Boomers, Xers, and Millennials: Who are They and What Do They Really Want from Continuing Higher Education?

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Earlier this year, Kathleen Casey-Kirschling, born one second after midnight on January 1, 1946, officially became the first "Baby Boomer" to receive Social Security benefits (Social Security Administration news release, October 2007). This single event marked a seismic shift as a dominant living American generation began the transition from midlife to elderhood. This event also highlighted an increasing general awareness of and interest in generational groupings in the US.

Indeed, literature on US generational groups has expanded over the past five years; one need only glance at the list of references at the end of this article. One portion of this literature comprises general sociological/historical analyses with a focus on differences in values, needs, preferences, and behaviors among a generation's members. Another body of work provides practical information on managing a multi-generational workforce. Still a third body of work examines methods for effectively marketing to different generational groups. Though one recent book, *Millennials Go to College, 2nd Edition (2007)* by Strauss and Howe, targets higher education, particularly

academic and student affairs issues at traditional degree-granting institutions, none of the extensive body of literature on generations specifically addresses continuing higher education or nontraditional students.

Because nontraditional students encompass a large age spectrum, sensitivity to generational differences seems particularly relevant to our field. The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive review of current literature about generational differences and apply that knowledge to the field of continuing higher education. This article will: describe the usefulness of employing a generational perspective, provide a description of generational characteristics for three living generations, develop hypotheses about generational differences relevant to our field, review results of a recent market research study that employed generational segmentation, and address "lessons learned" for continuing higher educators.

WHAT IS A GENERATION AND WHY STUDY THEM?

In developing educational programs and communicating about those programs to potential students, we know one size does not fit all. Continuing educators typically divide or segment students by age, gender, geographic region, income, profession, declared interest areas, among other factors. Characteristics, needs, and preferences of these segments help drive decisions about program content and format, features to emphasize in marketing messages, most effective marketing channels, among other elements. However, generational groups may be a more meaningful segmentation strategy for us to employ. Strauss and Howe observe, "As a social category, a generation probably offers a safer basis for personality generalization than such other social categories as sex, race, religion, or age" (1991, p. 63).

A generation is defined as a cohort of people born within a particular period of time. By most definitions, each generational interval is approximately 20 years in length. Twenty years represents the average length of time between birth and childbearing—or the beginning of the next generation. The twenty year interval also represents the division of an average human lifespan of roughly 80 years into four distinct phases: youth, rising adulthood, midlife, and elderhood (Strauss and Howe, p. 60).

A generation moves together from one life phase to another. There are some differences in the literature in terms of breakdown of current living American generations. Strauss and Howe, two authors who have written the most extensively on the subject, employ the following divisions that also will be used in this study: G.I. of WWII Generation, born 1901-1924;

Silent Generation, born 1925-1942; Baby Boomer Generation, born 1943-1960; Generation X or Thirteenth Generation, born 1961-1981; Millennial Generation or Generation Y, born 1982-2003; and the newest, born since 2004, is yet unnamed (1991, p 32). However, Howe and Strauss predict this generation may be called the "Homeland Generation," due to the repercussions of the events of September 11 on their lives (2007, p. 206).

All authors recognize distinct differences among current living generations. Strauss and Howe call this a "peer personality," described as:

> The peer personality of a generation is essentially a caricature of its prototypical member. It is, in its sum of attributes, a distinctively personlike creation. A generation has collective attitudes about family life, sex roles, institutions, politics, religion, lifestyle, and the future. It can be safe or reckless, calm or aggressive, self-absorbed or outer-driven, generous or selfish, spiritual or secular, interested in culture or interested in politics
> . . . (p. 63)

It follows that if we know more about this "peer personality," we may do a better job of developing and delivering effective educational programs. So strong is this peer personality, that we also need to recognize our own generational personality and not assume these apply universally to other generational groups:

> [Today's marketers] assume that the next generation will be like the last generation, only more so. No generation continues what came before. Every generation turns a corner, and in some critical respect, changes fundamentally the direction of whatever trends they inherit from the last generation" (LifeCourse Associates, 2006, p. 2-3).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THREE MAJOR US GENERATIONAL GROUPS

This section describes basic differences among the three generational groups that comprise the majority of continuing higher education students today: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Because a generation's world view or "peer personality" can be attributed to the social context that existed during the youth phase of each generation, I begin by briefly describing the social context for each generation as youth followed by each generation's major concerns today. In addition, because much continuing higher

education is related to career advancement, I also explore each generation's basic career orientation.

