



Communicating Across the Generations

For the first time in history, there are *four* different generations in the workplace. As a professional and business women's organization, Soroptimist clubs can take a cue from the generational differences that can affect workplace issues such as recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, and managing—which all boils down to communication.

Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. While one size does not fit all, people of the same generation, or age bracket, often share common experiences. Because they share these experiences, they also share a value system.

Having a variety of generations in Soroptimist clubs enables the organization to be more inclusive and fosters diversity. All generations have the ability to support Soroptimist's mission of improving the lives of women and girls. Learning how to communicate with different generations can help eliminate misunderstandings and increase how effectively and efficiently a club functions. When reviewing this information, it's possible that no group will fit any one person exactly—these are just overall similarities in values and behaviors.

The Generations Defined

Silent Generation: born between 1925 and 1941 (ages 69+)

This generation came of age during World War II and the effects of growing up in that time period are realized in the behaviors of this group. One of the most distinctive qualities of this generation is their concern for the plight of others. They tend to be cautious as a generation, i.e.: saving money was a way of life. This generation values responsibility and women in this generation tend to be team players who work within the system. The Silent Generation accomplishes goals through hard work and sacrifice. This is the first generation of women who aggressively moved into the workforce.

The best way to communicate with the Silent Generation is through face-to-face contact. Formal social events are very successful as well as tributes and recognition events. Direct mail, phone, and increasingly the internet are great ways to communicate with this group. Email usage is climbing steadily with the Silents, but it is not at the same level as other generations.

Baby Boomer Generation: born between 1942 and 1964 (ages 46-68)

This group represents the largest substantial sustained growth of the current time. These are the post-W.W. II babies. They are also known as the generation who “questioned authority” in many of cultures. Boomers enjoyed unprecedented employment and educational opportunities in most countries. They value creativity—while their parents were conformists, this generation searched to break the mold. They love adventure and are risk-takers. Boomers tend to evaluate achievement in terms of personal fulfillment. This is the first generation to discover that lifetime employment no longer exists—so job security is not everything to them—but job satisfaction is. With women now firmly implanted in the workforce, Boomers are forced to re-evaluate the role of work in their personal lives.

Because Boomers invented new forms of families, they also incurred new stresses. Boomers were the first generation to divorce at a higher rate than the two previous generations.

Nostalgic messages work best with Boomers and they also enjoy networking events. A good example of a Soroptimist message to this group is: Soroptimists are women at their best, helping other women to be their best.

Direct mail, face to face interaction—especially in fundraising, the internet, and email—are great ways to interface with this generation.

Generation X: born between 1965 and 1981 (ages 25-45)

This is the first generation to grow up in the new family systems created by the Boomers, so they are very independent. The Xers also adapted the Boomers “question authority” attitude very quickly—much to the dismay of their Boomer parents. They are determined to be involved, responsible and in control. Because Xers grew up watching television, they tend to have a more cynical view and they focus on the here and now. They are risk takers, but they take calculated risks and are not intimidated by authority. They are problem solvers, tend to be goal oriented, and demand flexibility.

The best way to communicate with Xers is through email. They are very “e-friendly” and engage in a variety of online media. They do well at social events—themed events and wine tastings are popular. But Xers will not respond as well to something called a “recruitment” event because it doesn’t sound fun—it sounds like a sales pitch. They want to get something back from their investment, be it the actual cost or the value of their time.

The Millennials/Generation Y: born between 1982-2000 (ages 10-24)

This generation will be the future of SIA, so it’s never too early to start thinking about how to communicate with them when they are ready to join their first professional or volunteer organization. The Millennials are the first generation to grow up with the internet—they do not remember a time when it didn’t exist. Many Millennials are technology dependent because of this.

They are over stimulated and because of this are easily bored. This generation understands they will change jobs at least once every five years. As such, titles do not mean much—they believe respect should be earned based on the job, not the title. Millennials are goal-oriented, and like the “Silent Generation,” they are team players.

Communication Tips

Clubs with multi-generational representation have the important job of understanding all of its members. Good communication is a key to living well (both personally and professionally). Being able to connect and build rapport with other people is a foundational life skill. Consider the following suggestions to guide communication efforts.

- Review and become familiar with the different generations listed above.
- Don't judge a book by its cover—in other words, look beyond appearances.
- Be cognizant of what is said, but more important, how it’s said. Generational clashes often stem from miscommunication in tone or style.
- Adopt "ageless thinking"—one is only as old as she feels!
- Offer an information session on different generations and how to work as a team with diverse age groups.
- Consider creating a mentoring program.
- Try adding team-building activities to club meetings.
- Have collaborative planning, decision-making or problem-solving discussions.
- Communicate information in multiple ways (phone, email, face-to-face)—varying the type and means of communication ensures that all members feel engaged and informed.
- Be accommodating to differences in personal scheduling needs, work/life balance issues, and nontraditional lifestyles.
- Respect each other—treat everyone, from the newest to the most seasoned member, as if they have great things to offer and are motivated to do their best.
- Capitalize on each individual member’s strengths.
- Be patient with each other. A little bit goes a long way.

Keep in mind that individual Soroptimist clubs are as diverse as the membership. It is the goal of clubs to carry out Soroptimist’s mission while making membership convenient and relevant within the reality of today’s environment. Remember, effective communication reduces conflicts, promotes cooperation, and thus, increases a member’s commitment to Soroptimist.

Even though a club may have a varied generational picture, everyone is there for the same reasons!