

## **Generational Shift Requires Nonprofits to Rethink Communications** **By: Hardy Smith**

Communicating successfully is extremely critical to nonprofits. There are donors to reach, volunteers to recruit, causes to publicize, and program participants to sign up.

Basic to ensuring that outreach efforts are being executed with maximum effectiveness is making certain that important messages are clearly identified and, more importantly, understood. This is becoming increasingly difficult because lines that previously differentiated audience segments are becoming blurred.

Recognizing and dealing successfully with the current generational transition greatly influences how effective an organization will be in reaching its communication objectives. The impact of this demographic shift will be even more dramatic in future years.

This transformation means a one-size-fits-all approach that may have been effective in the past will no longer produce the same results.

Likewise, methods previously utilized for message delivery can no longer be depended upon as single or even primary sources of information. Case in point: newspapers and other print media, once a main source of information, are facing declining circulation and are now working to establish a presence on the internet. Similarly, as viewership drops, television is using social media to build viewer connection.

To help nonprofits gain a better understanding of this change and how to cope with it, I turned to Anne Loehr who has been called the "Generational Guru" by *The Washington Post*.

According to Anne we are now a population that is made up of four generations and each has distinctly different personality characteristics that affect how information is received and responded to.

The four groups are Traditionalists (born between 1922-1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964), Generation X (born between 1965-1980), and Generation Y (born between 1981-2001).

Their values are different. How they choose to engage socially is different. How they communicate is different. How they process information is different.

Anne warns, "Communicating successfully with one message using one singular method of delivery to all four groups is nearly impossible."

To overcome the challenge this generational distinctiveness presents, Anne offers these four suggestions.

1. "Nonprofits will be well advised to spend more time crafting their message," she suggests. "Go deep to understand your various audience targets. The more you know about who you are trying to reach, the better focused you can be."

2. "If an organization's target is one that is large and diverse, successful outreach may require development of multiple forms of the same message for delivery through multiple communication channels," she says. This approach obviously takes more effort but will payoff with greater results.

3. Even though your focus presently may be on Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, Anne shares, "It is important not to discount the younger groups."

"The personality traits of those in the engagement pipeline for replacing today's volunteers and donors indicate building relationships with these individuals takes time, even years. Since connecting with them takes much longer than previous generations, unless you reach them at an early age they are likely to be committed elsewhere and your chances for engaging them later will be lost."

4. Anne also counsels, "It is a mistake to assume that younger generations will change their social engagement related behavior with age. Research shows they will carry their generational characteristics with them."

Take these suggestions from Generational Guru Anne Loehr as thought starters for thinking strategically about your communications activity.

Reaching different generational groups is more than just separating your contact lists. Message content makes a difference and that includes choice of words and how many are used. How graphics, video, colors, numbers, and photos are utilized also influences how effective a message is to each particular age group.

When preparing annual appeals, annual reports, event invitations, newsletters, advertisements, developing websites, and organizing plans to publicize services, think about who your intended audience is and identify the best vehicle for reaching it.

Dealing effectively with generational change is another significant challenge in the constantly evolving world of nonprofits.

As the competition for resources intensifies, Anne's advice on understanding the dynamics of generational differences will become increasingly important. Nonprofits can further benefit from Anne's insights by visiting her blog at [www.anneloehr.com](http://www.anneloehr.com)

**(As a nonprofit consultant and speaker, author Hardy Smith helps organizations achieve results-oriented high performance success. Learn more about Hardy by visiting: [www.hardysmith.com](http://www.hardysmith.com) )**