A few caveats, however. These characteristics represent broad generalizations and may not apply universally to all members of a generational group. For example, individuals born at the beginning of a generation have a different experience than those born at the tail end. Observations mainly apply to the experiences of middle class members or higher who spent the majority of their youth in the US. Generalizations may not hold for lower socioeconomic segments or for individuals who immigrated to the US. There is some evidence, however, that characteristics of the latest generation, the Millennial generation (particularly comfort with technology, openness to diversity, a global perspective, desire for luxury items), is a global phenomenon, extending far beyond the US borders.

Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960) were children of later GI Generation and early Silent Generation parents. As many authors have observed, youth for Baby Boomers was a time of great optimism. WWII had concluded and the US emerged as a major world power. Homeownership soared and suburban development proliferated. Baby Boomers enjoyed affluent and nurtured lifestyles (especially compared to that of their parents' youth phase) supplied by single wage earning fathers and stay-at-home mothers. Children became the central focus of the family. The US saw fundamental advances in science and technology as Baby Boomers were growing up, perhaps best signified by the development of the polio vaccine, the dramatic achievements of the US space program, and the development of oral contraceptives. Funding and effectiveness of US public schools increased during Boomer youth. Baby Boomers also were the first generation to have experienced television and were exposed to relatively uniform mass messages while growing up (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 305; Thornhill and Martin, p. 57; Willard, p. 1).

Other trends during the Boomer youth and young adult phase included increases in crime, accidental death, and teen unemployment and declining SAT scores (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 306). An emerging sexual revolution among women, the Vietnam War, and subsequent student free speech and the anti-war movements, also occurred at a crucial time in Baby Boomer's development. A shift from traditional religions to a more Asian-inspired spiritualism developed during Boomer youth as well (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 307).

Now firmly established in the midlife phase, the Baby Boomers' outlook is shaped by common experiences in their youth. Boomers are highly optimistic, individualistic, tend to reject authority, and greatly value instant personal gratification. This is the generation that invented the credit card; they are willing to buy on credit and as a result, have tended to undersave for retirement. Unlike their parents who lived well on a single income, most Boomers require two incomes to support a household. Men and women Boomers work hard, long hours, have little leisure time, and feel stressed. Smith has observed "one in seven Generation Xers and Millennials describe themselves as work-centric, compared to about one in four Baby Boomers" (p. 53).

Boomers tend to value education and many have relied on educational attainment to support their high need for professional identity. Because they are behind the curve on retirement savings and/or want to continue their highly desired professional identity, we might predict Boomers will be employed past traditional retirement age. Due to scientific and medical advances, Boomers will live long lives. Currently, Baby Boomers actively deny the normal aging process.

In terms of career orientation, Baby Boomers tend to be highly career-focused. They expect to have a "stellar career" with the salary, title, and perks that go along with it. They are highly competitive (Lancaster and Stillman, p. 22). Boomers value visibility and recognition (Smith, p. 52). Though they were not as loyal to one firm or organization as were previous generations, Baby Boomers are not frequent "job-hoppers;" they tend to feel job changing negatively affects one's career. Boomers value face-to-face interactions and are known in the workplace for preferring meetings as a mode of communication (Lancaster and Stillman, p. 113).

Generation X

The social context while growing up for Generation X (born between 1961 and 1981) provides a stark contrast with that of the previous generation. The US experienced severe economic recessions during this time period. Entire industries collapsed. Gen X children saw their fathers lose well-established positions and high wage earning jobs through plant closures and workforce reductions. US workers could no longer automatically rely on employers rewarding their dedication and loyalty with long-term employment or pension plans. Long lines at gas stations signaled a major energy crisis. This was the time when President Jimmy Carter asked Americans to "turn-off"

their holiday lights. Indeed, economic status decreased for Generation X. One in five lives in poverty and home ownership for young adults fell for this generation (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 327).

