



# We Can't Keep Our Mouths Shut

By Colleen Dilenschneider

**G**eneration Y. Millennials. Generation “Me.” The Obama Generation. However you identify these 20-somethings working in your museum, one thing’s for sure: We function differently than older generations in the workplace. Members of Generation Y (born roughly between 1980 and 1992) have a different value set and method of communicating than the generations that came before us. In fact, if you are a Traditionalist (born 1927–1945), a Baby Boomer (born 1946–1964) or even a member of Generation X (born 1965–1979), you may find that the behavior and priorities of members of Generation Y are directly at odds with your own workplace desires—or, at least, in direct odds with business as usual.

If anything, the sheer size of Generation Y makes Millennials hard to ignore. By 2008, there were 77.6 million members of Generation Y, outnumbering the 74.1 million Baby Boomers.

So what do Millennials want from the museums that employ them, and why should institutions care? Studies have found that our generation has some tall orders that are likely to cause a bit of cross-generational clash. But while these starry-eyed, tech-savvy, entrepreneurial, cannot-keep-their-mouths-shut 20-somethings may have a thing or two to learn from older generations in the workplace, we bring with us a new way of thinking that can benefit any organization—and museums in particular—if given the chance.

**Generation Y employees want to be included in important conversations regardless of their position within the institution ...** From a young age, members of “Generation Me” have been encouraged by elders to speak up and contribute—and we’ve been rewarded for our input. (On our Little League teams, everyone got a trophy, not just the MVP.) This egalitarian approach may perturb members of older generations who are accustomed to authoritative relationships within the workplace and value the hard work associated with moving up the organizational ladder that they climbed in

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*Colleen Dilenschneider is a Generation Y museum professional writing about the evolution of cultural nonprofit practices at “Know Your Own Bone” ([colleendilen.com](http://colleendilen.com)). She is currently a graduate student pursuing her master of public administration in nonprofit management at the University of Southern California.*

order to participate in such decision-making discussions.

**... but they also bring transparency and accessibility to organizations, which will likely have a positive impact on the museum industry.** The social media revolution is in full force, and many Millennials would not recognize a world without cell phones and the Internet. With increasing connectedness comes increasing information-share, and in the current market, incredible value is placed on brand transparency. Accessibility has always been an important aspect of museums' missions, but it is becoming increasingly critical as social technology, online engagement and crowd-curated exhibits take hold of museum audiences. Most Millennials have communication and transparency hard-wired into their nature. And because we use these tools to communicate with friends and family, we often know how to utilize them with the sincerity that is required for building a strong brand.

**Generation Y employees value mission and mentorship over money, challenging traditional workplace motivators ...** That may not sound like a culture clash, but it certainly makes the priorities of Millennials a bit tricky to understand, particularly for goal-oriented Baby Boomers who are accustomed to utilizing monetary reward as a motivating force. Tracing the annual Universum IDEAL Employer Rankings reveals a startling trend in Generation Y's ideal employer preferences. While the 1999 version of the survey found that Generation X wanted to work for large, private companies like Microsoft or Cisco, Generation Y prefers working for public service organizations. They don't call us the "Obama Generation" for nothing: Working for an organization we believe in is often every bit as important to Millennials as the price tag on a starting salary. Because of our generation's desire to achieve and be recognized, mentorship is also an important aspect of the ideal Millennial work environment. Mentorship takes time, though, and time translates to money for older generations.

Making time for the mentorship of Millennials is not always a high priority for busy professionals.

**... but these values also represent a natural alignment with your museum's public service goals.** While adjusting to these "softer" workplace desires may require some effort within the museum, having energetic employees motivated by public service is sure to work in the organization's favor. Don't get me wrong: Millennials have more debt and student loans than any generation that came before them, so warm fuzzies aren't going to cut it if we cannot pay our bills. Those emotional rewards, however, motivate us and provide what studies have shown is often very high on our workplace wish list: personal fulfillment by making a positive social impact.

**Generation Y has a reputation for "overshare" and treating employees equally, even the CEO ...** Generation Y is often regarded as an "oversharing" generation, seemingly tweeting about every meal and putting countless photos on Facebook for the world to see. Another habit contributing to our overshare reputation is the perhaps too casual way in which Millennials offer up input to leaders in the workplace. In fact, Andrew McAfee, a principal research scientist at MIT's Sloan School of Management, cited overshare and addressing all employees casually as two "not-so-smart" mistakes that Millennials commonly make in the workplace in a recent Harvard Business Review blog post. Being social means sharing information with your friends—and online, Generation Y has a lot of them. Millennials are a social bunch and, not surprisingly, surveys have shown that members of this generation prefer to work in groups and share information. Similarly, Generation Y has been found to value teamwork and organic workplace structures. Members of Generation X and Baby Boomers may find this particularly odd, as they've been found to generally prefer working independently and have championed workplace autonomy.

**... but overshare keeps upper-level management aware of industry trends, and collaboration increases opportunities for competitive advantages.** According to writings by Brian Huffman, a professor of management at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls, CEOs and upper-level management are nearly always the last to see big societal changes coming; the front-end folks see it first. Considering this, it may help that the front line has a big mouth. With social technology bringing about almost constant changes in branding, marketing and community engagement, Millennials can be a key resource for institutions wrestling with the misconception that museums are organizations frozen in time. You might still cringe when a millennial offers unsolicited input to the department director, but it can help to share different points of view. Studies have found that organizational collaboration helps dodge management groupthink and, in general, makes organizations stronger.

So, what's the value in taking note of the workplace desires of Generation Y? A simple response may be, "Because they are the future leaders of your museum, whether you like it or not." But that's not a particularly compelling answer. A better reason is that competitive organizations are becoming more transparent, public-service oriented and horizontal in structure, with value placed on increased communication. The evolution of these business practices reflects the values of Generation Y.

Can members of Generation Y be a nuisance in the workplace? Maybe. Despite our reputation for over-confidence, we certainly

have a lot to learn. But Millennials can also be invaluable members of your organization who help weave the fabric for a strong and strategically sound museum. Each of our respective generations marches to the beat of its own drummer. Though the Generation Y workplace beat is a bit more casual and dissonant than others, we still have the interests of the museum at heart and an aim to make a lasting difference in the communities we serve. And that's pretty cool, right? ●