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Hospitality Across Generations: Move over Black Tie, Hello Blue Jeans!

By [Rob Rush](#), CEO, LRA Worldwide

The first sign of the times, you ask? Perhaps it was back in 2006 when Ritz-Carlton looked in the mirror and realized that “Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen” didn’t exactly apply to a 32-year-old CEO in jeans and a t-shirt. In a nod to the changing demographics of those who consumed “luxury,” Ritz loosened up a bit, recognizing the need for a generational component to its time-honored and revered operational and guest service standards.

That shifting mindset has only grown in our industry, as virtually every facet of a hotel operation has needed to step back and take a look at how it does business based on ever-widening generational needs. A byproduct of this trend, of course, has been the proliferation of brands aspiring to a laser-like focus on the language and needs of one specific generation; however, those who can rely on that true niche strategy are few and far between. Most of us need all the bodies we can get, whether they use Western Union or Wi-Fi. Full disclosure here for a moment - take my credentials on this subject with a grain of salt. I don’t tweet, I don’t “friend,” and I’m barely Linked In. But I have a fairly keen sense of what impacts the customer and employee experience. For the first time ever, four generations are actively represented in the workforce, and given that “65 is the new 55” and that 401Ks have withered in the last 18 months, a fifth generation is certainly still a consideration as both employee and certainly as a vigorous and active consumer. For the record, the generations in question are:

- Traditionalists (1915-1945)
- Baby Boomers (1946-1955)
- Trailing Edge Baby Boomers (1956-1964)
- Gen-Xers (1965-1981)
- Millenials (1982 – 2001) **(1)**

Without a doubt, this changes the way we market, sell, operate and train, forcing everyone to realize that there may be no “best” way to do things that we had previously taken for granted. Instead, we must collectively come to grips with the realization that there are multiple constructions of what is “best,” depending on the activity and the audience.

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Be careful of what you think you know and how you might have stereotyped the generations outlined above. While it is clear that Gen-Xers and especially Millenials (or “Gen-Y”) consume their information via a range of media , with few limitations on when or where that digestion takes place, it would be foolhardy to assume that the old guard is still tethered to the newspaper and a landline. Most studies place internet usage – in its varied forms – for Traditionalists at 33-percent; that number rises above 50-percent if you just look at the younger end (62-71) **(2)** of that spectrum. In keeping with that thought, this older group is no longer looking to be tucked away someplace to play shuffleboard; once again, with “65 as the new 55,” these folks are looking to be challenged and expand their horizons via travel and hospitality and should be marketed accordingly. Likewise, it would be unwise to assume that this group is retired, as “semi-retirement” is becoming a more realistic state of being given the desire of this generation to stay engaged in some form of work...and quite possibly the need to do so based on the current economic landscape.

Of course, the need to market and sell differently to Gen-X and Millennials has been well documented, and not just in the smorgasbord of alternative communications required to reach them. It's not just that you blog or Tweet...but how you do it. While the conventional wisdom is that Gen-X really wants to understand how a product or service is going to enhance their lifestyle or their enjoyment of such, Millennials are more interested in how a product or service is going to enhance...them...or their wallet. (Really, they're not all egotistical and self-absorbed. Just in the textbooks.) So creating a Facebook page just for the sake of having "friends" doesn't serve much purpose; loading it with information that speaks to these friends in a way that helps them understand how your product can enhance their lives is a must.

These distinctions don't only exist in how you sell and market to the different generations, but in a workforce that is growing increasingly multi-generational, how you manage across generations in sales and marketing roles. Generally speaking, the older guard has a more traditional notion of working one's way up through the ranks by merit and pounding the phones to generate leads; where they might be more comfortable in an online milieu as a consumer, that comfort-level declines somewhat in the workplace. Gen-X and Millennials? As you might imagine, far more attuned to technology as a means for driving awareness, leads and sales. But don't lump them into the same category as far as work environment and motivation. Both are willing to work on teams, but Gen X is eager to carve out their distinctive space on that team; likewise, where Millennials are viewed as motivated primarily by moolah, there is a "quality of life" component that occupies an elevated place of importance in the Gen X hierarchy of needs. Certainly all generalizations, so take them with a grain of salt...but manage with care.

Operations

This is where one needs to take The Golden Rule – treat others as you would like to be treated yourself – and tweak it a bit. For the purposes of this conversation, you really need to treat others...as they would like to be treated. As discussed previously, "Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen" may still resonate with the generations that skew a bit older, who may equate formality with luxury. The younger end of the spectrum, however, may find this formality slightly uncomfortable; what they are really craving are authentic interactions in their hospitality experiences. This requires the operator to stray a bit outside of the traditional hospitality comfort zone of rigid standards and practices, instead empowering individual associates to "read" the guest they are engaging and customizing the experience accordingly.

As my colleague, Rick Reilly, wrote earlier this year in Lodging Magazine in his article "Process vs. Personality":

"If the fundamentals are so well ingrained that your employees are able to shift their focus from putting one step in front of the other, they become free to expend that energy on creating truly captivating experiences. This shift yields the heightened awareness necessary to pick up on non-verbal cues, understand the intricacies of a situation, and eventually anticipate needs. The real kicker to this model, however, is the fact that the personality side of the interaction takes practice, too—you have to know what to look for and where to look for it. Unfortunately, this stage is inherently less structured in the sense that you can't provide a straightforward list of step-by-step instructions (i.e., standards) to walk someone through the process ... because personality is not a process. It's more about providing the tools, exposure, and reinforcement so that the employees can create something memorable on their own, letting their natural gifts shine". (3)

Naturally, this requires a skilled and confident workforce, an operator willing to loosen the grip a bit, and a concentrated effort on....

Training

There has been a traditional view in the hospitality industry that "Classroom is King" – how can one possibly teach the fine art of hospitality without a literal "hands on" experience. That notion has expanded beyond the classroom, where the "hands-on" training, coaching and mentoring might be provided by a manager or supervisor in the field. A bit of a different construct, but a human-to-human learning interaction nonetheless. As new generations have entered the workforce more accustomed to consuming everything (media, news, entertainment) "on-demand," the expectations have likewise shifted in how one consumes training. Just as younger generations find the notion of being limited in their consumption of news to when the newspaper hits the stoop at 7 AM or Walter Cronkite hits the airwaves at 7 PM as absurd, so is the concept of being confined to a classroom at a specific date and time for a predetermined block of time. Hence, the emergence of e-learning and distance-learning tools, allowing users to

avail themselves of training content in much the same fashion as they access other information - “whatever, whenever.” (Sorry W Hotels!) The more recent evolution of this concept is in the use of the Web 2.0 and social networking tools that have become seamlessly integrated into the Millennial lifestyle to more actively push content outward. No longer is distance learning purely a destination – it is now a constant feed.

I’m not claiming any revolutionary thinking here – just putting together some things I’ve read and observed in our work within the hospitality industry and without. Again, as one who sits firmly in Baby Boomer-land, you can take my observations with a grain of salt. Depending on your age, it may be from a traditional salt shaker, a small baggie of organic sea salt harvested from the Dead Sea and purchased at your neighborhood co-op...or the “grain of salt” app on your iPhone.

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