The Baby Boomers' optimistic child nurturing society reversed during Generation X's formative years. The US birthrate declined. The US divorce rate increased. The Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision legalized abortion and abortion rates increased. Crime and suicide rates increased and incarceration rates also increased. A wave of de-funding the public schools began with California's Proposition 13 tax revolt in the mid-70s. Generation X children saw art, music, and physical education drift away from their schools.

The women's movement blossomed. Women joined the workforce in record numbers either due to financial necessity or due to women's dissatisfaction with and rejection of traditional females roles. Yet, there was a weak support network for children of working mothers. Many members of Generation X were the infamous "latch key kids" who stayed home by themselves after school until their parents returned from work. Childcare centers and afterschool programs had not yet emerged to a significant extent (Fleishner, p. 1; Manning-Schaffel, p. 1; Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 324).

Due to the greater prevalence of divorce, Generation X was the first to experience complex blended families. According to Howe and Strauss (1993), Generation X was scored lower than Boomers in academic skills, but higher in negotiating, consumer awareness, and adult-interactions skills. Generation X was less college educated than the previous generation and they tended to be more politically and financially conservative. Newspaper readership declined for this generation compared to previous generations. Despite or perhaps because of these trends, Generation X were the resilient "survivors," who, though somewhat cynical, pessimistic, and suspicious, found a way to successfully negotiate their challenging social environment.

Values, needs, and preferences of Generation X were shaped by their formative years. These individuals now have children and homes. They want to provide the financial security and attention to their own offspring that they may not have experienced themselves as children. Fathers play a significant role in their children's lives (Klein, p. 1). Generation X are involved with their parents and extended-blended families, describe their parents as "cool," and assist family members with large purchasing decisions (Manning-Schaffel, p. 2).

As a group, Generation X tended to marry later than previous genera-
tions, thus spent an extended time as single adults. Generation X is very
diverse and well traveled (Ritchie, 1995, p. 146). Just as the Baby Boomers
were the first generation to grow up with television, Generation X was the
first generation to have grown up with computers. Generation X is more
concerned with long-term economic prospects than are the Baby Boomers.
They tend to save more. Because they were exposed to many brands and
product choices growing up, Generation X are savvy comparison shoppers.
As Klein pointed out:

> [This] leads to more cautious spending across the entire income
> spectrum. Where wealthy Boomers might brag about how much
> they pay for something, Gen Xers relish talking about how much
> they managed to save—and that applies even to those in the
> top income brackets (p. 1).

In terms of career orientation, members of Generation X want to build
a "portable" career, providing them with career resiliency their parents
did not have (Lancaster and Stillman, p. 55). Not surprisingly, as a rule,
Generation X is not loyal to a single employer and see job changing as
necessary and advantageous. Because they are so family oriented, they
value and protect their leisure time; eighty-hour work weeks are not the
norm (Smith, p. 52). They appreciate feedback and want to know how they
are doing. They appreciate the opportunity for professional development
and some employers may use learning opportunities as a retention device
for Generation X employees. In the workplace, as in other aspects of their
lives, Generation X are resilient survivors who want options. (Lancaster
and Stillman, p. 53).

Millennials

Following Generation X, the Millennial generation (born between 1982 and
2003) experienced a shift back to a child-centered social context. This time
period represented the lowest child-to-parent ratio in American history,
perhaps best signified by the "Baby on Board" stickers applied to minivans
that proliferated during this time. Also during this time, the US abortion
rate plateaued; infertility and neonatal treatment became more effective
and commonplace. Concern with quality of education emerged and stan-
dardized test scores began to increase. Terms like "cocooning" and "soccer
mom" were coined during this era.

The poverty rate for children under six peaked during this time period,

as did the divorce rate. Congress expanded Medicaid to cover all poor children, starting in 1983. The First Children's Summit at UN occurred in 1990 (Robinson, p. 50; Strauss and Howe, p. 336).

