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What Does Generation Y want from Conferences and Incentive Programmes?

By Rob Davidson

May 2008

Summary

This article examines the particular characteristics of Generation Y, such as their high expectations, their desire for ongoing education and their technological aptitude. It investigates the ways in which conferences and incentive programmes can be designed in such a way that they appeal to this youngest, but fastest-growing, segment of employees. Approaches include effective use of technology, involvement at the design stage, consideration of CSR and sustainability and effective use of speakers.

The recommendations will be of interest to all intermediaries and suppliers in the conference and incentive travel industry, including convention bureaux and other destination marketing organisations, destination management companies, professional conference organisers and incentive travel houses, venues and speakers.

Introduction

All businesses must adapt their products and services to meet the changing needs of their customers, and the conference and incentive travel industry is no exception. It must constantly evolve in order to ensure that the business events it offers effectively meet the needs and aspirations of each new generation of participants.

Conferences and incentive trips play a key role in fostering communication between members of the same profession or the same organisation and achieving greater business results. Most of the end-users of such events, those who invest their time in participating in conferences and incentive programmes, are men and women in some form of employment. For them, such business events can play a key role in their careers, as important sources of information, motivation and networking opportunities.

Today, for the first time in history, there are four generations in the global professional and managerial workforce:

- The **Traditionalists**, born between 1925 and 1942. Most, but by no means all of these, have retired or entered semi-retirement.
- The **Baby Boomers**, born between 1943 and 1960. The oldest of these have begun retiring from employment.
- **Generation X**, born between 1961 and 1976. Many of these are already established in management positions.
- **Generation Y**, born between 1977 and 1995. These form the latest cohort to enter the global workforce.

(Note: there are various definitions of the generations above, which vary slightly in terms of the years they span. See [Defining Generation Y](#) below.)

This article examines the particular characteristics of Generation Y and investigates the ways in which conferences and incentive programmes can be designed in such a way that they appeal to this youngest, but fastest-growing, segment of employees. The recommendations will be of interest to all intermediaries and suppliers in the conference and incentive travel industry, including

convention bureaux and other destination marketing organisations, destination management companies, professional conference organisers and incentive travel houses, venues and speakers.

Defining Generation Y

Authors focusing on the most recent generation to enter professional employment use a variety of terms to describe this cohort. While most refer to 'Generation Y', alternative phrases include: Generation Next, Echo Boomers, Digital Natives, the Millennium Generation or Millennials. There is also some variety of opinion among authors as to the exact years of birth which define Generation Y, with some commentators putting the qualifying date as early as 1976 and others defining it as beginning in 1980.

For the purposes of this study, we will use Hira's^[1] span of birthdates of 1977-95, as this is the most widely accepted. We will refer collectively to the cohort under consideration as 'Generation Y', and the term 'Y-er' will be used to denote an individual member of Generation Y.

The characteristics of Generation Y

A thorough understanding of the values, tastes and preferences of the youngest generations of employees is vital to the success of any industry targeting them with its products and services. In many ways, today's twenty- and thirty-somethings differ considerably from previous generations of employees. And they are gradually accounting for a greater percentage of the workforce.

2008 is a critical year for the inter-generational balance of power. This year, for the first time, Generations X and Y collectively will be able to out-vote Baby Boomers. As these two generations are increasingly represented in business, the media, and public life, their values, attitudes and lifestyles are gradually replacing those of the previous generations.

Cossetted but independent

The salient characteristics of Generation Y may be summed up in one author's description of them as the 'most coddled, well-informed, open-minded to diversity, technically-enriched generation'.^[2] The parents of Y-ers are widely portrayed as having nurtured their offspring with a programme of activities since they were toddlers and as continuing their hands-on involvement well into their children's early adulthood.

However, many authors are at pains to point out that despite this parental cossetting, most Y-ers may be characterised as being independent and confident in outlook. Neither does the indulgence of Y-ers' parents appear to have produced a generation particularly characterised by selfishness. Indeed, the majority of commentators list tolerance, concern with equality and fairness and a deep-seated social consciousness as major attributes for this generation.

