Heart of the Matter
What Gets Next-Generation Members to Truly Engage?
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BY THOMAS MARCETTI

SALUTE TO AM&P’S 2018 VOLUNTEERS
A heartfelt thank you to all the volunteers who gave back to this association over the past 12 months, strengthening AM&P as well as the association publishing profession and its knowledge base.

ONE STEP AHEAD
Associations set new goals to advance into the new year and far beyond
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‘Liking’ a post in the digital world is a surface-level engagement, but Signature explores what it truly means to be a brand loved by next-generation members.

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Heart of the Matter
What Gets Next-Generation Members to Truly Engage?

By Thomas Marcetti
In a July 2018 Sidebar e-newsletter survey, only 7 percent of responding AM&P members said their content reflects the demographics of the young professionals they want to attract. In a December 2017 survey, 27 percent of responding AM&P members said their content strategies contained plans for multi-generational content. More cringe-worthy, a full 40 percent said they had no idea whether their plans met that goal.

James Pogue, CEO of James Pogue Enterprises, a multi-generational expert, and keynote speaker at the 2018 AM&P Annual Meeting last June, says associations, like many organizations, tend to struggle with reaching and connecting to younger generations.

“Too often, executives look at younger professionals and say, ‘They don’t care, so what’s the point in trying?’” Pogue says. “For many in these younger generations, making a difference and doing something good are their most important goals. If they aren’t engaging with your association, that means the value of the association isn’t clear to them.”

Millennials are now the largest demographic in the U.S. workforce. They are soon to be replaced by Gen Z, which means that very soon, if younger generations don’t see your value, it won’t just mean losing a handful of members; rather, it could mean that the majority of the workforce will not see your value.

In short, associations must make sure their message, mission, and content are relevant to next-generation members.

“Good content, good writing, transcends generations,” says Teresa Brinati, director of publishing for the Society of American Archivists. “It’s absolutely essential to have content targeting different segments — where they are professionally — and if it’s done well, it can have value outside the target group.”

David M. Mastovich, president and CEO of marketing firm MASolutions, says generational descriptions can be helpful and certainly generate discussion, but they can also lead to misconceptions, mismanaging, and missed opportunities.

“Whether describing Baby Boomers, Generation X, or Millennials, the problem is that the generation spans 18 to 20 years. The oldest segment within a cohort is going to be quite different from the youngest segment in that same generation,” he says. “That’s why open, clear communication still rules the day regardless of generation.”

Effectively reaching multi-generational members requires publishers to be authentic, dynamic, and effective.

AUTHENTIC: TRUST IS INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT FOR YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Studies show traditional marketing is far less effective on younger generations and that they are far better at sussing out “fake news” and false information than their
predecessors. Don’t hide information from them. If you skip the bad news to protect the industry’s brand, they will find it somewhere else and then not trust you. Instead, look for ways to build trust with personal and human connection and communication.

“You can’t accidentally be a great organization or a compassionate organization,” Pogue says. “You can’t trip and fall and suddenly have people trust you. You have to purposely say, ‘This is who we are.’ You have to say it in everything. You have a website with 25 different pages? Each page better speak to purpose, people, community — or all three.”

Governments and corporations led the country into the Great Recession, a scar that may haunt Millennials’ economic futures. According to a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the long-term effects of the Great Recession will likely mean that, over their lifetime, Millennials will make as much as 34 percent less than any other living generation.

Is it any wonder younger generations mistrust organizations in general?

“Trust in organizations and businesses is horribly low, historically low,” Pogue says. “For many people, that is the beginning and end of it. They simply don’t trust organizations. So why would they want to be part of one?”

To further complicate matters, many associations advocate statewide or nationally on behalf of their industry. So now, not only is it an organization, which probably can’t be trusted, it’s an organization with deep political ties.

Pogue says associations can start to address this by reminding people they are not faceless institutions, that they are not single-minded automata. Like most effective communications, it has to start with the leaders.