In addition to cherishing and nurturing their children, Boomer and Generation X parents of Millennials, seemed obsessed with preparing their children for the future. Millennial children began building their resumes in preschool, attending the best schools and participating in a plethora of extracurricular activities. Many Millennials began preparing for college admission in the 6th grade. They are a pressured and achieving generation. Despite this pressure, Millennials are trusting of their parents and other authority figures.

Unlike their individualistic Baby Boomer or pessimistic Generation X parents, the Millennials are team-oriented, confident, and optimistic (Howe and Strauss, 200, p. 8). Like Generation X, Millennials grew up with computers; they also experienced the rapid adoption of the internet, cell phone, and other mobile devices. They are a highly networked, connected generation and tend to be completely immersed in technology. As one research analyst noted, "they've never known a life without a computer—they can take in 20 hours' worth of information in seven hours" (van Dyk, p. 28). More than any other generation—even their affluent Boomer parents—Millennials have a strong preference for high-priced luxury branded goods (van Dyk, p. 28-31).

Millennials are graduating from college and are entering graduate school or the workforce. They tend to be very career oriented and expect rapid advancement and perks. They are very accustomed to being in the spotlight, receiving recognition for practically every achievement growing up no matter how trivial. They expect to be treated as special and to be catered to (Johnson, p. 15). Millennials also appreciate feedback, having been graded, evaluated, and ranked throughout their lives. They appreciate their parents' involvement in their lives. In the most recent survey of freshmen students at US universities, conducted annually by UCLA, a large majority of freshmen (84 percent) reported parental involvement was the "right amount" in their decision to attend college and 77.5 percent reported parental involvement was the "right amount" in dealing with college officials (Robinson, p. 51-52). Because of their skill at multi-tasking, Millennials are likely to want to build parallel careers, not necessarily focusing on one job or profession at the exclusion of others. Thus, multi-tasking may ultimately take the form of continuous job-changing for Millennials.

Because of their community orientation, they tend to appreciate mission-driven organizations. They are motivated by helping others, improving the environment and making the world a better place (Barone, p. 1, Strauss and Howe, 2007, p. 85). Because of their intense focus on learning and achieving throughout their lives, Millennials are likely to appreciate continuous learning opportunities (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002).

GENERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS IN A CONTINUING HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Given that our students span the Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial populations, generational characteristics and differences have direct relevance. This section highlights generational considerations in program design and delivery and marketing messages. The section concludes with a series of hypotheses about needs and preferences for continuing education segmented by generation.

Boomer preferences for continuing higher education

The Baby Boomer generation always has been avid consumers of education; this tendency is not likely to change. Major factors that will drive Boomer's consumption of education include their need, both financially and emotionally, to continue to work past traditional retirement age. According to a recent survey conducted by the MetLife Mature Market Institute, older Americans stay in the workforce for two main reasons: "financial necessity and the desire to remain active and/or to try something new" (Knowledge@ Wharton, p. 1). Boomers derive great satisfaction from their professional identity, titles and recognition, so they are likely to appreciate earning some sort of certification as part of their continuing education.

Boomers always have sought meaning and self-actualization and the latter stage of life may offer more opportunity for them to transition into a different, more meaningful or altruistic field (Thornhill and Martin, p. 37; Wofford, p. A36). As Freedman explained this phenomenon: "in the end, the real force driving people to find meaningful work is not economic or social, but personal. It's that inner voice calling for something as simple as a change of pace, as ambitious as changing the world, as profound as reclaiming a dream deferred before it is denied" (p. 84).

Based on their developmental experiences and current need, Boomers are likely to be interested in topics like: personal financial management/ investing; health and wellness; spiritualism; heritage languages; travel;

counseling; teaching, coaching, mentoring; programs that involve grand-children. In terms of formats and delivery method, Boomers are likely to appreciate interaction-heavy formats, in-person meetings, classroom-based programs, and cohort programs that allow them to form relationships with others. They will appreciate clear evaluative criteria. Boomers are comfort-able with technology and will probably accept online, distance learning options, if there also is opportunity to interact with instructors and fellow students.

