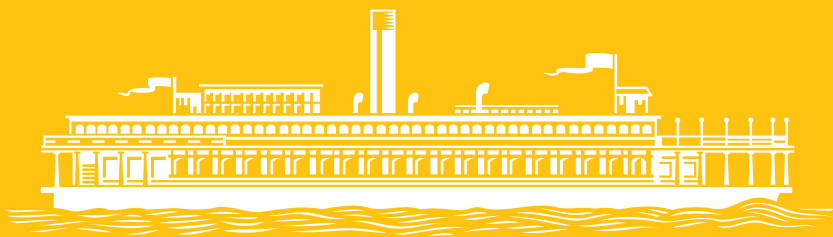


Wooing Generation Y:
 a practical guide
 by Cable Daniel-Dreyfus
 Marketing
 May 2007



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My 23-year-old half-French, half-American cousin has a great life. She speaks four languages, travels around the world staying with friends she meets on Myspace.com and creates opportunities to work on music videos as a producer by networking, networking, networking. When asked if she would ever consider working for a corporate company, she says only if they respect her interests, goals and lifestyle. If they couldn't meet her needs then she would leave or work for herself. Welcome to Generation Y.

Born from 1977–1985, Generation Y is often negatively characterised. Much has been written about this group, as their work expectations and demands are different, and often confusing to their older managers. Mutterings from managing boomers range from being confounded that these whippersnappers have the audacity to demand promotions after only months of employment to the criticism that they jump from job to job and are unable to show longevity and work their way up the corporate ladder. And finally, that they believe in the crazy notion that money isn't everything and "lifestyle" is important.

Yes, my young cousin is demanding and, some would say, unrealistic. But the demographics are in her favour. Due to the enormous push of globalization and the resulting prosperity, the world is her oyster. International companies bemoan the lack of qualified applicants. In short, there is too much work and not enough brains. As the consultancy Accenture reports, "The inability to attract and retain talent is now one of the top three concerns by senior business executives across the globe."¹

Economists say that competition is positive, as it increases service standards and choice for consumers. Companies who want to hire and retain top students are going to have to do more than rely on their reputation and starting salaries to differentiate them. There is a talent war raging and the firms who adapt themselves to Generation Y's needs and desires are going to be the most heavily sought employers.



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This article was first published in *Marketing*, May 2007. To subscribe to *Marketing* magazine call (+ 61) 3 9525 5566 or email: marketing@niche.co.au.

¹ Daniel Thomas, "Chief Executives Awake to Need for Better Talent Management," *Personnel Today* (2006).

A critical question that a Generation Y employee will ask about a job is, “What does my place of work say about me?”

How does a company attract and retain the top talent from the Generation Y pool? By examining the Generation Y cohort and understanding what motivates them. A good place to start is with brands.

Harnessing brand strength

This group understands branding. If nature abhors a vacuum, then brands provide for Generation Y the sustenance older generations would have found from close-knit, local communities, large families or the that lifelong job that no longer exists. That is not to say that they are brand loyal—they are not. The difference is that while Boomers would see the product first and then the brand, Generation Y uses the brand as a heuristic for decoding not only the augmented product’s meaning, but also the meaning that brand provides for the concentric circles of all consumerism, pop culture, politics, and society. It provides context in a big, messy, fast world.

For a company looking to beat the talent dearth, branding represents a significant opportunity. To become an employer brand of choice for Generation Y, a company should examine their brand image, heritage, and meaning and tailor all recruitment activities accordingly in order to attract the type of candidates they desire. It is critical that there is true consistency between the culture of the company and what the recruitment ads say, is the culture. Authentic brands that do what they say are trusted and rewarded by pocketbook voting and resumes.

Leading by example

Brands don’t come much more authentic than Google. For Internet users the world over Google legitimately means intelligence, efficiency and a healthy dash of irreverence.

