



ATTITUDES OF GENERATION Y TO MEETING PARTICIPATION AND MEETING DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This is an empirical paper, based on current research into how managerial and professional members of Generation Y experience meetings. The research questions are: what are the prevailing attitudes of these members of Generation Y towards travelling to face-to-face business events such as meetings and how can events be designed and marketed in such a way that they hold more appeal for people in this age group? What alternatives to face-to-face networking and information gathering could help to enhance the meeting experience?

Authors use a variety of terms when referring to this most recent cohort to join professional life. While most speak about 'Generation Y', alternative phrases include: Generation Next, Echo Boomers, Digital Natives, the Millennium Generation or Millennials. There is also some disagreement as to the exact span of dates that defines Generation Y. For the purposes of this study, we will use Hira's span of birthdates of 1977-95, as this appears the most widely accepted. We will refer collectively to the cohort under consideration as 'Generation Y', and the term 'Y-er' is used to denote an individual member of Generation Y.

KEYWORDS: meeting design, meeting content, Generation Y, Gen Y in meetings, meeting technology, meeting architecture

BACKGROUND

Executives of professional and trade associations as well as corporate meeting planners are encountering an increasingly heterogeneous group of meeting attendees. Delegates come from progressively diverse cultural backgrounds and there has been a steady growth in female participation over the last decade. But the most pronounced trend has been the surge in numbers of Generation Y employees and professionals and the resulting generational mix at meetings, bringing together, probably for the first time, 4 generations, from the traditionalists and baby boomers to the younger cohorts (Generation X and Y).

There has been reported dissatisfaction by the younger generations regarding the 'traditional' content and format of meetings. For associations, this dissatisfaction can lead to an observed reluctance on the part of those belonging to Generation Y to (a) join associations and (b) attend their associations' conferences. Given the fact that most associations depend on recruitment and conference attendance for the major part of their funding, this is a genuine cause for concern. But Generation Y expectations are also an important factor for corporate meeting planners to take into account when designing relevant experiences that manage to attain the objectives set by the meeting sponsor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As pointed out by various authors, today's workplace brings together four generations for the first time, as follows: Matures, also called Veterans born before 1946, Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 (Stanton Smith, W. 2008), Generation X born between 1964 and 1977 and Generation Y (Y-ers) born between 1977 and 1995 (Hira, 2007). This situation creates challenges for companies as the four generations share basic values, but have different

characteristics and expectations (Stanton Smith, W. 2008).

This paper concerns itself mostly with Generation Y, children of the Baby Boomers and their attitudes to meetings and conferences and we shall therefore review some of those characteristics that clearly differentiate Y-ers from other generations. The main characteristics defining this generation are their need for interactivity, their ambition, their demanding nature and their flexible attitude (Hira, 2007). In business or in life they look for truth, authenticity and new experiences (Williams & Page, 2009). They aspire to work with bright and creative people that would manage them with a coaching style (Eisner, 2005) and for “good” companies that will value their work (Stanton Smith, 2008).

Authors point out that it these characteristics, which differentiate members of Generation Y from the other three remaining generations in the workplace and that those differences can cause intergenerational conflicts. (Armour, 2008; Davidson, 2008; Eisner, 2005; Nas Recruitment Communications, 2006; Stanton Smith, 2008; Ruby, 2007). Y-ers are also different in their expectations. They are seen as a coddled generation with a high dependence on their parents, generally Baby Boomers, who have made them feel special (Hira, 2007; Ruby, 2007; Eisner, 2005; Nas Recruitment Communications, 2006). Y-ers have been told that they can do anything; they now think that everything is possible (Hira, 2007; Nas Recruitment Communications, 2006). This dependence results in a need for structure, supervision, attention, status and support (Ruby, 2007; Nas Recruitment Communications, 2006).

This can also be qualified as “emerging adulthood” (Hira, 2007). Furthermore, they have high expectations, not just of others and of their environment, but of themselves as well. (Armour, 2008; Hira, 2007; Davidson, 2008; Ruby, 2007). In addition, having been raised during a period where technology is in constant development, they feel highly comfortable with digital technology: Internet, software, mobile devices, social media etc. This not only makes them experienced users of technology but also very demanding as to tools and applications used in the workplace or during a meeting (Davidson, 2008; Eisner, 2005; Nas Recruitment Communications, 2006; Ruby, 2007; Stanton Smith, 2008). They expect easy access to information and that the wide choices, which the Internet offers them, to be replicated in all aspects of their lives (Hira, 2007; Eisner, 2005; Nas Recruitment Communications, 2006; Stanton Smith, 2008).

