

Adopting a millennial mindset—or at least understanding it—is the key to selling to this new generation of buyers.

business issues

MILLENNIAL MINDSET

BY ANNE SCARLETT

CONSIDER THIS SCENARIO: Through your network, you uncover a hot lead. A local community college has completed its master plan for several new buildings and will now begin hiring a variety of firms (to spread the work!) for project execution.

Before picking up the phone to call the campus architect, you do your due diligence—general internet research, degrees of separation on LinkedIn, memberships within relevant organizations and so forth. As you put together the pieces, building up a “profile” for this prospective client, you suddenly discover that he is young—as in 30-years-young.

Whoa. Really? A “kid” in his early thirties is a decision-maker for this community college?

You think to yourself, “I must be 15 years his senior! Will I be able to successfully connect with someone of his generation? Well, we’ve certainly interfaced with client *contacts* in their late 20s and early 30s, particularly within some of our high-technology clients. But a millennial decision-maker? This is new.”

It’s real. More and more frequently, gen X-ers and baby boomers are starting to encounter millennials (born from the early 1980s through the early 2000s) in the role of prospective clients. If this hasn’t happened to you yet, you should be prepared for it to in the next couple of years.

This means AEC business developers will no longer have the luxury of building relationships with peers who share our same generational sensibilities and preferences. As a result, we will have to modify aspects of our existing sales process and adjust our communication channels, processes, touch-points and messaging.

How to Appeal to Millennials

What is the highest and best approach to appeal to the millennial generation? Here’s my set of initial tips, based upon my own direct interaction with millennials in the college classroom, casual conversations with folks that have already experienced the phenomena of “selling to a younger generation” and reliable sources citing observable millennial character traits.

Peer reviews and social media. Millennials value the opinions of others, even strangers. In most cases, they will not make a decision—large or small—without first looking at reviews. Often, these reviews are located online via social media outlets.

Tip: Make sure to have *multiple* references for each project in your portfolio. Seek the perspectives of not just the owner, but also the client contact, representatives from user groups and other stakeholders. Note that a simple phone list of references will not suffice. In fact, since millennials overwhelmingly prefer texting over phone conversations, their motivation to call a reference is likely low. Instead, you need to secure written, robust testimonials. (For the purposes of visibility, don’t forget to obtain the authors’ permission to include testimonials across *all* your marketing mediums.)

Respect. You may find the millennials’ definition of respect to be different compared with prior generations. Millennials inherently desire praise, feedback and to be taken seriously. Yet on the flip side, they are less forthcoming with their displays of respect—until they believe you have earned it.

Tip: When selling to millennials, ask them (often) about their perspective, their experiences and their preferences. But wait. How is this approach any different from your typi-

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cal consultative-based selling methodology of asking your prospect probing questions followed by acute listening? Here's the difference: In the millennials' case, aim to inquire about their opinion on topics not related to their AE project. In fact, you might even ask for their take on something related to *your* company's business. Essentially, millennials want to be treated as equals even if they are interacting with a seasoned professional. They don't always assume that with experience comes wisdom; they too want their voice heard and considered.

Just-in-time knowledge transfer.

When it comes to nitty-gritty details, millennials want the information when they need it—not before. In order to truly absorb new information, they must believe that it is directly relevant at that moment in time. Millennials are less likely to embrace knowledge simply because it will be “helpful down the road.” Today's university students, for example, have a habit of weeding through course content, discarding whatever they feel will not directly impact their success on graded assignments. Maybe this mindset stems from growing up with a 24/7 inundation of too much information (“TMI” in millennial-speak) thanks to technology.

Tip: Put yourself in their shoes. Do the filtering for them. Carefully choose the details that are sensible to share and relevant in the moment. While it may sometimes be tempting to toss everything at a prospect to see what sticks, this approach won't align with the millennials' mentality. And for cross-selling purposes, when you are trying to educate the client on your firm's services across departments, perhaps it is best to keep asking the probing questions first, and then carefully select what information to share.

Nimble, flat organizations. Millennials grew up with the ability to obtain information at lightning speed via technology. They recognize that the global economy moves fast, demanding constant change and innovation. As such, millennials don't empathize with hierarchically companies. When presenting your firm's design process, the millennial decision-maker will keep a keen eye out for perceived waste. Is the team top-heavy? Do responsibilities overlap? Are the design and delivery processes protracted? (Side note: What does *your* organizational chart look like? Is it simple, streamlined and somewhat flat? Or is it cumbersome, complicated and deep?)

Tip: When describing your firm's approach, you need to come across as nimble, resourceful and efficient. For their specific project, you may earn bonus points for offering clever and innovative ways to further eliminate redundancies and increase

speed-to-completion. Challenge your own processes—regularly—to ensure they are the most appealing to this set of decision makers.

Unconventional work habits. Early in my business development career, I remember feeling elated whenever I exchanged home phone numbers with prospects and clients. To me, that was the mark of a solid business relationship, one that would survive hiccups and potentially last for the long haul.

As technology evolves and access increases—thanks to cell phones, text messaging, email and social media—it becomes more difficult to draw boundaries around availability. And

while it's never a concern with my peer gen X-ers or the boomers, I feel somewhat compelled to “be there almost always” for the millennials. With their mastery in all things technology, it's no surprise that they are not interested in a fixed 9-to-5 work schedule. Many are comfortable with telecommuting and flex time. They don't mind blurring the lines between work life and personal life. This is a plus in the sense

that it is easier to reach them. However, they may expect quid pro quo from you.

Tip: I've noticed that if my response time is ultra-speedy and thorough during conventional business hours, millennials are less likely to attempt to reach me outside of 7:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. If they do make contact during your sacred personal time, one option is to quickly respond with a promise to fully answer and/or handle it as a priority the next business day. This way they know they have been heard, and you have subtly drawn a boundary to protect your personal space.

Job hopping. Job hopping is something you should plan for regardless of your prospect or client's age. More so than with previous generations, we can expect millennials to switch jobs many times throughout their careers.

Tip: For at least the past 15 years, we've become accustomed to the notion that our client contact may move to another organization. We've aimed to stay in their good graces, with the hope that they would bring our firm on board once they settle into their new digs. Hopefully, we've also had the good sense to carefully build multiple relationships within the original organization so that our firm can be viewed as indispensable rather than as a commodity. Now, more than ever, building multiple levels of relationships is key. That said, it must be handled with sensitivity, since your millennial client contact may not (or may!) be open to it.

As we continue to discover more about millennials, over time we will identify effective approaches for selling to this exciting—albeit sometimes a bit perplexing—generation. ■

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