwork and “togetherness,” going with the consensus on change even if the change is not accepted personally. The younger Baby Boomers were part of the 1980s “chase the wealth” movement, constantly looking over their shoulder at what neighbors were doing and what neighbors had earned. They fear being left behind; they fear not being relevant; and, they fear not being heard. If the church can get this crowd moving in a direction, it’s estimated that 9 of 10 will follow in that direction. But, it’s important to know and building credibility with the key leaders, and to communicate vision and purpose behind the movement. This generation likes to know the “why” behind decision-making.

This group can be pulled to embrace website communication, social media, e-mail, and text-messaging. If the “world view” is large enough, and the mission of the New Testament church is communicated clearly enough, this group can be pulled to accept change.

My communication message for this generation is this one: “We expect you to stay in step with our church, and we can’t slow down for you – there’s a lot of Kingdom work at stake.” They will rise or sink to the expectation before them.

Generation X (Born 1965-1980 – age 32-47)

The label Generation X has actually been used to label generations since the 1950s. Author John Ulrich wrote, “Generation X” has always signified a group of young people, seemingly without identity, who face an uncertain, ill-defined (and perhaps hostile) future.” The label stuck with this specific generation because it follows the big Baby Boomer generation and its unclear how Baby Boomer fallout will affect Generation X.

In the movie King Kong, the giant ape plows through the jungle, creating a swath of destruction and “clearing the way” (good or bad) for those who follow him. Personally, that’s how I see Baby Boomers moving through our culture, creating a big path with unknown fallout for future generations to tackle – good and bad. Generation X is the first group to follow in the

wake of the Baby Boomer path.

Most researchers believe this a group that is very skeptical and without a lot of organizational loyalty. This is the first generation that doesn't pay attention to the church sign and denominational loyalty of previous generations. They are going to church where they see God at work, where their children are loved, and where they can get involved in ministry. To reach this audience (and most churches crave it), the church must have its A-game in vision, programming, communication and infrastructure. There is very little wiggle room for a slump because this generational will move on to another church pretty quickly.

As the children of Baby Boomers, who have lived in a degree of prosperity, this is a self-entitled generation. Because many Baby Boomers idolized these children, Generation X has now turned its own children (Generation Y) into idols. That's why so many chase the child's dreams and provide children with a vote within the family. This is a generation living through its children, and wanting the idols to always be happy and comfortable.

This is also the first generation to begin moving away from print in the new paradigm of digital communication. They are learners, explorers and gadget freaks. The average age of a Facebook user now falls within this generation. They are very critical of organizations that don't get on board with technology and professionalism.

The church's message to this generation is simple: We will have a commitment to our A-game, and we welcome your help in maintaining professionalism and cultural relevancy toward a Kingdom end.

Here are some characteristics from the Marketing Teacher website:

- The "latch-key kids" grew up street-smart but isolated, often with divorced or career-driven parents. Latch-Key came from the house key kids wore around their neck, because they would go home from school to an empty house. (Parents' guilt over this has been poured into their children).
- Entrepreneurial.
- Very individualistic.
- Want to save the neighborhood, not the world. (It's important to understand this when considering the church's Acts 1:8 missions strategy).
- Cynical of many major institutions, which failed their parents, or them, during their formative years and are therefore eager to make marriage work and "be there" for their children.
- Raised in the transition phase of print-based knowledge to digital knowledge archives; most remember being in school without computers and then after the introduction of computers in middle school or high school
- Tend to commit to self rather than an organization or specific career. This generation averages 7 career changes in their lifetime, it was not normal to work for a company for life, unlike previous generations.
- Society and thus individuals are envisioned as disposable.
- Beginning obsession of individual rights prevailing over the common good, especially if it is applicable to any type of minority group.

- Raised by the career and money conscious Boomers amidst the societal disappointment over governmental authority and the Vietnam War.
- Late to marry (after cohabitation) and quick to divorce . . . many single parents.
- Want what they want and want it now but struggling to buy, and most are deeply in credit card debt.
- It is has been researched that they may be conversationally shallow because relating consists of shared time watching video movies, instead of previous generations.
- Self-absorbed and suspicious of all organization.
- Survivors as individuals.
- Cautious, skeptical, unimpressed with authority, self-reliant.

Keep in mind that this generation needs a lot of discipleship education regarding New Testament church life: Teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer. It's a generation that, as children, missed out on a lot of discipleship training and education within the local church. Don't assume this generation understands Scripture or even how to approach faith.

Generation Y (Born 1981-2000 – age 22-31)

This is the first-wave of idols in our culture. They have been raised to have a voice in family decisions – where to vacation, where to eat, where to live – and they now expect to have a voice in all areas of their lives. This generation is not used to hearing “no” or “wait” when it comes to their desires.