“Leaders have to start using their voices and not just for the association’s mission,” Pogue says. “Say I’m the leader of ABC. ABC has nothing to do with gender equality and parity. That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have a voice about it. In fact, if I say, ‘I believe this,’ or ‘Our association believes in this,’ younger professionals will notice. They have a lot of respect for that. All people respect leaders who stand for something, but it’s crucial for younger generations.”

Younger generations pay attention to groups and leaders who are not afraid to use their voices, not afraid to take a stand, and not afraid of upsetting someone. They only want to be part of a group if it is as passionate as they are.

“Many of us 50-, 60-, 70-year-olds were alive when the saying ‘If you won’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything’ became popular,” Pogue says. “However, many people from these age groups have forgotten that. They tend to just be quietly disappointed — hide behind their armor — and trudge on.

“Younger generations grew up seeing the power of people taking a stand and making change happen,” he says. “They are trained to use their voice — and they will.”

Mastovich says organizations often run into problems when they focus too much on what they want the message to be and not enough on addressing the audience.

“Our communication problems often stem from poor or nonexistent communication. The lack of effort in trying to understand the person or group you’re communicating with is a real issue,” Mastovich says.

“Our communication problems often stem from poor or nonexistent communication. The lack of effort in trying to understand the person or group you’re communicating with is another issue.”

— David M. Mastovich, president and CEO of marketing firm MASSolutions

Part of understanding this difference is rooted in understanding the generational difference in approaches to organizations and hierarchies, Pogue says.

“Millennials and younger generations were allowed and encouraged to speak
their minds, to have an opinion, to go to leaders and say, ‘We can do better,’” Pogue says. “When they get into organizations run by older generations, that doesn’t work. Older generations were trained to not speak up, to not have opinions. You are supposed to keep your head down and play office politics. If that is what your association looks like to new young members, it won’t make any sense to them. It will alienate them. Then, you are just another organization they can’t trust.”

**DY NAMIC: YOUNGER GENERATIONS NAVIGATE DOZENS OF INFORMATION FEEDS THAT UPDATE CONSTANTLY**

Static web content is anathema to younger generations. They learn quickly how swift you are and won’t hesitate to look for someone faster.

They are also far more likely than older generations to do research, which means they will check many media channels and sources. Any channel where you are not will echo loudly with your absence and with the sound of your competitors.

A big part of this need for speed is driven not just by the desire for the latest information — though that is important — but by the preference for dealing with information in an interactive way. As good as AI and UX has gotten, in general the most valuable interactions are still going to be person to person.

Dan Schawbel, partner and research director at Future Workplace, says an intelligent and effective use of technology and person-to-person interactions has to start internally before it can be mirrored in outward-facing content.

“When technology can flatten corporate hierarchies and foster collaboration, it’s important to not overuse or misuse it. For instance, you can text someone a reminder to go to a meeting, but don’t text someone trying to resolve a conflict,” Schawbel says. “Technology should be a bridge to human interaction, not a barrier. Lack of connectivity makes people feel disengaged, isolated, and lonely.”

Feelings of disengagement, which is a problem for all ages, is especially problematic for younger generations.

“We can scale connectivity through technology, but the human touch is also required. We can scale large company announcements through video and audio, but then have more one-on-one or small team meetings in person, over the phone, or through videoconferencing,” Schawbel says. “We need to scale communications, but also have intimate ones at the same time.”

Of course, this flies in the face of the stereotype of the young professional shunning people and print for mobile devices and digital content. But that’s a stereotype that has well overstayed its welcome. Pew Research studies — such as, “Younger Americans’ Library Habits and Expectations,” “Key trends in social and digital news media,” “Younger adults more likely than their elders to prefer reading news” and so on — find that Millennials and Gen Z are far more favorable toward print than Gen X or Baby Boomers. Magazines in particular are far more popular with younger generations than with older.

“**When you look across generations, three things are most important: people, purpose, and community. People want to work for and with organizations that treat people well, have a clear purpose they can connect with, and treat the community with respect — locally and globally.**

— James Pogue, CEO of James Pogue Enterprises

“When we offer free back issues of our magazine and journal at our annual meeting, the No. 1 group taking those are young people,” Brinati says. “A lot of people think they need more digital to reach younger professionals, when they are equally as likely to go for print as older generations.”

