





# The Gen Y Imperative

How effective are your communications in engaging the youngest members of the workforce? A new global study reveals what works—and what doesn't

by Leah Reynolds, Elizabeth Campbell Bush and Ryan Geist

**T**he global talent crisis employers face is a complex and widely recognized issue. But the big question, “how do we better engage new, diverse workforces?” seems to yield only abstract solutions and theoretical responses. There is plenty of dialogue surrounding this challenge, but few organizations have translated abstract ideas into the concrete solutions that effectively engage their diverse workforces. We see this as a clear call to communication leaders and advisers to play a more strategic role in helping companies reach the best and brightest in each generation.

Communicators have an opportunity to be catalysts for change by adapting our style to the needs of our workforce to foster a stronger sense of con-

nection and community. So what steps can we take to effectively adapt and connect with employees—particularly those in the youngest generations?

Quite simply, we asked them. Results from a recent global survey of IABC members confirm the need for significant changes in organizational communication in order to reach the next generations of employees (see page 21). We have already seen considerable shifts in the advertising and marketing world, where Generation Y (those born between 1982 and 2000) is recognized as an important consumer segment. Now, members of this new generation are filing through the corporate doors, bringing with them different expectations that challenge how companies communicate internally. These challenges will only grow more

## generation y: in their own words

*From Lesley in Canada:*

“Word of mouth is not exactly word of mouth anymore. It happens now via cell phone, texting and forwarding e-mails. It is a different way of spreading the message—and has significant implications on the speed of messaging.”

*From Kimberley in Jamaica:*

“Gen Yers want to be communicated with daily! All generations want to have a constant flow of information, but Generation Y expects it.”



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acute as more members of Generation Y—and generations to follow—join the workplace. But engaging this young workforce requires far more than a change in communication mechanisms. Rather, it requires a fundamental shift in how companies think strategically about communication with all generations, in terms of style, content, context, attitude, tactics, speed and frequency.





### Understanding the “connected generation”

The newest group to join the workforce, Generation Y, is now about four years old in the corporate world. They are the offspring of baby boomers, and nearly as large a demographic group (76 million Gen Yers versus 80 million boomers). Within the next decade, this group will be entirely inte-

grated into the global workplace. These young people have prompted their fair share of business press, earning a variety of often controversial labels, including the entitled generation, the next great generation and the connected generation. It should be no surprise that the tech-savvy Gen Yers in your organization want to feel connected, updated and involved. The technology that they grew

## Talking 'bout my generation

The four generations represented in the current workforce have very different preferences across all aspects of communication. It is clear that communication preferences have changed and we need to adapt to engage diverse audiences.

				
	<b>VETERAN (born before 1946)</b>	<b>BOOMER (1946–1964)</b>	<b>X'ER (1965–1981)</b>	<b>Y'ER (1982–2000)</b>
STYLE	Formal	Semiformal	Not so serious; irreverent	Eye-catching; fun
CONTENT	Detail; prose-style writing	Chunk it down but give me everything	Get to the point—what do I need to know?	If and when I need it, I'll find it online
CONTEXT	Relevance to my security; historical perspective	Relevance to the bottom line and my rewards	Relevance to what matters to me	Relevance to now, today and my role
ATTITUDE	Accepting and trusting of authority and hierarchy	Accept the “rules” as created by the Veterans	Openly question authority; often branded as cynics and skeptics	OK with authority that earns their respect
TACTICS	Print; conventional mail; face-to-face dialogue or by phone; some online information and interaction	Print; conventional mail; face-to-face dialogue; online tools and resources	Online; some face-to-face meetings (if they're really needed); games; technological interaction	Online; wired; seamlessly connected through technology
SPEED	Attainable within reasonable time frame	Available; handy	Immediate; when I need it	Five minutes ago
FREQUENCY	In digestible amounts	As needed	Whenever	Constant

SOURCE: DELLOTTE CONSULTING LLP/PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

## IABC pulse survey reveals a critical disconnect

The data we collected from 1,279 IABC respondents (out of 14,471, for an 8.8 percent response rate) includes perspectives from all generations in the workforce. While the overwhelming majority of respondents identified themselves as North American (86.6 percent), the data represents member perspectives from all continents. Perhaps most noteworthy, analysis reveals little to no significant variance in responses across continents, underscoring the idea that engagement of new workforces is a truly global issue. Also surprising, there was little variance across generations. Top-line results present an unsettling picture: Organizations often fail to engage and connect with their young workforce through communication.

- **There is insufficient awareness** and understanding at the top. Sixty-four percent of

respondents said that organizational leadership does not have a clear understanding of the communication preferences and perspectives of Generation Y. (Interestingly, Generation Y respondents were slightly less critical of leadership.) This seems like a void in awareness that corporate communicators can logically fill by broadening their understanding of new workforce communication needs and carrying these messages upward.

- **Communicators recognize a need for change** but report that few successful change efforts have actually occurred. More than 75 percent of IABC respondents reported that current communication methods were ineffective or only slightly effective in connecting with young professionals. Yet a gap clearly exists between awareness of the issue and action, with 74 percent reporting that no significant

adaptations in communication have taken place to date.

- **We clearly understand the risks.** An eye-opening 90 percent of those who responded indicated that their own, or their client's, organization will be at some risk if they fail to significantly adapt their communication methods and technology.

It seems we have a challenge on our hands. This challenge will require more than tweaking messages or adding another channel of communication, but rather more radical, measurable and valuable change. To start, a shift in mind-set is needed. The responses from our IABC colleagues worldwide have clearly identified the significance of this issue. We hear it loudly. Do you?

—L.R., E.C.B. and R.G.

up with gave them real-time access to information, and their boomer parents and teachers socialized them to speak up and contribute their ideas.