Most researchers point to this generation's upside: They work well in teams, having learned through school and sports about team projects and team goals. Public education around character education has helped them embrace one another, respect authority, and respect opinions. They will adapt to the fellowship of church – working together for Kingdom results – but they will be full of opinions and advice along the journey.

With the rush of digital communication, this generation will largely have very little print within its communication mix. This generation is also a multi-communication group, meaning they will use a broad mix of communication, but always defer back to the method that provides the simple and quick message.

This is also a first generation to overlook a person's skin color or disability when it comes to building deep and lasting relationships. As this generation moves into church leadership – whatever that looks like – the church will have great potential for great diversity.

The message for this generation is this one: How can our church serve you . . . toward a goal of you serving others. I think it's important for us to preach and teach to this generation that they have a responsibility to plunge their lives into other people as well as themselves.

From Marketing Teacher website, here are some other attributes for Generation Y:

- They are nurtured by omnipresent parents, optimistic, and focused.
- Respect authority.
- They schedule everything.

- Prefer digital literacy as they grew up in a digital environment. Have never known a world without computers! They get all their information and most of their socialization from the Internet.
- With unlimited access to information tend to be assertive with strong views.
- Envision the world as a 24/7 place; want fast and immediate processing.
- They have been told over and over again that they are special, and they expect the world to treat them that way.
- They do not live to work; they prefer a more relaxed work environment with a lot of hand holding and accolades.

Generation Z (Born after 2001 – age 0-21)

These are the new idols, and their parents are chasing them. Churches can see dramatic shifts in participation based on the cultural demands placed on families through this generation. Many families, faced with a Sunday morning sports or child-focused activity, will always choose the activity over church participation. Many churches will be pushed to take “church” to the ballparks, gymnasiums and soccer fields on Sunday mornings, knowing the families are there.

This is a generation that will never know a time without the internet or e-mail. Digital communication is expected, and organizational relevancy will be tied to professionalism in the digital communication world. They text-message, they use social media and they use the internet to communicate with one another, and in some cases around their less sophisticated parents.

This is a generation that will expect everyone else to keep up with them in all areas of life.

But, there is a huge upside to this generation. It’s a hopeful generation. The desire to learn, the desire to do good in and among others, the desire to belong and to be engaged in purposeful activity provides the church with a great opportunity to build this generation into a powerful group of disciples. Now, the church may not look like the church yesterday or today, and so churches will be forced to adapt to connect with this audience, but the potential is incredible.

The message for this audience is this one: We want to be in partnership with you toward Kingdom work in any way possible and at any possible time.

Here are characteristics provided by www.marketingteacher.com.

- In 2006, there were a record number of births in the US and 49% of those born were Hispanic, this will change the American melting pot in terms of behavior and culture. The number of births in 2006 far outnumbered the start of the baby boom generation, and they will easily be a larger generation.
- Since the early 1700's the most common last name in the United States was 'Smith' but not anymore, now it is Rodriguez.
- There are two age groups right now: (a) Tweens, 8-12, who number more than 29 million and impact family spending of more than \$210 billion per year; and (b) Toddler/Elementary children of which 61 percent have a television in their bedroom and of which 4 million have their own cell phone.

- Have Eco-fatigue: they are actually tired of hearing about the environment and the many ways we have to save it.
- With the advent of computers and web based learning, children leave behind toys at a younger and younger age. It's called KGOY-kids growing older younger, and many companies have suffered because of it, most recognizable is Mattel, the maker of Barbie dolls. In the 1990's the average age of a child in their target market was 10 years old, and in 2000 it dropped to 3 years old. As children reach the age of four and five, old enough to play on the computer, they become less interested in toys and begin to desire electronics such as cell phones and video games.
- They are Savvy consumers and they know what they want and how to get it and they are over saturated with organizational messages. To reach them, the church must be focused and intentional with its communication message. <^><

Sources:

The Six Living Generations In America, www.themarketingteacher.com

Generational explanations, www.wikipedia.com (search by generation name)



Scott Vaughan was a 20-year newspaper writer, editor and publisher before entering vocational ministry as a church communication strategist. As a member of the media, he won awards in both the Georgia and South Carolina press associations, and served on the South Carolina Press Association's Executive Board. For nine years, he was marketing director for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, serving churches of all sizes, in all cultures, and of all ages. In 2003, he created his own ministry, enabling him to serve a larger ecumenical community throughout North America and the world. He is a professional public speaker, and has the gift for creating original presentations customized for audiences. He is an ordained minister, and local church leader, serving as a deacon and small group teacher/leader. He is active in his community, specifically supporting children and young people through youth sports. He and Vicki have been married 25 years and have four sons, ages 23-14.