What this really means is that a true omnichannel approach is needed. All-digital is a bust. All-print is a bust. Simply having a social media account or digital edition is a bust. Every channel needs to be leveraged to its fullest potential, and every channel needs full support.
“Adapting communication skills is important for connecting in an authentic way to people of all age groups,” Schawbel says. “When generations come together to share and support each other, everyone wins, especially the association or profession they are a part of.”

SIGNIFICANT: IF THEY HAVE TO ASK HOW YOU ARE DIFFERENT, IT’S PROBABLY TOO LATE
Younger generations are incredibly driven to make a difference. If you can’t help them with that, they’ll look somewhere else. Tell stories that emphasize your mission, explain the “why” behind what is happening in your field, and show (don’t tell) what sets you apart.

“This doesn’t mean all leaders should talk about a bunch of issues just to try to make younger generations happy,” Mastovich says. “It means that if you are passionate about something and can convey your position in an authentic, professional, and respectful way, you have an opportunity to reach and influence a key target market from a recruitment, retention, and customer acquisition standpoint.”

An association’s significance certainly circles back to its authenticity. Pogue points out that it’s one thing for leaders or organizations to say what they stand for and another thing entirely for them to actually stand.

“People will say, ‘Well, James never cared about this before, so why should we care about it now?’” Pogue says. “You can’t flip a switch and motivate people to make big moves. You have to build it. If you try to build it on the eve of when you need it, it’s way too late. You need to build it now, so it’s ready when you need it.”

This is another area where associations should naturally shine. Mission and purpose are supposed to be baked into everything associations do. Their content should be no different.

“Being a member of an association is about the community you become a part of, the information you have access to, the opportunities to volunteer, and the tools and guidance to improve,” Brinati says. “Association publications embody much of that naturally. They have endured because of it. But we have to be much more deliberate in those efforts to continue to endure.”

Professional development and self-improvement are two areas that are very important to younger generations who are still growing into their professions. These are areas many associations neglect.

“Anything on management and leadership is important. In many professions, there is little if any management training in school,” Brinati says. “They are going to look to their professional association to guide them. They want anything having to do with standards and best practices and anything in the digital environment. Changes there are so rapid and happen in so short a time.”

Ultimately, the greatest strengths of association publications are their intangibles. Pogue says reaching multi-generational audiences is not really about content or the delivery media — not really.

“When you look across generations, three things are most important: people, purpose, and community,” Pogue says. “People want to work for and with organizations that treat people well, have a clear purpose they can connect with, and treat the community with respect — locally and globally.”

In addition to industry news and best practices, younger generations are looking for proof of those three areas, Pogue says. Older generations have been taught to not expect it, but they appreciate it when it happens.

“Younger professionals are looking for it because that’s how they were raised,” he says. “Older professionals respond to it because that’s who we are as human beings. How you seed your content and how you push it out might affect your reach, but addressing or not addressing those three areas will definitely affect people’s actions.”

Thomas Marcetti is association editor for Signature.
Engaging the Mythical Millennial

By James E. Meyers

There’s been so much frenzy about this audience, but much of it is surface level. Pundits throw around a lot of so-called solutions, which generally fall into a few categories: Make membership free, make content more engaging, and make everything digital.

The reality is, it’s not enough to make things cheaper, or digital, or add a bunch of shiny graphics to the materials you produce. To understand how to speak to young professionals, you first have to separate fact from fiction and distill trends from material, meaningful shifts in how people communicate and seek out information.

The good news is that many of the strategies forward-thinking associations are adopting — being pointedly mission-based, de-emphasizing traditional membership — are inherently appealing to the younger generation. The key is not just to cultivate a value proposition that’s grounded in those ideas, but also to communicate it in a way that resonates with a tech-savvy, always-on, mission-driven population.

Here are five steps to make your organization focused on Millennials and future generations, without falling prey to passing trends.