In terms of marketing appeal, continuing higher educators should try to appeal to the Boomers' individualism by answering the question, "What's in it for me?" Marketing messages aimed at Boomers should explain personal benefits in great detail (Tooker, p. 6). Boomers deny the aging process and do not want to be reminded of their age. Do not refer to them as "old" or "senior." Instead, provide visual depictions of positive role models within the age demographic of the Boomers (Tooker, p. 6). Despite their fear of aging, Boomers value a high level of experience, so the reputation and longevity of an organization will likely impress this group.

Boomers value education, still desire instant gratification, and are willing to buy on credit. Boomers are not necessarily likely to be price sensitive; emphasize value for money rather than low price. They also are used to associating with causes. Consider incorporating some form of "cause marketing" into marketing messages (i.e., pink ribbon symbol for breast cancer research and Bono's red anti-HIV Gap campaign), especially campaigns aimed at Boomer women (Barletta, p. 1).

Generation X preferences for continuing higher education
Generation X members are firmly established and engaged in their careers and, due to their need for financial security, will be interested in opportuni-ties to advance their careers and earning power. They tend to be cautious comparison shoppers, so they will be very interested in outcomes from education they spend money or time pursuing. Their global experience, comfort with all forms of diversity, concern about parenting, and tech-nological competence will influence their choices for continuing higher education.

Preferred Generation X topics will include management and leader-ship skills as they advance their careers; personal finance and investing as they continue to be concerned with financial security; entrepreneurship as they start new companies; international studies; environmental issues;

organizational and efficiency; project management; and child development and parenting.

Because they are cautious consumers, Generation X members are more likely to prefer more flexible and shorter formats, "just-in-time" learning and smaller "chunks" rather than investing up front in a 2-3 year part-time certificate or degree program. Emphasizing the reputation of the organization and offering additional security through endorsements by outside professional organizations will be increasingly important. Modular programs providing sequential levels of certification may resonate with this group. Because of the value they place on family and leisure time, offering weekday programs will be increasingly important.

Generation X is accustomed to customization of products and services and may seek some level of personalization in continuing education as well. Because of their innate cynicism, Generation X will not respond to marketing "hype." They will prefer information, data, comparisons, and testimonials by people like them. Nontraditional word-of-mouth or "viral" marketing was invented by this generation. Having an easy to navigate marketing website is essential. However, many marketing professionals advocate using direct mail marketing to reach Generation X as they tend to open and read their mail (Fleischner, p. 1).

In terms of marketing message, emphasize career resilience and mobility. Treat Generation X members with respect. Emphasize the functional and practical value of programs and provide product comparisons.

Millennial preferences for continuing higher education

Millennial members are just now entering workforce and repaying their substantial educational loans. They remain expert multitaskers, résumé-builders, and are technology immersed, networked and connected. They are success-oriented, status conscious and, more than older generations, are avid consumers of luxury items and brands (van Dyk, p. 28). They have a plethora of choices for consumer products and they tend to be trendy and fickle. They have grown up surrounded by award winning product and graphic design and remain interested in all forms of design (fashion, product, auto, interior design).

Topics likely to appeal to Millennials include: new technology; independent living skills (budgeting, cooking, etc.); basic job skills (presentations, finance, spreadsheets); career information and options; personal finance and investing; and design. Because of their immersion in technology, Mil-

lennials are likely to prefer distance learning formats, though, due to their experience with traditional education may continue to be drawn to the classroom-based experience as well. They may appreciate the opportunity to receive education via wireless devices. Even more so than Generation X, the catered-to Millennial is likely to expect a high degree of customization and personalization in their educational opportunities (Robinson, p. 52). They will expect 24/7 access to instructors and student services staff. They will appreciate programs that provide "behind the scenes" access and "learning by doing," like special tours and internship opportunities (Robinson, p. 54). Millennials expect to have wireless internet access wherever and whenever they want it. Programs or facilities that can re-create a Starbucks-like multi-tasking environment will probably be a hit with Millennials.

