

## Should You Trust Your Marketing to a Millennial?

By Jeff Josephson

Millennials, alternatively known as “Gen Y” or the “Echo of the Baby Boom,” are now ascendant in the workforce. People born in the eighties and nineties are being hired in droves into entry-level and “experience required” marketing positions at both B2C and B2B firms, often because of their knowledge of and experience with social media and technology. The question for B2B firms though, as opposed to those involved in consumer marketing, is whether this knowledge and experience are assets or liabilities.

To be sure, casting aspersions on a whole generation<sup>1</sup> as unqualified for a job category is risky – particularly when its members view everyone as equally capable, and everyone as special. And so the natural reaction of those with a shelf full of participation trophies is likely to be umbrage, at best. And a Twitter storm of recriminations is more likely.

But, just for fun, let’s take a look at what the literature says about Millennials, and see how those traits fit with the B2B marketing position. To borrow some of their famed intellectual rigor, let's use Wikipedia as a source:

Jean Twenge, the author of the 2006 book *Generation Me*, considers Millennials, along with younger members of Generation X, to be part of what she calls "Generation Me". Twenge attributes Millennials with the traits of confidence and tolerance, but also identifies a sense of entitlement and narcissism based on personality surveys that showed increasing narcissism among Millennials compared to preceding generations when they were teens and in their twenties.

For those of us who have interviewed Millennials for a job, there is no doubt that the confidence to which Twenge alludes comes ringing through. Rare is the case where a Millennial admitted that they couldn’t learn to do a job that they weren’t already trained for – suggesting the inevitability of success despite the fact that most marketing jobs don’t offer training.

Similarly, the sense of entitlement seems to be baked in, if not scripted by their college job counselors, as most candidates will refer to it as “my job” before it’s ever been offered. And “Why You Should Hire Me for This Job” now appears above “Experience” as a heading on many résumés.

In March 2014, the Pew Research Center issued a report about how "Millennials in adulthood" are "detached from institutions and networked with friends."

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is satire. The author recognizes that generalizations are inappropriate and inaccurate, and in no way intends to indict an entire generation. That said, failure by the reader to see the humor would, to some, tend to provide proof of the point this piece is trying to make.

To be sure, Millennials bring epic networking strengths to the B2B marketing job. And while detachment from institutions could raise questions about Millennials' loyalty, many Social Media Marketing campaigns have been built on the belief that if the company can harness their Millennials' networking skills then their Facebook friends will gladly introduce the company's products to their own employers.

Indeed, the idea that Millennials hold the secret to making something "go viral" is the main reason why many companies hire Millennials for their marketing positions in the first place. As we all know, Millennials' unique combination of a built-in network and creative insights is the key to your target market speccing in your new family of industrial rivets.

In 2008, author Ron Alsop called the Millennials "Trophy Kids," a term that reflects a trend in competitive sports, as well as many other aspects of life, where mere participation is frequently enough for a reward. It has been reported that this is an issue in corporate environments.

Here is the true nub of the problem. Specifically, if youth sports is preparation for competition later in life, what lessons do we expect Millennials to have learned if no one kept score?

Of course this explains why so many Millennials go into marketing, as opposed to sales. It's much easier to duck accountability when you don't have a quota. But the question remains for the B2B business owner: Given that creating awareness remains, as it should, a legitimate part of the marketing strategy, who's responsible for generating actual sales leads if you have a Millennial in charge of your marketing program? Perhaps we should have a new definition of insanity: "Publishing content and expecting an actual result."

But even those who go into sales seem to have found a way to avoid measuring results, as the highly-leveraged sales job seems to have completely disappeared.

Some employers are concerned that Millennials have too great expectations from the workplace. Some studies predict they will switch jobs frequently, holding many more jobs than Gen Xers due to their great expectations.

This has been borne out in numerous studies, that Millennials switch jobs at nearly three times the rate of Baby Boomers. Of course, this is perfectly fine for the B2B employer who just wants to get rid of them after wasting so much time and money on creating content, blogging, posting to LinkedIn, sending out emails and networking.

Newer research shows that Millennials change jobs for the same reasons as other generations—namely, more money and a more innovative work environment. They look for versatility and flexibility in the workplace, and strive for a strong work-life balance in their jobs and have similar career aspirations to other generations, valuing financial security and a diverse workplace.

The problem with many Millennials is that there is no linkage to the sales results that one has to achieve in order to obtain financial security. There's no mention of the correlation between the work you do and sales, or the risk that competition may thwart your dreams. Beanbag chairs and free coffee are the measure of job satisfaction, but where are the revenues?

So why do we bring this up?

The temptation of the B2B business owner to buy into the Web 2.0 narrative – which, not coincidentally, was invented by Millennials – is strong. The message that you have to do SEO, publish content, drive traffic to your Web site, brand your offering, blog, send emails, and network with people on LinkedIn so that they'll call you (instead of you having to call them) is pervasive. And it's encouraged by an army of technology companies, many of which were started by – you guessed it – Millennials. But is it appropriate for the B2B business owner who's looking for more sales?

What's missing when you buy into the Millennials' narrative, of course, are traditional methods such as using market research to find qualified prospects, direct marketing and, of course, cold calling. Techniques where you actually have to risk rejection, as opposed to simply being ignored (which is easy to pretend isn't happening), are anathema for Millennials more used to “play dates” than not getting picked, or the rough-and-tumble of sandlot baseball.

Unfortunately for most B2B companies the track record of Web 2.0 is abysmal. But how could it be otherwise? If you're one of a hundred companies in your industry pumping out content, how could any of your prospects – who aren't looking for it in the first place – possibly see it? If you're one of 500 million people posting on LinkedIn, is it reasonable to expect to stand out? And do you really think anyone wins the pay-per-click game other than the search engines?

The money wasted is bad enough, but the time is unrecoverable. And now you want to hire an unaccountable acolyte to do more of it?

Putting a Millennial in charge of your marketing program is nothing short of letting the inmates run the asylum.

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