PART TWO:
Managing Event Volunteers Across Generations

Do You Need …

Dependable volunteers who will show up every day? On time? Consistently?

Passionate volunteers who believe in the mission?

Willing volunteers to do the job assigned to them?

Technically savvy volunteers?

By Florence May
During the past 15 years we’ve witnessed four generations of volunteers (and staff) come together in support of festivals and events. Volunteers come with a wide variety of motivations, skills, and expectations.

Take a few minutes. Consider the generational similarities and differences that influence sound volunteer management best practices.

Reflect on your volunteers, colleagues, family and friends as you peruse the list below of commonly reported generational traits. Are these work ethics and values consistent with your personal observations?

**Silent Generation**
(aka Children of the Depression/WWII/The Greatest Generation)

Born between 1922-1945, the Silent Generation is the oldest and most experienced volunteer group. They look for opportunities to keep busy and connected. Events and festivals can gain from their skills, knowledge and leadership.

**Silent Generation Volunteer Work Ethic and Values**
- Dedication to their job
- Follow the rules
- Respect for authority
- Prefer hierarchal organization
- Patient (don’t need instant gratification)
- Traditional expectations
- May use computers to communicate with children and grandchildren but more cautious about technology than younger generations.

**Boomers**
(aka Baby Boomers/The Largest Generation)

Born between 1946-1964, the Boomers are beginning to turn 60 years of age. Boomers seek active retirements including community volunteer opportunities.

**Volunteer Work Ethic and Values**
- May have workaholic tendencies
- Loyal to organizations
- Support personal causes
- Hard workers (want gratification from work)
- Seek self-improvement and growth
- Like technology that “works” and makes their lives easier.

**Generation X**
(aka Gen Xers, Baby Bust, Come of Age around the Milenium)

Born between 1965-1980, Gen X is the smallest of the workforce generations. This population volunteers to organize events, becomes participant fundraisers or helps promote their favorite nonprofits via social media and their personal networks, according to research completed by Dan Brown, Jewish Philanthropy.

**Gen X Volunteer Work Ethic and Values**
- May have workaholic tendencies
- Loyal to organizations
- Support personal causes
- Hard workers (want gratification from work)
- Seek self-improvement and growth
- Like technology that “works” and makes their lives easier.

**Generation Y**
(aka Nexters, Millenials, Echo Boomers, Generation www.)

Born between 1981-2002, Generation Y emerges as the second largest population group in the workplace. They are remaking volunteer expectations with their emphasis on active participation, effective use of time and achievement.

**Volunteer Work Ethic and Values**
- Demand balance between work, volunteerism and personal life
- Loyal to ideas, causes and products
- Strong morals and community service
- Eager make a positive impact while volunteering
- Tolerant
- Expect the latest technology
- Expect an active voice in decision making and planning
- Want immediate feedback.

Jennifer J. Deal, a research scientist with the Center for Creative Leadership states there are also “negative stereotypes for each of the generations … the Silents are fossilized, the Boomers are narcissistic, the Gen Xers are slackers, and the much maligned
Gen Yers are even more narcissistic than the Boomers.” Motivational speaker Bruce Tulgan notes sarcastically, “The Gen Y, like Generation X, is on fast-forward but with their self-esteem on steroids.”

Ouch!
Take heart, regardless of which generation you belong, it is difficult to find sources that agree precisely on the generational names, time span or even definitively on the positive or negative traits. Cuspers, or those people that fall at older or younger ends of their generation, may affiliate with another generation.

There is even a sub group of Baby Boomers that are often referred to as Generation Jones, a term coined by Jonathan Pontell. According to Wikipedia, “These are the people born at the tail end of the Baby Boom between 1954 and 1965. The name ‘Generation Jones’ has several connotations, including a large anonymous generation, a “keeping up with the Joneses” competitiveness and the slang word “jones” or “jonesing”, meaning a “yearning” or “craving.”

Many authors, including Bruce Tulgan of Rainmaker Thinking Inc., emphasize the importance of the generational mix of your organization and what it means for the future of your organization. He states that you need to understand the four generations in the workplace today—each at different life stages, each with conflicting perspectives, expectations, and needs. You need to learn the best practices to foster understanding, leverage strengths, avoid clashes, improve productivity, and maximize teamwork. Tulgen stresses that you must turn age diversity into a strategic advantage for your organization.