The different expectations Generation Y brings to the workforce seem to polarize corporate opinions about the value they will create. Realistically, however, it doesn't matter whether you see them as a catalyst for positive change and a source of fresh insights, or an overly entitled generation that needs to learn to play by the rules. The short supply and large demand for talent globally require corporate leadership to better connect with and engage all members of the workforce. We need to advance beyond Gen Y as a source of debate and understand how to engage them.

More important, we need to prepare ourselves for the new

perspectives and communication preferences future generations will bring to the workplace. Historically, generations are defined by the global events they experience during their lifetime. However, rapidly advancing technology has caused a paradigm shift in generational change, causing it to occur at a much faster rate. Futurists predict that generations will become significantly shorter in terms of span of years as we move into the 21st century, meaning that norms and structures will need to adapt more quickly than ever before. The ability to adapt for generational change will be an increasingly critical organizational competency.

**How effective are our communications in connecting with young members of our workforce, and how are we measuring that effectiveness?**

**We know we need to become more dynamic and adaptive to reach all generations, but to identify ways to translate this into action, we reached out to IABC members worldwide who fit into a unique category: Generation Y. Here are some of their key insights.**

- **Shorter, more frequent updates.** Generation Y likes to be informed and feel plugged in. If they sense that leadership is not sufficiently updating them, they will find information elsewhere, using their huge Web 2.0-enabled networks and tapping the blogosphere. Communication moves fast—if you wait to cascade messages through the ranks, you risk a different version of your message reaching the front lines. Beyond Generation Y, succeeding workforces will expect information to be shared with

**generation y:  
in their own words**

*From Jennifer in Hong Kong:*

"One of the great challenges for organizations is that younger professionals do not think it safe or do not have ways to share their opinion with more senior members of the company—knowledge that could be valuable."

*From Abdallah in Tanzania:*

"Most organizations do not give a chance for the younger generations to communicate up effectively. You find now that younger generations have a lot of ideas—really brilliant ideas, actually. If management can find a way to tap the knowledge that is brought in by these young generations, it would bring a very big impact to the organization."



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### generation y: in their own words

*From Luke in Australia:*

“Generation Yers are really motivated and keen to be involved in the communication process. By engaging them in the crafting of key messages, for example, we’ve seen them become advocates for both the messages and the process. It’s an opportunity for organizations to re-create the way they do things, as Gen Y are more willing to actively participate in the workplace and in the community in both a communications sense, and as engaged citizens.”

*From Craig in the U.S.:*

“Younger generations want less filler, just the succinct, bottom-line truth—or as close to it as you can get. Any rhetoric added, we almost see as deceptive.”

### about the authors

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increasing speed and frequency. The charge for communicators is to streamline the communication process and identify methods that enable real-time messages. That might mean limiting the number of people who need to see a communication prior to publication, or challenging functional leaders to connect more often, however briefly, with their staffs.

- **Create authentic communications.** We can’t stress enough the importance of authenticity in connecting with young audiences. When we say *authentic*, we mean far more than telling the truth. Telling the truth is assumed. Authentic communications consider the interests and communication styles of their audiences. They forgo the traditional corporate rosy glow and appeal to audiences by answering the “why should I care?” question with down-to-earth language. Regardless of which generation you identify with, we all connect better with more authentic messages.

However, the business reality is that Generation Y, bombarded by marketers from a young age, is a particularly tough audience. They have proven more discriminating about insincere rhetoric, and they will immediately disengage if they feel they are being spoon-fed a contrived message. The Gen Yers we spoke with resoundingly emphasized the need for more transparent communications from leadership, even if the message isn’t pretty. Adopting a more open and honest attitude and style in the message will speak volumes to a young audience. Ask yourself

how communication can be more authentic. Surveying your employees can help direct you to your answer, but IABC members have another suggestion.

- **Turn workers into change agents.** If you ask your Gen Y employees how communications can be more authentic, they will almost always welcome the opportunity to give feedback and lend ideas. These professionals want to tangibly contribute, and will likely share their extracurricular time with you if they feel they can make an impact.

How can you do this? For example, you might establish authentic feedback mechanisms by leveraging young employees to take the pulse of how communications are received on the front lines. Find young high performers, and give them the autonomy and responsibility to lead a special project to improve communications, in addition to their normal work. Ask them to conduct focus groups or generate ideas to better connect with their peers. Even further, involve them directly in crafting the content of the messages and identifying effective channels.

Gen Y employees love to collaborate. If you make a genuine effort to involve them in the communication process, they will quickly turn into your biggest advocates and virally spread your messages.

- **Develop mechanisms to generate great ideas.** No longer can organizations succeed by looking to the top of the org chart to find all the bright ideas.

There is tremendous untapped potential in most organizations, especially large ones. New workforces bring increasingly broad and diverse worldviews shaped by advancing technology and globalization. How can we leverage these broad thinkers and capitalize on their insights? How can fresh ideas be identified? Consider developing more, or more effective, vehicles for upward communication or launching an “idea campaign.” Move beyond the dissemination of information and create a mechanism for tapping into ideas, no matter where in the organization they originate.

Engaging Generation Y is the current challenge, but more imperative is the ability to adapt to a flattening and increasingly connected world. The pace of change will continue to influence generational work expectations and, in turn, how we must respond in order to successfully inform and connect diverse workforces. The risks are high for those who rely on traditional forms of communication to engage employees.

Organizations that fail to adapt will find it difficult to recruit and retain critical young talent. If we can better connect our workforce by building a sense of community and drawing out insights, we increase our organizations’ ability to compete in a faster and increasingly competitive global economy. Are we up to the challenge? If so, we believe it is time for communication leaders to change their tactics and serve as a strategic force in the talent war, not just as messengers. •