Can you hear me now?

A GROWING CHASM EXISTS BETWEEN generations, a fundamental difference in the way they communicate, especially when it comes to Millennials. The warning signs for businesses are clear: banks are investing in making their call centers more efficient, ignoring that 71 percent of Millennials would "rather go to the dentist" than listen to what their bank is saying, according to Scratch, a consulting business owned by Viacom.

Such a disconnect will prove increasingly expensive. By 2017, Millennials will spend more than $200 billion annually and make up a growing portion of a company's customers, employees, investors and analysts. Even in the regulatory arena their impact is tremendous; the average age of Washington, DC congressional staff is under 30.

At best, businesses that fail to adapt to these new realities will look old-fashioned or out of touch. The worst case is dire: failure to recruit top

Brunswick's **MIKE KREMPASKY** and **KARL WISEMAN** discuss the digital divide between generations, and how businesses can begin to bridge the chasm

talent combined with a disengaged workforce; stakeholders who haven't even heard your message, let alone agree with it; investors, analysts and capital markets that no longer rely on information you provide directly.

"WHAT WE'VE GOT HERE IS FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE" *

Generational divides are hardly new. From values to beliefs, fashion to music, politics to prose, there has long been a gap between old and young. That gap is often most visible when it comes to the emergence and adoption of communication technology. The telegram, telephone and television all enjoyed their share of early adopters and resistant skeptics.

These dividing lines between adoption and resistance of new technology have long tracked the divisions of generations: young people tend to adopt new and emerging channels; the wider population follows later. What's different today is that digital

ILLUSTRATIONS: HANNA BARCZYK

media is evolving at an increasingly fast pace, and every generation is being simultaneously affected – becoming more culturally distinct and isolated from those both younger and older.

As Millennials adopt new channels, everyone else remains a step, or five, behind. With the exception of Facebook, there is increasingly minimal overlap between the channels that different generations use to connect and share ideas, thoughts and content.

Even when they do use the same platforms, younger generations are increasingly wary about the liabilities of creating a permanent (and often public) digital record of their lives as they enter the workforce. This has made the Facebook timeline, or a colorful Twitter archive, less attractive.

That's one reason video-chat platform Snapchat, with its self-deleting content and immediate connection, has captured extraordinary attention and loyalty as it prepares for a $25 billion public offering. Likewise, a growing amount of social activity takes place within closed-group messaging applications like WhatsApp.

Changes in platform are also accompanied by a shift in the content we consume. Quartz, the relatively new online business publication, often talks about the "Quartz curve," whereby very short content and quite long content both do well on the web, but the standard op-ed format of 500 to 800 words falls flat. This curve is repeated across other media: video content is consumed in bite-sized pieces of a few seconds or a few minutes on Facebook and YouTube, and in massive hours-long quantities during binge sessions on Netflix.

Amid these ongoing changes, the tried-and-true behaviors of business communications are under great pressure. A recent survey from Microsoft and SurveyMonkey found that a key quality 93 percent of Millennials looked for in an employer was that the company had the latest technology, including for internal communications. Presumably, the tools themselves were less important to these young job seekers than what they revealed about the company progressive enough to adopt them.

In an area of rare alignment, generations are agreeing to consign voicemail to history. Companies such as JPMorgan are eliminating it entirely, and a Verizon executive estimates only a third of business phone lines even have voicemail capability, according to a report on National Public Radio. It should come as no surprise that a majority of Millennials in a recent study by LivePerson, a company that makes live chat software, said they would rather lose the ability to make voice calls

"Reverse mentoring" programs are no substitute for giving digital natives a seat at the strategy table

from their smartphone than one of their favorite social media applications.

For businesses, this rift between generations is not simply about communications, human resources or even technology; it's a critical business issue that executives need to prioritize.

4 STEPS LEADERS SHOULD CONSIDER

1 Get some digital natives into your kitchen cabinet immediately "Reverse mentoring" programs are no substitute for giving digital natives a seat at the strategy table and inviting them to inform the decisions that will affect the future of your company. The benefits of diversity in leadership teams are well known; age should be another consideration when convening representatives from across the business. They can observe and understand changes that their older peers will struggle to see.

2 Stop using your desktop computer When planning or reviewing your content strategy, remember that a majority of web traffic now comes from mobile devices and that desktop traffic has sharply declined over the last few years. These trends are both set to continue. Seeing your organization from that perspective will help you make decisions about how to reach your modern audiences. Ask

*"FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE"

A still from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, moments before Captain (raising baton) strikes Luke, played by Paul Newman, and delivers the film's most memorable line

RANKED 11TH ON THE AMERICAN Film Institute's top 100 movie quotes of all time from American cinema, "What we've got here is failure to communicate" comes from the 1967 film *Cool Hand Luke*, which was labeled by movie critic Roger Ebert as "anti-Establishment."

The plot features Paul Newman as Luke, a young convict who refuses to obey prison rules. The film's most famous line was spoken not by Luke, but by Captain, a prison warden embodying false pretense and menacing authority – the system Luke was rebelling against. The phrase gained currency as a metaphor for the famous "Generation Gap" of the 1960s, when the Baby Boomers entered adulthood and began to challenge many of the priorities and values of their parents.

