Why “Community Good” Initiatives of the Past Struggle to Appeal to the Millennial Volunteers of the Present

Community Exchange Programs Need to Adopt A “Millennial Style of Communication” to Succeed in Today’s Fast Paced World

Tag Words: Millennials; Baby Boomers; Social Media, Community Exchanges; hOurworld; Volunteering, Ice Bucket Challenge

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Summary: When it comes to community service, the Millennial Generation only participate on their terms. In order to achieve high young adult participation, the process of getting them involved must be short and concise, be meaningful in a big way, involve family, friends, and like-minded peers, allow them to utilize their professional skills, and take on leadership roles. Currently, community exchange and service groups are doing very little to shift outdated marketing strategies in their direction. In order to succeed in attracting Millennial and other generations, organizations need to adopt “A Millennial Style of Communication”.

Video Link: http://youtu.be/s7shISDEGU0

The Issue: Why “Community Good” Programs, with all Their Best Intentions, Fizzle and Why Community Service Groups are Finding it Hard to Attract the Millennial Generation

Who are the Millennials?
The millennial generation consists of those born in the late 80’s to early 90’s. These are the children of the Baby Boomer generation. The Baby Boomers of the 50’s-70’s single handedly shaped the America that the Millennial grew up in. This was an America filled with millions of Vietnam veterans, Civil rights protestors, and peace loving hippies. The one thing these three groups had in common was their empathy for their fellow man. This, and many other values were then, in turn, passed on to their children.

The young adults that make up this current generation not only supersede their parents in size, but also in diversity. “15% of young Americans were born in a different country, and almost 42% of them identify as non-white” (1). In regards to community service, this is a big deal. This means that almost half of the largest generation in American history has grown up as people of color. In todays’ day and age, this, more often than not, means that a majority of those people of color have grown up in low to middle class. The decision to better this situation as they aged led to an intense desire to give back.

Millenials and the Internet
The Millennial generation is most certainly the Internet generation. Over 81% of all Millennial are on Facebook and have double the amount of social media friends (2). It’s safe to say that this generation is plugged in at all times. 83% of them admit to sleeping with their smartphones and
32% of them admit to using their phones in the bathroom (3). The Millennial lives are hardwired into the Internet 24 hours a day 7 days a week. This means that the millennial generation has gotten accustomed to two things: 1) receiving a lot of information in an extremely small amount of time and 2) shifting through the vast amounts of information to determine what is worth the small amount of time that they possess. If any business, much less a community service group, hopes to increase their enrollment and subsequently their effect on society, they must appeal to the youth as quickly and efficiently as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation name</th>
<th>Birth years, Ages in 2010</th>
<th>% of total adult population*</th>
<th>% of internet-using population*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Born 1965-1976, Ages 34-45</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger Boomers</td>
<td>Born 1955-1964, Ages 46-55</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Boomers</td>
<td>Born 1946-1954, Ages 56-64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
<td>Born 1937-1945, Ages 65-73</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.I. Generation</td>
<td>Born -1936, Age 74+</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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(2)

**Why Millennials Volunteer**

The children of the 80’s and 90’s grew up believing that the things they did could have an impact on the world around them.

“When Millennial participants were asked ‘How much difference do you believe people working together as group can make in solving problems,’ 92 percent agreed that this will make at least some difference, with 62 percent saying it would make a great deal of difference and only 1 percent saying it would make no difference at all” (4).

This ideology subsequently led to a significant rise in community service involvement as they aged. As young adults in the prime of their civic engagement, the millennial generation out volunteered the Baby Boomer’s young adult engagement rate by almost 10%, and yet, it is in the levels of engagement where the numbers vary the most.
“The statistics on the Millennial and the Baby Boomer Generation reveals that more Boomers are engaged in demanding ways. Thirty-eight percent of the Boomers, versus 15% of the Millennial, are classified as ‘involved in several ways.’ More Boomers are performing service activities, although the Millennial include more ‘service specialists’, or people who are only involved in service. This may reflect the expansion of community service opportunities available to younger citizens through high school and college over the past decade, and the lack of connection between this service and other forms of engagement (such as voting or local problem solving)” (5).

