



Different strokes

Your team members deserve more nuanced consideration, says Brunswick's CHRISTOPHER HANNEGAN

ALL ORGANIZATIONS WOULD AGREE THAT generational distinctions are real, but few companies take the time to structure their employee engagement initiatives with those distinctions in mind. Fewer still attempt a detailed analysis. As a way to begin to look at different generations, leaders should consider their employees from two different vantage points: one based on individuals' ages and another based on their shared experiences within the company.

The age-based view finds, for instance, that younger workers' attitudes toward business are generally more positive than Baby Boomers or Gen X employees. Among 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed by Brunswick Insight, 59 percent feel businesses serve their employees well, versus 47 percent of those 50 and up (see "Great Expectations," Page 17).

Millennials also want to engage with employers differently: they expect better communication, but are less interested in face-to-face exchanges. Conversely, older generations want more in-person contact with their supervisors and don't choose to rely as much on digital platforms. While email remains a critical tool, younger workers are less likely to feel engaged using it, favoring other channels including internal social media. Managers with multigenerational teams will have to take these preferences into consideration so they can create the most effective suite of interactions.

The shared-experience view looks at bands of employees who have been shaped by distinct phases

of a company's development. A poorly integrated acquisition, a traumatic CEO change, the launch of a blockbuster product, or a period of rapid workforce growth are all formative experiences, coloring employees' perceptions. By identifying the chapters in a company's history, it is possible to project how cohorts, whose perspectives are framed by those chapters, may react to any piece of news.

In each of the shared-experience bands, a variety of age groups will be represented. Digital natives are lumped in with older folks who may have no love of social media. The message may be the same for both, but the channels may be different.

All employees will have one thing in common: a tendency to feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information they receive. To break through, you need to get them to pay attention in an instant. The message has to be creative and simple, even as you target specific groups. Focus on emotional appeal; people engage with their heart first, head second. If they feel good about their initial interaction, they will be more inclined to follow through.

It helps to build into the campaign the internal or external sources each group finds most credible. Those who saw senior leadership lose credibility during a rough patch may be more inclined to trust industry experts or analysts on their view of the company's performance. To convince them, it helps to acknowledge this reality.

Research-based models in the form of personas can help bring to life the groups of employees you hope to engage. Create four or five fictional employees, with names, ages and a particular "look." Describe what's important to them, list the emotional baggage and perceptions they currently have and how to best engage with them. Hold on to these personas as reference points, to maintain an appropriate focus in all the stages of the campaign.

Companies have long been wary of treating consumers as a homogenous group. Research, segmentation, and targeted messaging through specific channels are now considered routine. The same holds with employees. If the people who buy your products and services are worth such an investment, certainly those who create, deliver and maintain those products and services are as well.

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Source: Brunswick Insight