In terms of marketing, word-of-mouth, interest groups, collaborative filters will be important. Continuing educators would do well to pay close attention to trends and be prepared to change even more quickly than is current practice. Millennials are savvy web-researchers. They will comparison shop and look for opportunities to "test drive" programs. Offering podcasts of excerpts from instructor presentations will be a good marketing device for this generation. Because of their expectation to be treated special, insider "perks" or loyalty programs may also be effective. This generation uses social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, etc.) to a high degree. These may be new marketing channels or Millennials may prefer to preserve that space for personal socializing, rejecting efforts to market or advertise via these vehicles.

Effective messages for Millennials may include: getting ahead on the job and how to be part of the "inner circle." Emphasizing the reputation of your institution where possible may appeal to the brand sensibilities of the Millennial generation.

SPECIFIC HYPOTHESES

Based on this analysis above, I developed a series of specific hypotheses about needs and preferences for continuing higher education programs, broken down by generational group. I hypothesize that Boomers will exhibit:

- interest in career-related programs;
- some interest in personal enrichment;
- preference for classroom-based programs;
- acceptance of online programs;

- interest in reputation of sponsoring institution ;
- response to direct mail;
- response to electronic marketing channels.

Generation X will exhibit:
- high interest in career-related programs;
- less interest in personal enrichment;
- less interest in evenings and weekend programs;
- enthusiasm for online programs;
- resonance with "career relevance"
  in marketing messages;
- high interest in testimonials from past students;
- preference for electronic marketing channels.

And Millennials will tend to:
- show interest in career-related programs;
- show some interest in graduate school or degree prep;
- prefer online formats over classroom;
- react positively to career relevance in marketing messages;
- appreciate ability to sample prior to enrolling;
- show greater preference for electronic channels;
- show interest in social networking as a marketing channel.

RESULTS OF RECENT MARKET RESEARCH SURVEY

This section provides an overview of a recent market research survey conducted by UCLA Extension. Using a generational segmentation strategy, the survey attempted to ascertain differences in student needs and preferences for continuing education program types and formats, the student's purpose for attending, and some indication of their preference for marketing messages and channels.

I employed conjoint analysis as major component of this survey. Conjoint analysis is a common market research technique that attempts to simulate a real-world purchasing situation within a survey context. Within most standard market research surveys, respondents uniformly indicate they want the highest quality and greatest number of features for the lowest possible price. In reality, consumers make tradeoffs among various product attributes when making purchasing decisions. Conjoint analysis is a sophisticated technique that captures this dynamic by forcing respondents

to make such tradeoffs while responding to a survey. In the "forced choice" conjoint method, respondents are presented two sets of product attributes from which they are forced to choose. Now that a conjoint survey can be administered over the internet with responses instantaneously analyzed using a complex algorithm, the technique has become more accessible to a greater number of market-driven organizations. (For more information about this technique, see Bhaskaran, 2007 and Curry, 1996.)

For purposes of our survey, I based our design on the following product/marketing attributes: program type; program format; purpose for attending; main marketing message; and marketing method. The last three attributes are not technically qualities of the product itself, but represent elements of the purchasing situation. I purposely chose not to include "price" as an attribute. Price for UCLA Extension programs is highly variable depending on the program and format offered; it would be difficult to offer realistic purchasing scenarios under these conditions. For example, because attribute groupings are generated randomly by the conjoint software, respondents might inadvertently be presented with a very high-end program for an unrealistically low price.

Within each attribute, I also specified five options or levels. These are not inclusive of all possible options, but represent a judgment about what would both be important to students, would produce realistic product attribute combinations, and would provide some differentiation among segments studied. Time needed to complete a conjoint survey expands dramatically as the number of attributes and levels increase. Therefore, to avoid respondent fatigue while completing the survey, some selection and judgment is necessary. Options under each attribute reflect types of programs offered by UCLA Extension and would differ for other institutions.

Under "program type," options included:
- 1-3 year certificate program;
- 5-day intensive career program;
- 1-2 day quick career refresher;
- 10-week class;
- prep and prerequisites for a degree program.

Under "program format," options included:
- classroom based—weekdays;

- online;
- combination online/classroom;
- classroom based—evenings;
- classroom based—weekends.