The quote has since appeared in a number of movies, books, television shows and has even served as a sample in a Guns N' Roses song.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

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yourself "what can I learn – or not learn – about my company from its social channels alone?"
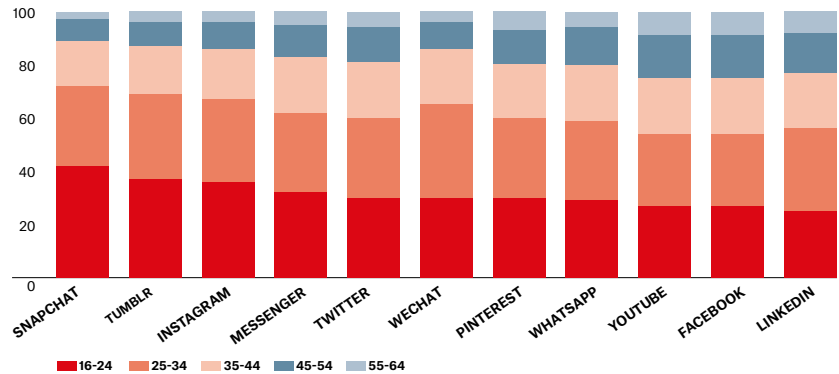
3 Add digital layers to your communications That is not to say you should replace anything right away; different audiences will transition at different speeds. *The Wall Street Journal* has a Snapchat channel, but it hasn't eliminated its other channels. A better approach is to add new channels, one at a time, in ways that leverage existing investments in content or infrastructure.

4 Create a communications R&D lab Your customers' tastes evolve; invest in making sure your products meet their changing needs and desires. Likewise, establish and fund a permanent function that can explore and experiment with new approaches to reach your corporate stakeholders.

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SURFING THE GENERATIONS CHANNELS

A 2016 study by GlobalWebIndex, a market research firm, looked at the age profiles of popular websites and social platforms. Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube had the largest percentage of users aged 55 to 64, while Snapchat had the highest percentage of users under the age of 24 – more than 40 percent of its total users. One thing all platforms and websites had in common: a majority of their users were 34 years old or younger

Chart: Age profile by platform (SNAPCHAT, TUMBLR, INSTAGRAM, MESSENGER, TWITTER, WECHAT, PINTEREST, WHATSAPP, YOUTUBE, FACEBOOK, LINKEDIN). Y-axis 0 to 100.

Legend: ■ 16-24 ■ 25-34 ■ 35-44 ■ 45-54 ■ 55-64

WALLS WITHIN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

Algorithms have turned the exchange of ideas into a mirror for individual beliefs, says Brunswick's RONALD SCHRANZ

IN HIS 1964 BOOK, *UNDERSTANDING MEDIA*, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan argued that the benefit of any successful innovation is accompanied by a dramatic, but usually overlooked, loss – an "amputation," to use his term, of some faculty that humans previously enjoyed.

McLuhan foresaw the creation of the internet and imagined it helping undo a lot of the amputations and divisiveness of the past, facilitating humanity coming together as a single tribe in a "global village." In fact, the internet has given us huge advantages, including connectivity and near-total information – unlimited, real-time and ubiquitous. But in recent years it has also aided the disappearance of the rich marketplace of discussion, where disagreements and foreign opinions may be encountered and taken seriously, an amputation that is already having critical repercussions around the world.

The mountain of information we now have at our fingertips allows us to find support for anything that we wish to believe, making it harder for individuals to share a common definition for a problem or solution. Digital natives – Millennials and younger – are particularly prone to this siloed worldview,

with little understanding or sympathy for the opinions that may disagree with their own.

The personalized programming algorithms that guide our choices online are one root cause. These filters create an information bubble around each person that is growing in depth but narrowing dramatically in breadth. The resulting social network, built of connections to people with similar specialties, attitudes, beliefs and world views, mostly reinforces each user's pre-existing ideas. The internet, for all of its diversity, has become an infinite collection of mirrored rooms and echo chambers.

Far from creating global harmony, the internet as it exists now is helping fuel greater social upheaval, including widening

differences between generations, classes, religious beliefs, political and philosophical camps, and supporting the radicalization of disenfranchised groups. Siloed versions of reality reduce the potential for compromise and increase pressures on social coherence, democracy and peace.

To make matters worse, since the flow of information online is a self-organizing system, there is no trusted authority to say whether or not information is factual. False information, propaganda, conspiracy theories and deliberate attempts to obscure are often ascribed the same credibility as reports diligently researched by serious journalists, causing many to speculate about a "post-fact" age.

The older generation may lament the decline of the newspapers, the radio shows and the TV news programs they once relied on. But those outlets had their own biases and carried their own, though very different, amputations that McLuhan warned of more than 50 years ago.

More worrying is that the younger generation, who hold the future of society in their hands, might not be clear that the same technology today that has given us a bright vision for the future has caused us to leave something important behind.

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