High expectations

There is widespread agreement among commentators that, having been encouraged, since birth, to feel special by their parents and the media, Y-ers tend to have high expectations of themselves and are tenacious and questioning, as well as highly vocal and full of energy and innovative drive.

Many specialists in inter-generation differences focus on the fact that members of Generation Y have, above all, high expectations that life should be fun and therefore place higher priority on their personal life and leisure time, than previous generations ever did.

Desire for ongoing education

Nevertheless, there is little evidence to suggest that, as a whole, this generation shows signs of being hedonistic or indolent. On the contrary, Y-ers tend to demonstrate a deep-seated desire for

ongoing education, which they regard as the key to success in professional life. Some commentators have described them as 'lifelong learners', for whom education and training is perceived as the norm rather than the exception.

Technologically adept

Predictably, Generation Y's acquaintance and aptitude with technology in all of its forms, from an early age, considerably sets it apart from previous generations. It has been said that Y-ers regard electronic devices as 'extra limbs', and one source encapsulates them as 'a multimedia generation learning to juggle many more ideas simultaneously than their parents did'.^[3] This is the first demographic to grow up with the internet and it is clear that they view the Web as a two-way communications tool.

Their high level of technological skills and their preference for instant communication and social networking tools have made Generation Y into efficient multi-taskers. But persistent exposure to high-tech tools is also cited by several commentators as a contributory factor behind the phenomenon of Generation Y appearing to desire everything on demand – anytime, anyplace – with a pronounced tendency towards the need for instant gratification and a markedly shorter attention span than previous generations.

Adapting conferences and incentive programmes to Generation Y participants

Although there has been comparatively little research carried out into the attitudes of Generation Y towards their participation in conferences and incentive travel, much can be deduced from what is already known from investigations into their experience of education and working-life in general. Table 1 summarises the key differences in these respects, between Baby Boomers and subsequent generations.

Baby Boomers	Generations X and Y
Structure	Flexibility
Worker as instrument	Worker as a human resource
Work as labour intensive	Work as knowledge intensive
Hierarchical structures	Participatory structures
Education completed	Lifelong learning
Adapted from Ramsborg and Tinnish ^[5]	

These differences mean that the needs and expectations of Generation Y, in particular, regarding participation in conferences and incentive trips, are in many ways very distinct from those of previous generations. The rest of this article reviews those differences and suggests ways of creating business events that will appeal to this latest cohort of employees.

Effectively communicating conferences and incentive programmes to Generation Y

Y-ers respond to communication that understands their uniqueness, their particular way of receiving and processing information. The use of too many words in marketing messages is a guaranteed turn-off for Generation Y. The key to effective communication with Y-ers is to use as few words and as many strong images as possible. Generational marketing expert Ann A. Fishman believes that this age group think differently: they think in text-messaging format, so very short, efficient copy is required.

Another commentator emphasizes the use of images:

'Generation Y depends on visual learning. All their lives, they were raised on graphics, games, the Internet and online games. This is a generation whose marketing has been pictorial and graphic ... to attract them, you need to be dynamic in your use of graphics and pictures.'

[6]

Effective use of technology

This generation expect more – and better – use of technology in every aspect of conference and incentive planning. They expect all information about the event to be online – in an attractive, easy-to use format. They are highly unimpressed by clunking, complex, poorly-designed websites.

Fishman advises meetings planners who have any doubts about how their conference websites shape up for younger generation attendees to have their own employees in that age group analyse those websites and adapt them to Generation Y. [8]

Incentive programme 'teasers' can be sent to younger participants using their preferred means of communication: the mobile telephone. Indeed, according to US commentators Ramsborg and Tinnish:

'The full capabilities of technology must be exploited before, during, and after a meeting. Blogs, mobile phones, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, podcasts, virtual meeting environments, RSS feeds, videos, widgets, mashups, wikis, moblogs, and social networking sites ... Learners who use these technologies every day expect technology to be seamlessly interwoven into learning situations, i.e., meetings'

[7]

Effective design of conferences and incentive programmes for Generation Y

More involvement at the design stage

Generation Y is an interactive generation that is used to being consulted for feedback on almost everything that affects them, from their level of satisfaction with their educational courses to their experiences of the products they use. As a result, they are used to interacting with service providers of all kinds.