1. Be Digital First — But Not Digital Only
You have to be where they are: Millennials expect information to be convenient — and, unfortunately for you, the meaning of convenient varies from person to person.

One thing is consistent, however, for those accustomed to using a phone or tablet for just about everything: Convenient almost always means digital. If you’re tempted by the idea of going all digital, though, that is usually a mistake.

When it comes to messaging, associations that throw themselves headlong into a digital-only approach can end up alienating both younger members who crave authenticity and older ones who are accustomed to print. Without a doubt, there’s still power in paper — maybe more than ever. Imagination’s research shows that a print magazine is routinely among the top three benefits that association members most value.

The precise content distribution mix varies from association to association, depending on who your audience is and what they need. You need to cover a healthy mix of media with your specific niche or industry in mind.

2. Don’t Forget to be Human
A bone-dry content style will not endear you to Millennials, who are leery of corporate-speak in all its forms and have come of age with the much more casual-speak of social media as their tone-setter.

Loosen up the tone of your communications, but don’t go overboard and risk alienating members by suddenly ricocheting from a style reminiscent of a corporate news release to emoji-laden, acronym-riddled content (srsly!).

Part of being human, too, goes back to not just the words you use, but also your behavior, especially in social spaces. Young professionals have been communicating in social media virtually their entire lives. They expect conversations, not one-way communication streams where content is being pushed at them by a faceless entity. You have to be there. You need to respond and be a part of the conversation. When you talk, be prepared to listen — and talk back.

3. Put the Mission First
One of my favorite stories about the evolving role of mission comes from the American Astronomical Society. Executive Director Kevin Marvel recalls that in 2016, a group of young
members sent a letter asking AAS to take a position on the Black Lives Matter movement. They believed, Marvel says, that speaking out was the AAS’s rightful role, that it was incumbent upon a professional society to clearly state that it supports all minorities in science.

This may seem way outside of an association’s realm. But younger members are attracted to the idea that the association has a larger mission. Take advantage of that. Think about ways your organization can support your younger members as people living in the broader world — not just with tactical professional tools. When you put the mission first, you’re in the best position to compete with the online groups and other organizations vying for people’s attention.

4. Embrace the On-Demand Model

On-demand isn’t just about Millennials. All people — but especially young people — are accustomed to getting things when they want them, how they want them. This is a generation that has grown up watching TV shows on demand — the shows essentially plan around them.

Same for shopping, which is at their fingertips 24 hours a day. Spotify brings perfectly curated music instantly, everywhere. Instacart. Uber. The list goes on. When it comes to consumption, gratification is immediate.

For associations, that means rethinking how you structure membership. The days of one-size-fits-all are probably behind you. The AAS’s Marvel, for example, says he knows that paying for ongoing membership is going to be a hard sell for many young people just coming out of school. That’s why those people can access professional development without becoming members. The way he sees it, that model is true to the mission; after all, “enhancing our understanding of the universe means always having a pipeline of students who have the right skill set.”

5. Provide Human Interaction

I talk a lot about the importance of being digital. But the human touch is still important — in-person interaction isn’t going away. It’s changing. Today, it’s less about shaking hands and making connections, since you can do that, to some extent, digitally. It’s about connection — true, meaningful connection. This is good news: It’s not so different from what associations have been doing for decades. People still want to learn from peers and connect with them. They still crave recognition, an area where associations can shine.

That may mean building communities around topics or issues that are particularly important to early careerists. Or maybe it means offering networking sessions for younger members who are inclined toward job hopping. You still have to offer connections — but they must be contextualized and hyper-relevant.

For all of these changes, this isn’t about obsessing about Millennials and trying to appeal to them at the expense of older members. This is about acknowledging that Millennials — and the Gen Z workers coming up behind them — are at the leading edge of many shifts in how associations communicate and act when it comes to association and membership.

Evolving to accommodate what are becoming widespread, fundamental changes is essential to the future of your organization, no matter who your target market is.

— James E. Meyers is president, CEO, and founder of Imagination. This article is an excerpt from Meyers’ book “Becoming Essential” available December 2018.