While many claims that this is due to the Community service requirement instilled in high schools nationwide, the Millennial themselves say otherwise. According to Velma Oliver of Wofford University, the top six reason for millennial involvement is as follows: 1) expressing individual values, 2) gaining understanding of others, 3) participating in social activities, 4) advancing careers, 5) preventing guilt for being more fortunate, and 6) enhancing self-esteem and personal growth (6). These values are a direct response to the struggles faced by their parents. They gain a sense of gratitude and often speak of a feeling of “well-being” after volunteering. If the millennials are surpassing the Baby Boomers in volunteer hours, why are community service clubs failing?

Why Volunteer Groups Are Failing
During the 1960’s -1970’s community service clubs started to pop up across America where groups like the Elks or Kiwanis Club became an active gathering location. Now, these clubs are struggling to make ends meet. In 2012 alone, the national membership of the Elks club dropped from 1.64 million to 802 thousand (7). One reason for the decline is due to the fact that the Elks club members are becoming less active as they age or they die while the rate of influx of new members is declining. Younger generations have little interest in joining the organizations that their elders initiated. Furthermore, those that own and operate these community service clubs do not possess the technology to get the attention of younger people (7). A major draw of these community service clubs was the social component. Todays millennial are doing just that, all on their own. Through social media, today’s youth are connecting and interacting in ways that the founders and current members of these clubs could never imagine. Clubs such as these must drop the old notion of cold calls and invitations on a “who you know” basis and embrace technology and social media if they hope to live to see another decade of involvement from the generation they need the most.

Part of The Solution: Marketing and Information Dispersal
Marketing to the Millennial Generation
If one hopes to attract young adults to your cause you have to start by getting the information to them. While it sounds easy enough it is an endeavor in and of itself. Those between the ages of 18-35 are living life at a much higher pace than their forefathers. Psychologists say walking speeds have increased by an average of 10 percent in the past 10 years. (8). This fact alone speaks to the stressors plaguing this generation. They now have places to be and things to do. While they are walking you can be sure that they are more often than not on their phones completing a task or checking in with a friend. The age of standing on a street corner handing out flyers has long gone extinct as the people they were attempting to inform no longer have the time
to stop and hear what you have to say. Information about your community service group must be embedded in something they use regardless of intent to become informed, social media. The use of social media to market to the youth is a great idea but not a new one. Every successful company in the world has advertised to them in excess. According to one article, consumers are exposed to anywhere between 300-700 ads per day. This means if you hope to be successful, you must offer something extra to the pot. There must be a benefit to them clicking onto your page. Community Service club are lacking in this area.

**What Millennials are volunteering for?**

As you can see, millennials are a difficult group to catch and engage. Engaging them in conversation about volunteering leads to failure, yet as a group they are volunteering more than any generation before them. How is that possible? The answer is social media. It is not secret that Millennials’ time is stretched thin. “About 74 percent of respondents identified social networks as being used primarily for event announcements or organization-related information.”(9). This means that the info they need must be brought to them. They no longer have the time to go out and search for volunteer projects and sift through the ones worth their time.

Sites such as VolunteerMatch.com and Hourworld.org serve to match computer savvy millennials with volunteer opportunities that match their desired causes. Websites like the above are taking advantage of young adult’s popular methods of volunteering. Once matched to the group of their choice, young adults take care of the rest. Organizations that offer online membership/interaction have been proven to be more successful than the ones that strictly focus on face to face interaction such as weekly meetings.

The success or failure of a community service initiative is somewhat dependent on the number of volunteers. As mentioned above, the millennials are volunteering for very different reason than the generation before it. In order to attract the millennials, community service programs must shift their methods of persuasion. According to Forbes Magazine contributor Rick Smith, community service initiatives need to be three things. “Big, Selfless and Simple.” (10). Ignite Magazine agrees and adds two additional necessities: The opportunity to impress and a deadline (11). To be Big is to have a goal that enacts wide scale change. While change in your community is good, national or even global change is far more attractive. The term Selfless refers to the cause. Millennials support causes that touch the heart and feels close to home. Foundations alone appear cold and distant. If they hope to improve involvement they should move towards bringing their cause to the millenials and making it personal. Lastly the initiative must be Simple. Millennials have enough things to do in a day. An initiative full of complicated methods of participation will be ignored and overlooked. While these points might seem rudimentary in nature, taking the time to instill them into your community service project are the first steps towards turning dreams into a reality.