Under "purpose for attending," options included:
- advance my current career;
- change to a new career;
- find a part-time career for retirement years;
- learning for fun and personal enrichment;
- ability to connect and network with people.

Under "main marketing message:"
- testimonials from past students;
- quality of course and instructor;
- reputation of institution;
- direct relevance and benefit to my career;
- ability to sample a class before enrolling.

And for "marketing method or channel:"
- direct mail (printed catalog or brochure);
- e-mail (with specific course and enrollment information);
- website;
- search engine (Google, Yahoo, etc.);
- networking websites (MySpace, Facebook, Linkedin, etc.).

In addition to the forced choice conjoint section of the survey, we solicited general demographic data, including birth year, for segmentation purposes. We also asked for information on respondents' typical technology usage and technology they planned to purchase within a year.

We sent the survey to a random sample of existing UCLA Extension students from the past three years. Roughly ten percent of the sample also included "non-student inquiries," or individuals who inquired about a program, but who had not yet enrolled in a class or program.

In March 2008 an e-mail prompt with a link to the survey was sent to 14,950 e-mail addresses. Completion of the survey was strictly voluntary.

Those who completed the survey were offered the option of entering a raffle drawing for a complimentary course enrollment. We received 1,241 completed and partially completed surveys for a response rate of 8.3 percent, considered excellent for market research where the generally accepted response rate is .5 – 2 percent.

The conjoint section of the survey resulted in a percentage score of attributes' relative importance and a percentage score for average utility for each level or option within an attribute; the higher the percentage score, the more important an attribute or option is to respondents. Space prohibits a complete description of all survey results. The following provides a summary of the high points and should serve to illustrate some interesting and useful generational differences. In interpreting conjoint results, I recommend noting relative scores and rank order and to not read too much into relatively small differences in attribute and level utility scores.

IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES AND LEVELS

For all respondents, regardless of generation, purpose for attending (25.29 percent) and program format (23.88 percent) emerged as the strongest attributes. Program type (21.41 percent), marketing message (16.10 percent) and marketing method / channel (13.32 percent) followed. To illustrate how conjoint results can be used by continuing educators, I will provide a more detailed analysis of the two top ranked attributes, "purpose for attending" and "program format."

For all respondents, scores under "purpose for attending," emerged as follows: to advance my current career (56.8 percent); to connect and network with people (51.5 percent); to learn for fun and enrichment (50.4 percent); to change to a new career (48.0 percent); and to find a part-time career for retirement (42.9 percent). As expected, career emerged as very important for all respondents from our sample.

Looking at the other highly scoring attribute, "program format," for all respondents, the following average utility scores emerged from highest to lowest: combination classroom and online (55.0 percent); classroom-based in evenings (52.7 percent); classroom-based on weekends (51.6 percent); online (48.3 percent); and classroom on weekdays (41.9 percent). How did these same attributes breakdown for the three generational groups?

Results by generation—"Purpose for attending"

For the Baby Boomer group, "purpose for attending" scores included: advance my career (52.5 percent); connect and network with people (50.0 percent); find a part-time career for retirement (49.8 percent); tied with learn for fun and enrichment (49.8 percent) and change to a new career (45.7 percent)

For Generation X, advance my career emerged at the top, but other than that, we see a different pattern: advance my career (59.9 percent); connect and network with people (52.5 percent); change to a new career (50.0 percent); learn for fun and enrichment (49.4 percent); and find a part-time career for retirement (38.9 percent). "Change to a new career" scored higher for Generation X than for Baby Boomers, consistent with the hypothesis that Generation X seeks career flexibility and resilience. Also, "find a part-time career for retirement" emerged at the bottom of the list for Generation X with a much lower average utility score than for Boomers. This makes sense given the relative stages of life for the two groups.

For the Millennial group, current career rose to the top as well; part-time career for retirement appeared at the bottom of the list, but other results were somewhat surprising: advance my career (58.4 percent); learn for fun and enrichment (54.3 percent); connect and network with people (51.3 percent); change to a new career (46.6 percent); find a part-time career for retirement (38.1 percent). The most surprising result was that to "learn for fun and enrichment" emerged a strong second after "advance my career," receiving the highest average utility score at 54.3 percent of any of the other two groups.

