

5 Takeaways for Communicating With Generation Z

The New York Times recently reported how the newest students – translation, Generation Z – are transforming the way schools serve and educate them. Bottom line? They are “super connected, but on their terms.” It’s proving frustrating and challenging. Or, as the dean of students at Purdue University confessed, “I do get discouraged.”

They do not tend to read books. They rarely read emails. They are a generation that “breathes through social media... sending presidents and deans to Instagram and Twitter.” Further, students today want to navigate campus life on their own, getting food or help “when it is convenient for them. And, yes, on their mobile devices or phones.” As the associate director of learning programs at Ohio State University noted, “It’s not really technology to them.” He’s right. With the iPhone coming out when most were in grade school, it’s just the natural way to do life. So now, schools such as Ohio State issue iPads, have courses marked “iPad required,” and are building an app that “in addition to maps and bus routes, has a course planner, grades, schedules and a ‘Get Involved’ feature displaying student organizations.” More customization is coming. Soon, when students open the app, it will know “which campus they are enrolled at, their major and which student groups they belong to.”

But it’s not simply a communication revolution. They are forcing course makeovers, “pushing academics to be more hands-on and job-relevant.” Millennials may have wanted climbing walls and en suite kitchens—but Generation Z wants all things career development. It’s even changing office hours. One journalism professor not only takes attendance via Twitter and posts assignments on Slack, but holds office hours at 10 p.m. via the video conference site Zoom “because that is when they have questions.” The only role email plays is instruction, as a business skill, on how to write a proper one.

Another dynamic new to mainstream academia is how individualistic they are and how individualistic they expect to be treated. They have been raised in a world of “tailored analytics” that instantly customizes their online experience. This leads them to expect that everything put in front of them has been customized. They do not like to learn in groups. They “like to think about information, then be walked through it to be certain they have it right.” They want a model, and then they want to practice it.

And while they very much favor videos over static content (a Pearson report found that YouTube was their most preferred learning method) they still want visual, face-to-face communication over texting. They are not always good at live social interaction but they crave it. “They want authenticity and transparency,” says Corey Seemiller, professor at Wright State University. “They like the idea of human beings being behind things.”

Many reading this might be on overload in terms of response and application for the life of their church or company, classroom or team. So here’s five simple but important takeaways:

1. Embrace social media and the technology that facilitates it, and then use it as much as you can to communicate, inform and serve.

2. Customize what you offer to people as much as you can.
3. Be practical in your content, whatever that content might be.
4. Adjust to changing schedules, which means the schedule of the person you are trying to serve.
5. Get visual in every way you can, particularly using video, but facilitate and debrief in person.

Now, how you engage any of these five is up to you and will necessarily be distinct depending on your organization and the desired learning at hand. But make no mistake—these changes must be made and the reason is critical to understand.

This isn't merely "preference" for them,

... it's simply who they are.

James Emery White

Sources

Laura Pappano, "The iGen Shift: Colleges Are Changing to Reach the Next Generation," The New York Times, August 2, 2018, [read online](#).

Corey Seemiller, *Generation Z Goes to College*.

"Beyond Millennials: The Next Generation of Learners," Pearson: Global Research and Insights, August 2018, [read online](#).

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