**Big, Selfless & Simple**

There is no better example of civic millennial success than the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. This challenge combined the aforementioned characteristics into millions of dollars overnight. Essentially the core of the challenge was to dump buckets of ice water onto your head and then
in turn challenge a friend to do the same. If that person refuses to take the challenge within 24 hours, they must then donate $100 to the ALS foundation. “Plenty Consulting”, a firm that specializes in peer-to-peer fundraising, told Forbes the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge became a social media frenzy because it was essentially fun, easy and for a good cause” (12) The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge raised over 100 million dollars for ALS research. Towering over its previous yearly revenue by 3,500 % (12). As you can see, being Big, Selfless & Simple is the recipe for success.

Millennials are fans of “one-time” volunteership. This means that they completely dedicate themselves to a cause raising millions of dollars and amassing hours of service for a limited amount of time. A few examples of this include breast cancer awareness month and days of service i.e. homeless awareness day. Community service projects that require months and months of effort are not as popular. If this is the case, then why are sites like hOurworld.org struggling to attract members while community action initiatives like the ALS foundation’s Ice Bucket Challenge is thriving? One answer is exposure. Regardless of how spectacular or innovative the idea, it will fail without the proper marketing. The ALS foundation utilized social media to amass 2.4 million participants (13) while very few have participated in hOurworld’s exchange or even heard of hOurworld for that matter. To begin to determine whether the lack of participation in the hOurworld exchange was due to a lack of exposure or marketing, we set out to inform the Rutgers University millennials about the wonders of the community exchange.

Community Action: Requesting Rutgers University Millennials to Join the Local Community Exchange

Community exchanges were initiated in every county in three states (NJ, NY, & PA) as part of a Multistate Community Health and Resilience project by Dr. Julie Fagan, Rutgers University. She joined forces with hOurworld, a non-profit that developed a community exchange platform called “Time and Talent” that enables people to post and track their hours of services given and received. It enables “volunteers” to provide hours of service and then these hours can be used to receive someone else's time and talent. For example, say a student participates in planting trees at the Jersey Shore and spends 3 hours doing so. The student would log in those 3 hr and then look to see what others posted as to what services they offer. The student chooses to use 1 hr getting a massage, and 2 hr getting tutored on a particular subject. And this doesn’t cost a cent, as the form of payment is the gift of time.

Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? It is, but the problem is that only few know about the exchange. What good is it if its resources are not being used? How can we ignite the fire of change without any fuel? To remedy this problem, I created a signup sheet that people would sign to join hOurworld and make their community stronger by helping one another. The aim of the tabling was to inform the students about the community exchange program.

I walked around the New Brunswick Rutgers University campus and informed students about the community exchange and explained how it worked and about all the good it can achieve in the world. I began by asking those who walked by if they were interested in community service where they would be able to exchange their volunteered time for goods. I then showed them a hard copy of the brochure that is on the countystatestrong community exchange website to
illustrate how it worked. Despite my intentions to inform, very little gave me the chance to do such. Out of the 117 students engaged, only 5 stopped to fill out the form. Of the 5 that were interested, only two were signed up as members as they providing the required contact information. These two new members, however, did not post any services they could offer or services they wanted. Of the 117, 28 stopped to hear what I had to say only to conclude that they will “check it out themselves” and the other 84 people never broke stride and claimed that they did not have the time to stop/are involved in other community service programs. Most that said they would “check it out themselves”, we know probably won’t.

After experiencing such a lack of enthusiasm amongst the Rutgers University millennials, we asked the same questions of a few Baby Boomers. The brochure was shown to 35 coworkers in an office setting. Many of 35 wanted to know more information. Out of the 35 people that were approached, 12 took a flyer, 5 wanted to know more and 18 declined. No one signed up on the spot because they felt uncomfortable providing their contact information. Maybe it was the atmosphere of the office setting or simply this generation's’ desire to please, but it appeared that the baby boomers were at least more receptive to the idea of a community exchange. Despite the fact that 12 Baby Boomers and 28 Millennials took a flyer, hOurworld received 0 requests to join the exchange as a result of handing out the flyer. While there are a number of reasons why this could be so, i.e.; work, lost flyer, etc, as a whole the program failed to entice them to take the extra step to sign up.