One explanation for this would be the Millennial generation's focus on high achievement as they made their way through their formal education. Perhaps their focus on academics and college entrance requirements precluded them from learning for "fun," something they now crave. Or a quest for fun may be a theme of this generation in general; employers have noted their younger Millennial workers have little tolerance for boredom and want careers that are interesting and fun (Smith, p. 48). Overall, this is an interesting finding that warrants further study.

Results by generation—"Program format"

Boomers' preferences for program format resulted in the following: combination classroom and online (56.5 percent); classroom-based on weekends (52.8 percent); online programs (52.5 percent); classroom-based in evenings (49.1 percent); and classroom-based on weekdays (38.9 percent).

Generation X preferences were fairly similar to those of the Boomers: combination classroom and online (55.3 percent); classroom-based in evenings (54.1 percent); classroom-based on weekends (51.2 percent); online programs (47.5 percent); classroom-based weekdays (41.7 percent). I was somewhat surprised that among our respondents, online programs received a higher utility score from Boomers than from Generation X among our respondents. Also, I had hypothesized Generation X would prefer weekday programs to preserve their leisure and family time, but among our respondents, that did not bear out.

Results on program format preferences for the Millennial group were are follows: classroom-based in evenings (55.1 percent); combination classroom and online (53.0 percent); classroom-based on weekends (50.7 percent); classroom-based on weekdays (48.2 percent); and online programs (43.2 percent). Again, the results were not consistent with our expectations. Among our respondents, Millennials prefer the classroom-based format over online programs. This may be due to their unfamiliarity with the online format and their recent experience with traditional higher education. The blended classroom / online format emerged as strong with all groups.

LESSONS LEARNED

The conjoint-based market research survey helped to clarify hypotheses relevant to generational differences in preferences for continuing higher education. Despite their life stage, Baby Boomers remain mainly interested in career-related programs and they exhibit some interest in personal enrichment. They tend to prefer classroom-based programs, but also prefer a blended format. Program quality is an important draw for Boomers, even more that reputation of the sponsoring organization. Though they do respond to electronic marketing methods, direct mail is still an important marketing channel for the Boomer audience.

As expected, Generation X also showed a high interest in career related programs and interest equal to Boomers for personal enrichment programs. Among our respondents, Generation X members are willing to sacrifice weekend and evening time for professional development and continuing education activities. They show interest in online programs, but surprisingly not as strong as the Boomers. Emphasizing relevance to career and quality in marketing messages will resonate with Generation X. This generation shows a preference for electronic marketing channels.

Millennials show strong interest in career-related programs as well as some interest in graduate school or degree preparation. Despite their immersion in technology in most other aspects of their lives, survey respondents showed a weak preference for online formats in continuing education. Like the other groups, emphasizing relevance to career and quality of program appear to be the strongest marketing messages. I noted some preference for electronic channels, but surprisingly, direct mail scored the second highest utility for this group. In terms of newer social networking marketing channels, the Millennials showed a slightly higher average utility that the other generations, but not extremely so.

Taken as a whole, a number of lessons can be learned from this generational segmentation exercise. I did not detect as many extreme differences among the generational groupings as I originally suspected. This may be a function of the survey sample that was biased toward existing UCLA Extension students. Nonetheless, career was important to all groups, even the Baby Boomers who are nearing traditional retirement age. Of all the groups, the Boomers showed the highest interest in post-retirement careers. Despite the growth of distance learning technologies, when given a choice, the classroom format still appears highly desirable. Also, despite the growth of electronic marketing methods, direct mail still appears to be an expected marketing channel for all groups. The strong preference among the Millennials in our sample for programs stressing learning for and enrichment may lead to a re-invention and resurgence of noncredit course offerings.

The literature on generational differences is rich and robust and provides a wealth of opportunities for continuing educators to learn from and to apply to our field. This one initial market research study represents a first step to validating the ways different generational groups view and consume continuing higher education. Ultimately, a generational perspective offers a very useful lens for understanding our students and for guiding us in developing relevant and effective programs to meet their ever-evolving educational needs.

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