Conference and incentive travel planners targeting this age group are advised to involve them, from the earliest stage, in the design of the programme, choice of activities, and even the selection of speakers, so that they feel a sense of 'ownership' of these events.

Fishman suggests that ...

'the meeting planner can ask early registrants if they have special concerns [they can just email them to you] which will enable you to see if the meeting will meet the younger audience's needs or if the meeting needs to be tweaked a little. Taking that extra step ... can make a big difference.'

[8]

Corporate Social Responsibility and environmental issues

At EIBTM (the global meetings and incentives exhibition) in 2007, Andy Besent of the InterContinental Hotels Group identified a greater concern for CSR and the need to have some interaction with the local community at the conference/incentive destination as two of the most distinguishing characteristics of Generation Y as participants in such events. Arguably, much of the impetus towards 'greener' meetings and incentive trips is being driven by this youngest generation of participants, who are far less tolerant of waste and the negative impacts of such events on the natural environment.

They also appear to care more about the human environment, and are uneasy about the apparent elitist aspect of many business events, particularly when these take place in destinations marked by widespread poverty and disadvantage. Progressive conference and incentive planners respond to these concerns by giving their participants the opportunity to take time out to interact with the local

community during the event and to 'give something back' – by, for example, raising funds for a local charity or playing football with the local children.

Such activities hold great appeal for Y-ers, who regard them as an ethically sound antidote to the conspicuous consumption and elitism that can characterise business events.

More effective use of speakers

It is often said that Y-ers' short attention spans make them a difficult audience, at any conference. But all of the psychological research indicates that for delegates of any age, attention levels drop dramatically after the first 20 minutes of any presentation. The drive towards shorter, more interactive sessions will intensify as Y-ers account for an increasingly large proportion of participants in business events.

Generation Y participants expect interaction, in real time, with each other and with speakers, through having the opportunity, for example, to text-message their questions to a big screen during sessions.

Having grown up with computers at home and an abundance of TV channels, multi-tasking Y-ers expect and thrive on constant change and stimulation. What do they expect from speakers?

Fishman believes that they want the following. [\[8\]](#)

- Substantive information that can help them advance in their current jobs or become better prepared when they move on. Motivational speakers don't motivate them.
- Information they cannot get from the Internet or a book. They don't like to waste their time.
- To hear from speakers who are in a position of power. They want to know how the game is played.
- PowerPoint to be used correctly:
 - slides only when necessary;
 - no 'laundry list' of multiple points the speaker is about to make;
 - few words on each slides.

Above all, speakers need to deliver their material in a way that combines education and information with entertainment – edutainment and infotainment are what Y-ers expect from all of their experiences. As Ramsborg and Tinnish put it:

'The adult learners of today expect "infotainment," the delivery of information in an entertaining format. Even the most serious programming on television, the news, is created now with graphics, music, lighting, and special effects. Sports arenas now have giant television screens to show instant replays and powerful sound systems for commentary and music. There aren't many places that people go where they are not treated to a "show" – and meetings are no exception.'

Conclusion

The continuing success of the conference and incentive travel industry depends upon achieving a firm understanding of Generation Y's needs from meetings and incentive programmes and communicating with Y-ers on their terms. If such events do not adapt to meet the needs of this generation, Y-ers will vote with their feet and stay away from association conferences and refuse to participate in incentive programmes that do not motivate them.

The future of face-to-face business events (and the businesses and destinations that depend on them) rests on all stakeholders achieving an accurate understanding of how conferences and incentives must be designed and run in such a way that they hold a significant appeal for

Generation Y participants – while, at the same time, not alienating any of the members of older generations in the workforce.

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About the author

Rob Davidson is a Senior Lecturer in Business Travel and Tourism at the University of Westminster in London. His latest book, *Marketing Destinations and Venues for Conferences, Conventions and Business Events* (2006) was co-written with Tony Rogers of the British Association of Conference Destinations. In February 2005, he was nominated Meetings and Incentive Personality of the Year 2005, at the Meetings & Incentive Travel Awards ceremony in London. In 2006, 2007 and 2008, he was included in *Conference & Incentive Travel* magazine's 'Power 50' – the 50 most influential people in the UK conference industry.