The intergenerational differences and challenges brought by the arrival of the Generation Y do not only concern the work environment: indeed, attendance at conferences and meetings is affected as well; This in turn influences how meetings are organized and designed. It is possible to observe that, compared to the literature available on Generation Y in general and their impact on the organization in particular, the literature related to meeting participation and meeting design concerning this cohort remains limited. It is probably true to say that only a few of the relevant articles are academic and supported by original research and figures. However, we will endeavour to highlight what characterizes Y-ers when attending a meeting.

Mimicking the situation in the workplace, four generations are currently attending meetings, and it is possible to affirm that Y-ers have characteristics and expectations that are specific to them when related to meetings (Fenich & al., 2012; Fjelstul & al., 2008; Fjelstul & al., 2009;

Kovaleski, 2008; MPI Foundation 2012; Morell, 2011, Nassar, 2012). Nowadays, meeting planners are advised to re-examine and re-invent meetings if they wish to attract and engage the new generation (Kovaleski, 2008). Indeed, members of Generation Y want to benefit personally from meetings and thus expect engaging events that are worth their time and money (Fenich & al., 2012; Kovaleski, 2008; Lutz, 2012; Morell, 2011; Nassar, 2012). They value education while attending meetings as it represents for them an important part of their professional career progression (Fenich & al., 2012; Fjelstul & al., 2008; Kovaleski, 2008).

However, they do not expect the learning experience to be delivered by static lectures, but prefer education that uses entertainment and technology (Fenich & al., 2012; Kovaleski, 2008), which can be designed as “edutainment” (Davidson, 2008; Fenich & al., 2012). Furthermore, as they have grown up with TV and Internet, they “think in text messaging format” (Davidson, 2008) and are visual learners (Davidson, 2008; Fishman, 2007), which impacts how sessions are conducted.

They prefer short and interactive sessions, rather than long general lectures as they have a shorter attention span than previous generations (Davidson, 2008; Fenich & al., 2012). In addition, Davidson (2008) & Nassar (2012) add that Generation Y are keen on environmental issues and so expect sustainability while attending meetings, and want to be consulted regarding the design of the meeting and the program content. On another hand, Lutz (2010) says that social-causes programs should be included in conference agenda as it helps to “create emotional connection”. Also, authors from the MPI Foundation (2012) found in their survey that Y-ers are more likely to attend if social functions are part of the event. Career opportunities are essential to them and they therefore expect that networking will be facilitated (Fenich & al., 2012).

In terms of technology, Y-ers have had a great influence, as they are “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). Indeed, they are the first generation to grow up with Internet and the new technologies (Delaney & Brigid, 2005) and are therefore considered as technology adept. As Davidson (2008) highlighted in his research, Y-ers communicate differently to other generations; technology has become a real means of communication for them. Authors agree on the fact that this phenomenon helped to shape the new generation to a large extent. Growing up with technology made Y-ers more flexible, adaptable, multitasking, and fast (Stanton Smith, 2008).

The mobile revolution and the fast expansion of social media are probably the most noticeable factors that have marked Generation Y (Shapiro, 2010). Indeed it is difficult to think of a Y-er who does not own a smartphone or a tablet. The mobile technologies have had an important influence on the popularity of social media and thus on the amount of users and time spent on them (Shapiro, 2010). Cabral (2011) shows in his study that Y-ers form the highest percentage of social media users. They feel the need to be constantly in connection with their peers and use Internet and the social media to reinforce relationships. The business world and meetings and conferences can be said to be largely impacted by this trend.

Generation Y members expect to have fast access to information and to work in a place that provides and uses technology tools to deliver unique content. They use technology to communicate and expect it to be used in different experiences such as interactive games, team building sessions, for events content and visual effects. They place great importance on free WIFI

access so they will be able to use their devices properly (Fenich & al., 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings in this paper are based on structured interviews with conference planners, exploring their experiences of attracting and catering to Generation Y delegates followed by a questionnaire survey of Generation Y alumni of SKEMA Business School, exploring their attitudes towards attending meetings and their expectations from these events. A control sample of older respondents was used to test to what extent the Y-ers' professed attitudes and expectations really differ from those of other generations.

4 senior meeting planners based in the USA, China, the UK and Switzerland, who deal with both corporate and association conferences, were recruited as respondents by LinkedIn message and subsequently interviewed on the telephone (3) or asked to fill in an extended emailed questionnaire (1).

