

ENGAGING GENERATIONS

A University of Illinois Extension Program

A University of Illinois Extension Newsletter

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Upcoming *Engaging Generations* Programs

Workshops

October 8th Oscar Swan B&B, Geneva, Illinois
November 12th Freeport, Illinois

Train-the-Trainer

October 27-29 University of Illinois Extension Office
Westchester, Illinois (near O'Hare Airport)
November 24-26 University of Illinois Extension Office
Effingham, Illinois (Extension Only)
December 1-3 University of Illinois College of Medicine
Rockford, Illinois (Extension Only)

For more information and to register go to
www.EngagingGenerations.com

"CHURCH BASEMENT LADIES"— NOT THAT ENTERTAINING IN REAL LIFE!

I was enjoying a late summer evening on the beach with two friends, waiting for the coals to heat up, and watching our kids in the water. My friends belong to the same church, and when our conversation somehow turned to issues related to the worshipping preferences of the different generations represented in the church, my interest was piqued.

Although not a member of that church, my grandfather was raised in it and confirmed in the early 1900s and so I am familiar with the longstanding tradition of this church similar—very similar—to that portrayed in the popular stage musical "Church Basement Ladies." It seems that in recent years, in an effort to attract and retain younger members, the church has turned one of its Sunday morning services into a contemporary worship, featuring modern music, nontraditional instruments, and even some interpretive dance. The other Sunday morning service maintained the longstanding core of worship from Grandpa Art's childhood: traditional hymns, age old topics for sermons and tried-and-true scripture.

As summer approached, the church board wrestled with the problem at hand. Traditionally, because so many families vacation and have other commitments in summer, only one Sunday morning service had been offered Memorial Day though Labor Day. Using their best judgment, the board decided to make the only Sunday service a hybrid, and it turned out to not be a popular decision.

As Labor Day approached, my friends noticed Adele hadn't been attending, and Mavis had not been seen all summer. Gail, Adele's daughter-in-law, previously very active as a volunteer and leader of the late middle-aged

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Finding the right opportunity for each volunteer can be a challenge, but it is key to your success. Companies and organizations must understand how expectations differ between generations, as well as individuals, to effectively recruit volunteers and then retain them. We believe recruitment approaches depend, in great part, on the generation(s) you wish to engage.

For those of the Radio Generation, simply a call for help may be adequate. This generation's priority is family and their community—however it is defined—and many are willing to put any spare time toward a useful purpose. They like to be recognized for their contributions and the value they bring to a specific volunteer opportunity. The Radio Generation looks for ways to continue the feeling of productivity that defined their lives through the years. For this generation, being needed and in an effective manner is essential in active volunteering.

Baby Boomers are very selective in what they choose to do. If your organization does not allow them a modicum of creativity in what they provide, Boomers will likely move on to the next opportunity. Moreover, if your processes are overly hierarchical and too structured, you may retain some Boomer volunteers but you might be surprised to see how often they find ways to supersede the rules and regulations (and revel in doing so!).

Generation X have a strong technical interest. Their need for immediate feedback drives them to make things happen quickly. They expect their leaders to show competence and to earn their respect. Gen X have unique styles of accomplishing tasks and exceptional confidence in their abilities. Most importantly, they make a clear separation between their "life" and work. Finding appropriate volunteer activities for this generation is challenging, as they have limited time to devote. They respond best when their opinions are solicited, when the tasks are fun and flexible, and when they are not micromanaged.

Generation Y likewise are also keenly interested in technology. They are accustomed to a fast pace and like to have lots happening at once. Their ability to multitask may be difficult for other generations to understand. They need to know the desired result of their efforts, and they function well in project-based relationships. One can expect the parents of Gen Y to become involved in their children's activities, even to the point of being a part of any interview process. Again, look for projects that your Gen Y can accomplish with family and/or friends and not necessarily part of a large group activity.

A reminder on both Gen X and Gen Y we cannot stress enough is the importance of allowing these volunteers to do the work you need on their own time and in the place of their choosing whenever possible. Let them use the technology they cut their teeth on—email, intra- and internet, webpages, even faxes—to create and/or deliver what you need. And one more thing—actively listen to what they bring to the table and do not discount their ideas even as you are sure these new ways to deliver the services you need will not work with

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set of “church basement ladies,” was also absent, and talked of not making her Sunday offering with regularity. In fact the statement “that church will not get any more of our family’s money” carried a very powerful message. What had happened to this church that was previously rock solid, full of staunchly supportive worshipers who were carrying on their traditions of their families?