Below is a pie chart of the compiled results. Green stands for “I'm Busy” and reflects the people who showed no interest. Yellow-Orange is for “I'll Check It Out Later!” - the ones that showed moderate interest Purple, “Sure! Let’s Do it!” stands for the percentage of people that gave information and showed a high interest in the exchange.
It is clear that the method of face to face marketing works better among the Baby Boomers than for the Millennials. This is why community exchange programs must make a change if they hope to succeed to attract different age groups. The fact that very few of the millennials stopped to hear about hOurworld does not necessarily mean that they do not care for volunteering. Perhaps it just does not fit into the flow of their busy and demanding lives. If hOurworld hopes to fulfill its purpose of making change in the world, its founders & partners must adapt to the needs of its market in order for this great initiative to take root. Otherwise it’s safe to say that hOurWorld and sites like it will be forever remembered as nothing more than a poor attempt at a good idea.

“Throughout the first four years of the Millennial Impact Project, the following trends emerged and evolved:

- Millennials engage with causes to help other people, not institutions.
- Millennials support issues rather than organizations.
- Millennials prefer to perform smaller actions before fully committing to a cause.
- Millennials are influenced by the decisions and behaviors of their peers.
- Millennials treat all their assets (time, money, network, etc.) as having equal value.
- Millennials need to experience an organization’s work without having to be on site.”
Recommendations for success:

Provide details that would enable millennials to be passionate about the issue.

Provide opportunities to meet like-minded people.

Provide opportunities that will enhance their expertise.

Provide feedback to show how their time, talent and expertise translated into people/cause helped

Provide a continuum of opportunities such as being able to participate with friends and family one-time projects, projects that take little time, and those that require their professional skills where they may play a leadership role (so they feel like they are not being taken advantage of)

Utilize Facebook and more visually based platforms (like Instagram and Pinterest) to provide the visuals and compelling stories that enable millennials to learn about and engage with the cause without having to be there.

Provide a specific online donation portal on the organization’s website that provides the information, not on Facebook or social media site.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if one hopes to succeed in attracting the millennial generation, one must consider who, what, when, where and why the youth of that generation do the things that they do. The millennial, born in the late 80’s to mid 90’s, spend far more time on the internet than the generation before them. This means that businesses are fighting for their attention 24/7. Due to the fact that their attention is stretched thin, Face to face marketing does not work. They volunteer for specific purposes for an even more specific length of time. As seen by the success of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, the key to success is to be Big, Simple and Selfless. There is no room for stubbornness when it comes to marketing to the youth. “We’re at the point where marketing and messaging will lend themselves more to the Millennial style of communication”. Community exchanges like hOurworld are great ideas and appear to work well in select communities. However, only 20% of the participants in these types of community exchanges were millennials, with the majority of the members being highly educated female boomers with limited incomes (15). The primary motivation for participating in these community exchanges was to get services they needed and to act on their values. The services that are typically offered by members of community exchanges may not be services that millennials would find useful or attractive. In order to attract millennials, there needs to be an influx of opportunities that perhaps are one shot deals that take little time, involve friends and family and peers that are like-minded and provide a sense of satisfaction knowing that they’ve directly helped people or helped a cause.
References

Dear Editor,

I wish to provide some information about how and why the millennial generation is not volunteering in the same manner of their predecessors and what various community service organizations can do to attract them to their cause. The young adults of our society make up a great deal of the online users. They are constantly “plugged in” and are flooded with information all day long. This makes it extremely difficult to not only attain their attention, but to keep it. This has led to an extreme number of “quick service” involvements. This includes online donations and hashtag activism. In order to gain their attention, community service organizations must change their methods of recruitment. Long gone are the days of meet and greets and handing out flyers on street corners. The Millennials must be marketed to on a personal and concise manner. The best way to do this is through online social incentives. Young adults love nothing more than a chance to express themselves to others. Organizations such as hOurWorld serve to do just that. hOurWorld is a site, through partnership with Rutgers University that prides itself on its ability to exchange amassed community service hours for goods and services. While hOurWorld is but one example of using technology to attract and retain volunteers, it is one of many sites that have been thriving off of the social nature of its clientele. If the community service clubs of old hope to make it in his technological society, they should look into collaborating with such an innovative endeavor.

-Melissa Horton; Exercise Science Major, Rutgers The State University Of New Jersey