The link to an online questionnaire was sent by newsletter to SKEMA's alumni network and the link was posted on SKEMA's Facebook, LinkedIn and Viadeo pages and on the school's Twitter account. Authors also posted the link on their personal and group LinkedIn pages. The questionnaire consisted of 19 multiple choice questions with one possible answer asking respondents to evaluate their agreement towards a statement on a Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire also comprised two open-ended questions. A total of 82 fully completed questionnaires plus 7 partially completed forms were collected. 68% of completed questionnaires were from Y-ers (cohort 1977- 1995), the remainder from the control sample of older generations.

FINDINGS

Conference Planner Interviews

The expert interviews revealed that meeting planners, while still of course having to excel in logistics, are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that meetings need to deliver highly relevant and up to date content and a maximum of professional contact opportunities..

Two mentioned the fact that they are offering a larger number of topics in smaller workshop type events as menu of choices rather than mandatory sessions for delegates. The Chinese meeting planner also highlighted the fact that the medical association her company works for is looking to entice students and younger physicians by creating a special career forum for them and giving them more opportunities to meet their "icons" they have come to the conference for. The planner had noticed a recent decrease in attendance by younger delegates. As reasons for this decline she mentioned the fact that Y-ers are only willing to spend the money if the event earns them medical credits (i.e., as per the literature review, allows them to further their career) or if they can network with their peers or meet those industry figures they have come to respect.

The Chinese and UK meeting professionals also explained that it was becoming increasingly important to change the format of the learning sessions and of the networking events, in order to accommodate the younger delegates in particular. Traditional sessions such as the poster presentation or a networking reception were made more interactive and entertaining through the

use of technology (e-poster session) and competition. This corresponds to the characteristic of edutainment that was previously highlighted in the literature review.

Once again in accordance with the literature review, all four interviewees stressed the importance of digital technology in pre-conference event marketing, information dissemination and engagement with potential or registered attendees through enhanced websites and multiple social media communication channels in particular. During events, mobile applications, social media feeds and multi-site video conferencing reinforce information provision and encourage feedback and interactivity. Finally, live streams and podcasts capture content for delivery to other audiences during or just after the event. The Switzerland based planner states that these tools can be used either for internal purposes, such as training in larger corporations, or can constitute a revenue stream, for example for associations.

While all four respondents are agreed about the fact that technology is a major driver that promotes change in the meeting architecture, only one of them attributes these changes to this to the greater participation of Generation Y delegates in meetings. The other three believe that technology savviness is no longer limited to that generation but that even “digital immigrants” (Premsky 2001) now expect to use ICT devices throughout the pre, during and post meeting cycle. The major difference could lie not in the extent of usage of such applications such as social media but rather in the nature of the different tools – the UK planner mentioned that while some non-Gen Y delegates may not use Pinterest or Facebook to the same degree, they do expect to be able to sign in to their Twitter or LinkedIn accounts. In addition, the Chinese meeting professional expressed her surprise at the low take up from Generation Y of a social media application that was pioneered for her client’s conference recently.

Quantitative Questionnaire to Young Professionals

The survey questions query statements and factors that emerged from both the literature review and from the expert interviews.

The responses to the quantitative questionnaire reveal a surprisingly harmonious picture between Generation Y respondents and those from earlier generations. The differences that will be highlighted in a special section below are less numerous than could have been predicted from the literature review.

In the first instance it is no doubt highly positive for meeting planners to hear that almost 73% of all interviewees “generally look forward to attending a conference” and that there is no noticeable generation gap in the level of comfort in “interacting with delegates with other generations”, with 84% of Y-ers and 85% of older generations being happy to network freely with each other (answers to questions 1 and 14). Industry recognition, as emphasised in the literature review, also scores a high consensus of 90%.

Generation Y delegates (66%) and others (65%) are also in consensus on the importance of “environmentally neutral conferences”, again as highlighted in the literature review as a predominant trait for Y-ers.

In addition, both sets of respondents broadly agree on the need for creating highly personalised conference programmes with smaller, interactive sessions, opportunities to question

and network with speakers and VIPs and where the delegates’ voices can be heard before the event (on social media) and during or after through feedback procedures.

It is interesting to note that, in line with the feedback from the expert respondents, the “digital immigrants” of older generation are not at all dismissive of the use of social media prior to the event.

The table below summarises the findings in percentage terms for both Y-ers and the control group.