However, Google has also managed to leverage its brand equity to build a fantastic employer brand. By emphasizing community, fun, quirkiness and smarts, the tech giant Google has become one of the most popular employers with recent graduates. When the company needed more top engineers, they hired a billboard in the brain hub of Cambridge, MA. The only print on the board was of a complicated math problem. No mention of the Google name was on the board. Those that were clever enough to solve this problem were directed to another problem. Those that could solve the second problem were encouraged to apply to Google.²

This kind of recruitment was targeted perfectly to analytical engineers who get thrills out of problem solving. The creative messaging of the billboard was consistent with the potential employee’s perceptions of the Google brand, as well as hinting what the experience would be like to work for Google. This invitation to solve the puzzle was completely on-brand behavior and is consistent with other Google touchpoints. In fact, Google ranked number one in Landor’s 2006 ImagePower[®] survey, a study that conducts over 2,000 interviews to determine which brands are held in highest esteem.

² National Public Radio. (NPR.com.) 2004. www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3916173

A company needn't be a multibillion dollar firm to be able to attract Generation Y; in fact, the flattening world is throwing up ever more alternative channels to reach them. An alternative way to engage Generation Y is to frequent the places where they like to "hang out" and use those channels as a means to launch an awareness campaign.

This group is increasingly living their lives online, on role-playing and social networking sites.³ The intersection of work, socializing and networking is joining, as evidenced by Myspace.com launching a job site. The role-playing site, Secondlife.com, which allows users to create avatars and build a new online life is so popular that Reuters and CNET have opened bureaus. American Apparel has a virtual store and online visitors can shop for virtual clothes for their virtual selves.

Creating a company Myspace.com page and a virtual Secondlife.com office are effective ways to demonstrate creativity and raise awareness to the Generation Y cohort who use these sites.

Asking a Boomer to dedicate time to updating an online networking site or monitoring traffic into the virtual office would be considered a tedious task and a duty, but delegating this task to the younger group in the office would be an incentive that gives Generation Y the control and autonomy they seek in a narrow but meaningful setting.

The double benefit of corporate responsibility

Another way to engage Generation Y is to connect with their moral conscious. A study released by Boston-based companies Cone Inc. and AMP Insights state that 61 percent of 13-25 year olds feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world and stated that Generation Y are "the most socially conscious consumers to date."⁴

Aligning volunteer-work programs, corporate responsibility efforts, and product recycling drives can signal to Generation Y that their personal values are similar with that of their employer's. While it may be more difficult for a company to invest in volunteering programs or a credible sustainability program, it will prove in the long run

a better investment as this is not only an employer-branding signal but also a marketplace signal. As the *Financial Review* succinctly states, "Companies are already picking up these issues from employees and customers. When the markets start asking, that will be a very powerful force."⁵ Environmental policy change is inevitable. The companies who signal first will help to add positive attributes and associations to their corporate brand thus elevating the attractiveness to Generation Y.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car, one of the largest car rental companies in the world, is an employer of choice for Generation Y, in part because they excel at storytelling. To celebrate their 50th anniversary, Enterprise is partnering with the National Arbor Foundation to plant 50 million trees over the next 50 years to the tune of us\$50 million. Enterprise is putting their money where their mouth is, never underestimating Generation Y's ability to subtract the message from the action. Enterprise does not just tout their corporate responsibility behaviors, but also actively promotes the process and effectively communicates their efforts on their website and to the market.

What can I do?

Regardless of the size of the firm, a critical question that a Generation Y employee will ask about a job is, "What does my place of work say about me?" While a Boomer may delineate clearly between work and personal interests, Generation Y uses the company's brand as a simultaneous self-expressive statement and guide for cultural representation. Therefore, incentives have become indicators for corporate culture and a proxy for determining whether a firm is a "good fit" with personality and interests. From the company perspective, incentives ought to be aligned with senior management's desired culture and their vision for the future. This vision must also clearly show the kinds of employees that will be the best fit for the firm and add the most value to daily working life. ■

³ The Future Laboratory, "Sleeve Living," *Spring Dossier* (2006).

⁴ Sharon Jayson, "Generation Y Gets Involved." *USA Today*. [Washington D.C.] 24 October, 2006.

⁵ Narelle Hooper, "Boardrooms Face up to the Challenge of Climate Change," *Financial Review*. Sydney (2 February 2007).

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