



Tuning in to the Generational Zeitgeist

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While it's always been true that audiences respond best when your presentation is tuned into their radio station WIIFT (What's In It For Them), younger audiences present an increasingly challenging demographic for today's presenters. A generational zeitgeist now defines many audiences you may find yourself presenting to. With four generations (baby boomers, generation X, generation Y and millennials) present among the working population, it becomes increasingly difficult to adapt messages to generationally diverse audiences. Success in presenting to these audiences will depend largely on your ability to adapt your messages to their frame of reference.

Each generation has its own priority for work/life balance, its own understanding of company loyalty and its own preference for a medium of communication. We've witnessed an evolution from the letter to the phone call to the email to the text message. Millennials have even created their own language to provide a shorthand form of communication for text messaging. This language has drifted over into offline conversation as well. What has become a natural extension of their communication habits for Millennials has become a foreign language for earlier generations.

Attempts to create a connection with the audience must take these generational zeitgeists into account as well. As a baby boomer, I grew up with The Andy Griffith Show and Gilligan's Island. I quickly learned that in speaking to younger generations, references to foibles of Barney Fife were falling upon deaf ears.

We have familiarity with historical events that younger audiences may not share. That means using historical references and analogies for support of key messages in a presentation may not be as persuasive for younger audiences. You're more likely to create a connection with such audiences by references to popular culture such as movies, songs and television shows. Although voracious media consumers when it comes to popular culture, their diet of news pales by comparison. They typically show less interest in current events and are less aware of newsworthy stories.

Younger people also tend to be less "future-focused." I've seen any number of financial planners illustrate the fact that if people would start even a modest savings program in their early twenties and maintain it throughout their working career, they could easily retire as millionaires. But people in their early twenties seldom prioritize retirement planning. Instead, they're focused on issues such as repayment of student loans, buying a home and starting a family.

The Greek Poet Hesiod wrote: “I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words. When I was a boy, we were taught to be discrete and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise and impatient of restraint.” It’s a sentiment many might share today. But you’ll be more successful in getting your message heard if you suspend such evaluations and focus instead on adapting to the differences.



Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at www.RainMakingPresentations.com.