

Catching Generation Y

Today's young professionals, members of the "echo boom", are a hot commodity. Companies that are committed to attracting them need to change their search strategies for success

By Jeremy Miller



Generation Y has been a very hot topic in marketing circles for some time, because they are the "echo boom," a market niche with astronomical spending power. Employers are paying just as much attention. With over 72 million people worldwide in this cohort currently entering the workforce, they are standing up and taking notice. Generation Y is the group that will fuel the talent wars for the next decade or more.

For employers, members of Gen Y offer a set of highly desirable traits: they are well educated, technically savvy, and have grown up with constant pressure from society and their parents to achieve. Basically, Generation Y is pumping out a huge workforce of people who are driven to succeed. Employers are recognizing that the traits that make Gen Y attractive also make them different in how they connect with companies, view their career

and make major decisions.

Bombarded by constant advertising, 24-hour news outlets and information overload from the Internet, Gen Y has grown up skeptical of the media. To deal with the volume of competing messages, they have developed strong social networks to streamline their information flow. Traditional recruiting techniques include posting ads on online job boards to draw in a pool of active talent. But many Gen Y job seekers are circumventing traditional recruiting techniques and taking control of their own career development activities.

Networks and connectors

Stephen is an up and coming sales rep who is at the cusp of the Gen Y group. In late 2005, he decided it was time to make the next step in his career. He had been the top sales rep for two years in a row with a global payroll services firm, and he wanted to find an opportunity for bigger sales and more potential to earn a higher income. He didn't use traditional HR tools to find his second job. Nor did he use corporate career sites or online job boards. Instead, Stephen networked. As he explains, "The purpose of a job ad is to screen me out. If I really want to work for a specific company, I find out who is already working there. I then send them my resume to submit to the right person."

Gen Y has a strong group orientation. Marketers selling to Gen Y rely heavily on concepts such as viral marketing, word of mouth, and peer-to-peer recommendations. The goal of these programs is to create what they refer to as a "social epidemic" that will cut through the clutter and gain direct access to their market. To find out which employers were hot in the market, Stephen sought out people in the know. Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *The Tipping Point*, describes these people as connectors. Connectors are people with a special gift for developing relationships with a broad range of people in a variety of groups.

Stephen didn't know much about the job market, but he had friends who had recently left his company who could point him in the right direction. Some led him to the recruiters they had worked with, while others forwarded his resume to their network of friends to pass onto their respective employers. In a short period of time, Stephen's resume had been submitted to over a dozen employers, without him responding to a single want ad. He used six degrees of separation to find his next career opportunity.

Values, respect

Authenticity is at the heart of communicating with Generation Y. They have grown up immersed in technology such as e-mail, cell phones and text messaging, and they have fully integrated them into their daily lives. The statistics are astonishing. According to Frank N. Magid & Associates, more than half of all teens own a mobile

phone, nine out of ten teens have a home computer with Internet access and a quarter of 18 to 24-year-olds have Internet-enabled cell phones. The technology doesn't impress them. They see right through flashy ads, and attempts to get them to act in a certain way. They want to be connected to individually. Any attempt by companies or marketers to talk down to Gen Y could end in disaster. Too often, job ads and hiring managers either act as gate keepers with a long list of job requirements or as promoters promising fantastic careers that just aren't realistic.

Darryl, a recent university graduate, used time as a key determinant when deciding if he wanted to apply for careers with potential employers. If an online application process took longer than five minutes, he gave up on it. Darryl felt an employer using a highly controlling and restrictive application process doesn't demonstrate the values he is looking for in his career. He looked for the opportunity to spend five minutes to speak with a company representative to learn about the company's purpose, the job opportunity and to assess if there was a fit to move forward. Darryl is the first to tell you that employers have to screen through a lot of unqualified resumes, but he also explains that the way an employer treated him would affect whether or not he would refer a friend to them in the future.

Support at home

Don't forget about the parents. Unlike earlier generations, Generation Y involves their parents in many of their major decisions — even after they have left home. Carol Bisnath, a career coach focused on multi-generation workplaces, explains: "When you ask Gen Y who their heroes are, the majority will say their parents." Ahead of career counseling, online job services and every other resource available to them, Generation Y lean on their parents for career advice.

Sue, a senior consultant with a global consulting firm, is actively involved in her daughter's career. "I want Claire to have every success in her career," she explains. "Prior to an interview, we research the company together, and we rehearse potential questions she might face." The parents' deep bond with their children can become a great ally for employers. Just as Sue coaches her daughter during the hiring process, she is also looking for opportunities for her with potential employers. By marketing jobs to both Gen Y and their parents, employers can expand their reach by connecting to proactive parents looking for opportunities for their kids.

Generation Y is a key group of people for any company competing in the war for talent. Traditional recruiting and hiring practices will continue to work for many companies, because people desperate for work will adapt to whatever the employers throw at them. Yet to really tap into Generation Y requires a refined marketing strategy.

Companies can connect to the networks of Generation Y by equipping their own Gen Y employees to carry the corporate message. The tried and true employee referral program is now more powerful than ever. By adjusting the delivery and messages of these programs, employers can extend their reach. The message is a key success factor. A company's value proposition, career message and benefits of the job must be clear and authentic. They have to stand up to the networked delivery process, the skepticism of the audience and the scrutiny of the parents.

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