



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

“It’s a Generational Thing”

By Aliza Chudnow

Today in many transit agencies, you may find as many as four different generations working together. The Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y have matured through different periods of history but now work side-by-side to forge customer relationships and provide efficient and excellent service. Not only are transit employees from different generations, but they are likely to be interfacing with riders from different generations as well. This article will summarize the technical brief *Exceptional Customer Service Across Generations: How to Manage Different Generational Dynamics to Improve the Transit System*, published in a national RTAP publication. We’ll explain how the four generations approach the workplace and customer service and provide tips for transit managers.

The **Silent Generation** includes 35 million people who were born between 1929 and 1945. This generation was shaped by the hardships of the Great Depression and World War II, and they generally have values of self-sacrifice, patriotism and community service. Many transit volunteers who are retirees are in this generation.

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 and grew up with a vision of unlimited opportunity. Baby Boomers are driven to compete in the workplace, and tend to define themselves by their work.

Sixty two million people born between 1965 and 1982 make up **Generation X**. This generation grew up during a time of economic downfall and social breakdown, divorce rates were at an all time high. Generation Xers are self-reliant, skeptical and self-sufficient and are very independent in the work place.

Last, there is **Generation Y** (or the Millennials), born between the years 1983 and 2001. Raised by supportive parents, this generation is comfortable with a diverse world, as well as technology. Many Millennials grew up using cell phones and the internet, and rely on technology to get through their daily routines.

External generational dynamics in transit agencies

Based on these characteristics, this is what sometimes plays out when transit workers interact with customers:

Relating to customers. Generational research of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation suggests that they feel



10 to 15 years younger than their actual age. Baby Boomers believe that middle age starts at 48 years old and ends at 73, while the younger generations believe middle age starts at 36 years old and see people over 57 as “over the hill.” When this is applied to customer service, it can be difficult for a 20-year-old staff member to relate to a 57-year-old customer.

Acknowledging and listening to customers. Because technology is integral to Generation Y, face-to-face contact isn’t practiced as much by them. For a transit agency’s customer service program, it is important to maintain eye contact with customers and be clear and efficient with communications, which is something Generation Y struggles with. The older generations, however, look for unspoken cues and know when they are being heard and understood. Incompatible communication styles can present problems with customer service.

Answering customer questions. Younger generations have come to expect immediate answers to questions. Thanks to the internet, the answer is just a click away. Sometimes, younger customers/riders can get frustrated if customer service representatives or drivers don’t have immediate answers to their questions.

Ways to become more generationally-savvy

Use these tips for providing excellent customer service across the generations:

Teach generational dynamics to your employees. By doing

so, they will be able to broaden their perspectives on different generations. Allow attendees to share thoughts on how they see other generations, then collectively make a list of how generational dynamics may be affecting the transit agency's internal workflow, views of customers and customer service.

Use generational sensibilities when recruiting workers. The key to recruiting workers across generations is to use words and images in job listings and recruitment ads that each generation will be able to relate to and understand.

Include generational perspectives to increase worker retention. In today's multi-generational workforce, different generations want different performance incentives and rewards. It is very important to create a performance rewards system that works for all four generations (see sidebar).

Keep learning. Great organizations make continuous improvement part of their culture. It is important to further investigate the growing body of knowledge on generational dynamics in the workforce. Start by Googling "multi-generational workforce" or go to an online bookstore and search for books on the topic. (Of course, Gen Y folks have already Googled this!)

Create generational-inspired customer icons. This is an easy way to build awareness of the different generations and can be easily done by creating four large posters, one for each generation of customer, placing key words on each poster describing that specific generation. These posters can teach and remind employees that their customers have different age-related perspectives and expectations.

Improve and develop transit services using a generational focus. Marketing a transit agency is about getting close to the customer (and potential customers). When designing new services, bring in the voice of the customer and make sure all of the generational voices are represented. This can be done by introducing staff to the generational icon posters, sharing customer satisfaction research, and mapping out different ways the customers interface with the transit system.

Assess and understand customer satisfaction by generation. In the customer satisfaction survey ask for the

Internal Generational Dynamics at Transit Agencies

Your customers come from different generations, and so do your employees. Here are some generational differences you might see in the workplace:

1. Work-life Balance. Baby Boomers live to work, while younger generations work to live. Baby Boomers view work as a part of their lives while Generation X and Generation Y view work as something you have to do to fund your life. While Boomers created the idea of a 60-hour work week, generation X and Y believe that work is what you have to do from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and as soon as the clock strikes 5 p.m., work stops.

2. Technology. Generation Y is all about using technology at work. While many baby boomers and Silent Generation co-workers struggle with becoming up to date with current technologies, Generation Y are digital natives, needing to use technology to get work done.

3. Individual versus teamwork. Although the traditional workplace depends on teamwork and team meetings, Generation X grew up taking care of themselves and prefer to work independently. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, prefer meetings and value the sense of team accomplishment.

4. Performance reviews. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers grew up in a time where annual performance reviews were the norm, and that's what they still expect. Both of these generations expect rewards based on their performance over the past review period, while younger generations have a different expectation. Generation X and Generation Y look for immediate rewards such as positive feedback, instant appreciation, or direct benefits.

year the customer was born instead of an age range. This will allow the respondents to be placed in generation segments based on their birth year, and may give employees more information on the age-related needs and perspectives of different riders.

Conclusion

Training in generational dynamics in your agency is extremely important because it provides an easy way for all co-workers to understand one another better, which in return allows the work environment to be more productive. Strong and sensitive generational dynamics also builds a more empathetic, customer oriented culture.

For more information on about generational dynamics, read the technical brief in the source below.

Reprinted from the January 2013 issue of the *Kansas TransReporter*, a publication of the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) at the Kansas University Transportation Center.

Source

- John W. Martin, Exceptional Customer Service Across Generations: How to Manage Different Generational Dynamics to Improve the Transit System, Rural Transit Assistance Program.
<http://www.nationalrtap.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=2cflLeMiyNs%3D&tabid=1524>