Table 1: Results from questions 3, 5, 7, 9, 10 and 12

Question	Gen Y %	Older generations %
Conference programmes should be highly personalised, with enough options to satisfy individual delegates’ needs	77	69
Social media are a good way to engage with me before an event	80	73
I prefer interactive, small sessions rather than larger, lecture-style sessions	77	77
I want to interact with the speakers during a session through technology (using text polling, audience feedback...)	59	54
Giving anonymous feedback and being listened to is important for me	77	77
I expect to have the opportunity for direct, one-to-one contact with conference speakers and VIP delegates	62.5	69

Finally it is important to note that both sets of respondents stressed the vital importance of the right calibre of speakers in their answers to the open ended question number 20. Asked what “one thing” would motivate them to attend conferences more , “BIG [sic] names”, “experts in their fields”, “industry recognised characters” and “prestigious” presenters were repeatedly wished for.

Generation Y - Specific Expectations

The table below lists the main areas in which Generation Y differs from the traditional meeting paradigm. It is interesting to note that, though these expectations are not quite as pronounced or advanced as stated in the literature review, they do pick up some of the major points that were made by various authors.

Generation Y obviously want to be consulted on conference content, possibly because they have become used to the idea of crowdsourcing, in which a task is outsourced to a virtual crowd. This technique has been used extensively by companies and organisations over the last few years and is epitomised by the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. This idea also fits with the characteristic of Y-ers as “special”, whose input has been valued by their parents.

Short conference sessions that are visually stimulating relate back to the edutainment concept and the short attention span of Y-ers, while the lifelong exposure to technology translates here into a greater willingness to rely on digital documents on a mobile device, while no doubt also being at the heart of nearly a third of Y-ers declaring themselves more inclined to watch an online conference or to feeling more comfortable communicating with others online. The open ended questions 20 and 21 further illustrate these aspects. They address the “one thing” that could make Generation Y delegates more interested in attending conferences and ask what technology tools should be used more at conferences. The recorded answers shed further light on the aspects of edutainment and the ubiquitous nature of technology. Gen Y respondents call for the “TED conference model ... of storytelling “ and “more interactive learning through engaging the audiences via exercises” or “by playing games” , “entertainment during the conference” and “activities” . They want to be able to “follow the lecture on my[sic] iPhone/iPad”, 3D technology, Kinect PowerPoint presentations and tablets that are lent to delegates for the occasion.

Social activities are another special aspect valued by Gen Y. As already indicated by the MPI Foundation Survey, activities are shown by our research to play an important role when deciding whether to attend a conference. Lastly, for destination marketers, it must be heartening to learn that “the destination is a major criteria” in Y-ers’ decision to participate in an event.

Table 2: Results from questions 2, 4,6,8,11,15 and 17

Question	Gen Y %	Older generations %
Given the chance to watch a conference online, rather than actually attend it in person, I would often go for the online option	44.6 disagree (30 agree)	61.5 disagree
I expect to be consulted on what the actual content of the conference should be, so that I get the opportunity to make suggestions	62.5	38.7
I prefer short conference sessions (less than 1 hour)	68	46
Being visually stimulating is just as important for conference sessions as having stimulating verbal content	91	65
During the event, I only want digital documents that I can read on my mobile devices	43	30
I am more comfortable communicating with others online than I am in face-to-face networking events	45 disagree (30 agree)	61.5 disagree

at conferences		
Social and extra activities are important for me when I decide to attend a meeting	64	53
The destination is a major criteria in my decision to attend an event	70	42.3

On a more contradictory note, it is somewhat surprising perhaps, bearing in mind the importance accorded to environmental sustainability, that most respondents in this survey, older generations but also Y-ers, feel “neutral” about incorporating opportunities for social cause volunteering in the meeting programme, thereby challenging the significance of the “emotional connection” as discussed by Lutz (2010).

CONCLUSIONS

Both the literature review and subsequent research confirm that members of Generation Y are very comfortable with technology-based forms of communication, such as social networks, micro blogging, photo sharing applications, instant messaging and video streaming and podcasting and that they expect these to be used extensively before, during and after meetings in order to make these events more interactive.

Our research supports some earlier findings regarding Gen Y and their attitudes, notably on the importance of social activities, environmental awareness, the need for shorter sessions that are more entertaining and more visual and the expectation that their views are important and should be consulted, even regarding the meeting programme.

However, our findings do not absolutely corroborate the idea that Generation Y is so tech savvy that all communication and information should be migrated to digital format. Almost 45% of Y-ers would not choose the online conference over the face-to-face event and only 43% would prefer to receive all information digitally.

One guiding thought to emerge from our research is the absolute importance of relevant and career-enhancing content, the recognition of the event within the respondents’ sectors of industry and the reputation of speakers.

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