Simple. The Church Board, though honest in their sincerity to meet the needs of the entire congregation had missed one important, colossal factor: their church is made up of members from all generations. Careful consideration must be given to the needs of all generations as they consider changes and what they might deem “enhancements” to the foundation of the church structure. Modern worship music may be inspiring and loved by many, but perhaps considering that Adele has grown to love and cherish those traditional hymns that she has sung for her 82 years would give the Church Board a more complete perspective.

Carefully balancing the needs and preferences of different generations is not a priority for such governing boards—for churches small and large—as well as many other organizations that form the structure of our communities. But, is it not a priority or just not understood? Simple knowledge of the preferences of the different generations and a mindfulness of their needs can be very useful.

That old paraphrased adage “you can please all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time” holds its weight here. Mistakes happen, but so should learning from them. In the case of Grandpa Art’s church, I hope the Board responds when I come to discuss “*Engaging Generations*” at their next meeting.

In smaller communities, many churches have had to limit the number of Sunday services and may not feel they are able to make these kind of targeting the different generations choices; however, many of these same churches are experiencing a decline in numbers of Gen X and Gen Y attendance. The Association of Religion Data Archives indicates ongoing trends (1972-2006) of declining regular attendance overall (dropping from approximately 35 percent of the population to 24 percent) with 26.1 percent of those surveyed from the 18-30 age group responding as “never attending.”

When comparing age cohorts, those who attend religious services a few or more times per year include nearly 25 percent of both Gen X and Gen Y, clearly indicating that there is a desire to attend but perhaps just not enough to override other choices in the competition for time. So, how do churches compete?

It’s quite likely that Grandpa Art’s church’s leadership has transitioned from Radio Generation to Baby Boomers evidenced by the choice for change and with the desire to bring more into the fold—both Boomer characteristics. And, they are using Boomer tactics brought to us in the late 80s symbolized by the movie, *Field of Dreams*: If you build [change] it, they will come. Therefore, the first thing to learn about this—or any organization—is who

makes up their leadership. Given the status of nonprofit and church organizations across the nation, the chances are, Grandpa’s church mirrors those of others in that their primary leadership is of the Boomer era.

While Baby Boomers have the right idea in that change is necessary to attract those from younger generations, perhaps their perspective of what that means is less on target. Generation X look for a number of reasons to participate: the opportunity to be involved and be heard; flexibility in activities; use of modern technology; and the ability to be active as a family. Certainly, this last is a big part of what church service attendance is all about but when we know that the typical Gen Xer thinks of meetings (boring!) will a traditional church service—one that gathers in Radio Generation in great numbers—also attract them?

As with any social service organization, churches are encouraged to seek leadership from the age group that is most difficult to recruit in any generation: 25 to 40 year olds. By engaging today’s Gen Xers in guiding the direction of your church or organization, you gain both experience and insight. Leave it to the less-tested Generation Y and you will travel a road of constant change as they grow into whom they will all become.

Most important to understand about today’s youth, Generation Y, is that they are, in many ways, similar to the Radio Generation in their values and core beliefs. While the way they choose to proceed through life and how they prefer their information to be gathered and presented may differ from older generations, this is a rather traditional and conservative group. Here, we use conservative not in a political ideology but in the preference for the status quo—again, just delivered differently. Therefore, while you would not yet turn leadership of your church or organization over to a barely 20-something, if you do not include members of this generation in your leadership process, you will not likely get them involved and participating. It’s a bit dangerous to assume that all Gen Y wants is flash and technology, “modern” ways and 50 Cent leading the choir; however, it’s more likely true that instead of “if you build/change it, they will come” you consider, “if you ask them, they will come.”

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your audiences. Take a chance that using the Web might increase your efforts or that connecting via email or text messages might be more effective than face-to-face meetings. And where resources are tight, take note that these volunteers just may offer to do it (and pay for it) for you.

Which brings us to probably the single most important aspect of volunteer retention: recognize each volunteer in a manner that means something to them. For more ideas on this, read the *Engaging Generations* White Paper on Recognition. Remember, the last thing you need in a volunteer is that eye-roll that signifies *you*, the volunteer organization, just doesn’t “get it.” Even more than in the workplace, appropriate recognition of your volunteer base is imperative to your organization’s success.