Generational similarities and differences impact our volunteer management strategies particularly in the areas of organization, operations, technology and communications.

Organization
Based on seven years of research, Jennifer J. Deal states that all the working age generations want:
- To Feel valued 85%
- Recognition and appreciation 74%
- A Supportive environment 73%
- A Capable workforce 72%
- To Be part of a team 68%

Her findings are presented in the new book, Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young & Old Can Find Common Ground where she provides examples of generational similarities.

“Leaders must be trustworthy. Different generations do not have notably different expectations of their leaders. Above all else, people of all generations want leaders they can trust.”

Deal also clarifies that value, recognition and respect may take on a different nuance depending on the volunteer’s generation.

“Everyone wants respect, but the generations don’t define it in the same way. In the study, older individuals talked about respect in terms of ‘giving my opinions the weight I believe they deserve,’ while younger respondents characterized respect as ‘listen to me, pay attention to what I have to say.’”

Regardless of age, know thy audience!

Operations
Effective volunteer management requires that you take into consideration those mature volunteers who may request a more traditional “task structured” volunteer experience vs. the younger volunteers who may desire more “say” in their volunteer activities.

All of your helpers want to understand the expectations that come with the volunteer experience. It is normal for all age groups to expect volunteer job opportunities to be communicated with job descriptions, time requirements and restrictions.

Technology & Communications
The majority of people ages 16-64 have relatively positive feelings about new technologies including cell phones, PDAs, e-mail and the internet according to a recent survey by the PEW Research Center.
The Xers and Yers expect the time efficiencies of communicating real time changes, registering for volunteer positions online and selecting when they are available to work. They are frequently open to showing support for causes and their favorite organizations through social networking sites or blogs.

The PEW Research indicate Seniors, while generally positive about e-mail and internet, are not as accepting of social networking sites or blogs. Privacy and security fears continue to be major concerns.

Seniors may be open to new technology but many festival and event websites flunk basic “Senior Friendliness” tests. The majority of website complaints from mature volunteers are still largely related type size and fuzzy fonts. We need to create sites with larger, cleaner type for the sight impaired.

This prominent problem was brought to the table recently by a vision-impaired Ottawa Bluesfest volunteer registrant. She underlined some common problems and shared some important advice. Creating an easily legible site starts with:

- Using a minimum font size of 12 point.
- Designing with distinguishable colors, preferably black text on a white background.
- Using fonts like Arial and Verdana that provide a cleaner experience when magnified.

She also shed light on some important technical applications that made her registration process easier. She loved pull down options but also admitted that leader lines are helpful. The site did not timeout on her, which allowed sufficient time to complete each registration section. Finally, the system provided field verification to ensure she had completed all the required fields. We also learned that implementing these changes made it simpler for completely blind registrants to use programs such as Jaws or Windoweyes to successfully register online.

Websites should also be compatible with hearing enhancement software. And these programs are not just for the Silent Generation, they are also for the Boomers.

Online volunteer registration is rarely a problem for any of the generations. However, all organizations should only collect the personal information required for the volunteer position on their registration sites. Seniors often have more concerns about private information security but all generations should only be required to supply necessary data.

Volunteer managers need to carefully consider the registrant information required for participation. Do you really need to know birth dates, driver’s license numbers or social security numbers? If you do, make certain that your online registration system will encrypt this sensitive information.

Working Together
You know your volunteers and their needs better than anyone else. It is fitting to conclude with the words of Paula Gregorowicz, The Paula G Company.

“The solution to generational differences has to do more with respecting people as people and unique individuals than any prescribed formula.”

Florence May is President of TRS – The Registration System. TRS provides expert consultation and technological support for volunteer managers. TRS clients include the 2011 North Texas Super Bowl LOC, Kentucky Derby Festival, Indy 500 Festival, Ottawa Bluesfest, 2010 NCAA Men’s Final Four, SeaFair, 2010 World Equestrian Games, Calgary Habitat for Humanity and Shambhala.