



By Lindsey Pollak

# What Gen Y Wants:

*How to Understand Your Millennial Customers and Employees*

**P** Read any newspaper, business magazine or blog today and you are likely to find an article about the “problem” of Generation Y (a.k.a. the Millennials):

“They feel entitled to everything!”

“They don’t want to pay their dues and expect to be promoted on day one!”

“They won’t stop instant messaging me!”

As someone who coaches and writes a blog for college students and young professionals, I think there is some merit to these complaints. A lot of young people today grew up with doting parents, a healthy sense of self-esteem and an innate understanding of technology. We can focus on the downsides of these characteristics, or we can enjoy the upsides. I’ve chosen the latter, and I hope you will too.

So, who are the members of Generation Y and what do they want? Whether you call them Millennials, Generation Y, echo boomers or “those kids who think they own the place,” this generation (born 1982 or later, numbering over 75 million in the United States) can no longer be ignored. For the majority of companies today, understanding your Gen Y customers and employees is a business imperative.

Here are some insights into the mindset and motivations of Generation Y:

- *They want to be seen as individuals.* Today’s young people don’t view themselves as “Millennials” or “Gen Y” or any other group label. In a recent visit to a college, I asked the students if they would prefer to be called “Gen Y” or “Millennials.” The response: blank stares. They see themselves as totally unique individuals, defined by their nicknames, iPod playlists, cell phone numbers and customized laptops. Ironic as it is, what



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defines this group is the deep desire for expressing their individuality. If you want to connect with Generation Y, then acknowledge and encourage their individualism.

- *They want to be connected 24/7/365.* Today’s young people have been using computers for more than half their lives. Their natural instinct is to know technology and the Internet like the back of their hands. Everytime I have a question about the blogging platform, a Web resource or an instant message acronym, I ask a Gen Y. Even if this advising is not part of their job descriptions, Gen Ys are usually eager and excited to share their expertise. You’ll never miss out on the next big technology trend (social networking, Twittering, texting, wikis) as long as you have Millennials around. When it comes to attracting and keeping Millennial customers, keeping up with technology is crucial.
- *They want to make a real difference in the world.* In the 2006 UCLA American Freshman Survey, 67% of Millennial teens said it is essential or very important to help others who are in difficulty—the highest response in 26 years. The majority of Millennials are personally involved in one cause or many, ranging from education to the environment to human trafficking to AIDS. If your organization is trying to attract young people, think about what you can offer related to volunteering, good works and cause-related marketing.
- *They want to succeed.* Members of my generation (Gen X) were called “slackers.” Generation Y sits at the opposite end of the spectrum. Freshmen come to my career workshops and participate in internships every summer until graduation. Professional social networks like LinkedIn.com are full of young people looking to network. Yes, some Gen Ys can be accused of being overeager or acting “entitled” to jobs and promotions, but with a little guidance, their ambition can be channeled into serious results for your organization. (Hint: Gen Ys make great salespeople!)
- *They want to be global citizens.* When you’ve been surfing the Internet since you were seven, as most Millennials have, it’s not hard to grasp globalization. Most students I meet are eagerly learning a second, third or fourth language, and they’re planning to use their fluency to work or volunteer abroad someday. Colleges are encour-

aging this trend: Goucher College in Maryland now requires study abroad experience to earn a degree, and Princeton University recently launched a study abroad program for students who want to go overseas the year before entering college.

- *They want diversity.* Generation Y is our country’s most diverse generation ever, with one in three Gen Y-ers identifying as a person of color. Most members of this generation are broadminded about religious differences, sexual preferences, regional differences and gender roles. Your youngest employees will bring a naturally diverse and tolerant perspective to your organization, which reflects the diverse customer bases we all serve.
- *They want to involve their parents in their decisions.* When I was a freshman in college, I shared a single phone with three other girls. Calling home once a week was a lot. Today, Millennial college students use their cell phones to email, text and call their parents multiple times a day. This means that parents are involved in most of their decisions, and this parental involvement—some call it “helicopter parenting”—doesn’t stop at graduation. Many twentysomethings’ parents are heavily involved with their children’s purchasing and career decisions, ranging from buying a home to negotiating salary.

Still want to know more about Generation Y? Go ahead and ask! Millennials want to share their opinions. Thanks to their comfort with websites such as Facebook and MySpace, Gen Y-ers are at ease talking about pretty much anything—their likes, dislikes, habits, ideas and more. Think of this as free market research into an important customer segment and as a way to help Gen Y-ers understand other generations as well. After all, the more dialogue we have among the generations, the more we can all succeed. ■



*Lindsey Pollak is a Generation Y expert, professional speaker and the author of Getting from College to Career: 90 Things to Do before You Join the Real World (HarperCollins, 2007). [www.lindseypollak.com](http://www.lindseypollak.com)*