

**Article:**

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**Millennials: Deal With Them!**

by Stephen Abram, MLS

I have been watching this next generation closely for many years. I even have two of them – a son and a daughter. They're the biggest generation in history and already outnumber the Boomers. As librarians we must care about them. We have sadly seen some of the consequences of the mutual disengagement of libraries and Generation X. It isn't pretty. Simply put this 'next' generation comprises all of our student users (although there is emerging evidence that post-Millennials are even more different); most of our college and university users, and, within ten years, the majority of parents – in short our major key user populations. This is the one segment of the population that is actually growing through immigration. They will vote on library issues, influence library strategies and they will control budgets and dominate the consumer space. They are critical to the future of libraries and indeed, the future itself.

Thinking they are the same as other users is folly.  
Waiting for them to 'get it' or self-correct is foolish.  
Ignoring the issue like an ostrich is professional suicide.

I have commissioned, collected and read dozens of reports on this user demographic. I have lead dozens of focus groups and panels of Millennials and probed and tested their preferences and behaviours. Believe me, they're different. Libraries must adapt. I know it's difficult because libraries must continue to offer services and collections that serve demographic markets that behave differently and want services performed in another way. We have to keep a foot in all camps to delight all of our users. But just as we adapt to users as they age, we must adapt to new users as they emerge and engage the world of information discovery and research.

First, we must discard the idea that this is somehow a damaged generation. It is largely a myth that they are performing more poorly in their education. As a matter of fact, their performance is ahead of previous generations. They may be underperforming on some fronts internationally, but they are not the lesser of the older peers. Secondly, there is a growing body of research that their IQ's, their raw ability to access and use their intelligence has grown markedly and at a level of statistical significance. MRI studies of their brains show that they use a greater degree and balance of their brains and have greater physical capacity through increased ganglia and folds of their brains. The majority of their education has been reinvented and shows great promise. They have, among

others, better team skills, speaking and articulation skills, problem-solving and process management skills. Alternatively, they have weak general knowledge and fact skills. This is not necessarily bad. Actual facts decay rapidly in today's world. The Periodic Table is not the same as it was when we went to school. Indeed, the number of planets has changed; the maps of nations mutate on a seemingly daily basis; most knowledge is quite malleable in context today. Indeed, many Boomers believe strongly that water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit and all humans' internal body temperature is 98.6°F. Since this isn't true most of the time, it seems that building a generation to access facts and information on demand is a better solution in a complex world. This is a huge opportunity for libraries! It's also a huge threat to society if we fail. If a whole generation shifts their information loyalties to Google™ and makes all of their future important decisions based on the most popular answer, or the one that advertisers want to promote, or the answer that special interest groups or partisan politicians want you to see, society is lost. This is what could happen to a totally Googled generation.

So, the long and the short of it is that we have a window of opportunity to influence a generation. This opportunity only comes along, well, once in a generation. And this generation is a big one. Are we for quality information? Are we for authoritative information? Do we select the best? Can we improve the quality of questions? Can we create an information and entertainment environment that engages everyone and improves the learning and community experience? Of course the answer is: Yes! The question now is: How?

I don't pretend to know all of the answers. I do have some ideas and I'll share a few in this article. And, frankly, I don't think any single approach is best and no one thing will fix everything. It's all about attitude, approachability, engagement and understanding.

### **The Eyes Have It:**

Throughout the Spring of 2006 SirsiDynix and Kent State University partnered to study students from grades one through twelve. We learned thousands of things about this group but one of the more interesting studies we did was to take a subset of the students and have eye-tracking software used to study how they interacted with websites. These studies have been done for years and we know Boomers have a typical page scanning pattern and that it differs from GenX and post-secondary students today. We discovered new patterns emerging in these K-12 populations. Comfort is needed for learning to happen on any consistent basis. If your web presence does not align with the scanning and reading comfort of this generation, you run the risk of having them click by. As advertisers and news websites have learned all too quickly, eyeballs are important in the virtual world. And stickiness and return visits are improved by paying attention these basics. What works for you, likely does not work for

these important users. Also, what you may find busy distracting and dense may delight them. We have to learn to build for the real user beyond ourselves.

### **Format Agnosticism**

Libraries organize information and do this according to a deep and traditional set of rules. We often organize by format or container- videos here, books here and periodicals here. We then divide the discovery engines by format – search for books in the OPAC, articles in the databases, video by browsing the shelves. This worked for years and we rarely needed to challenge it. Of course, the web and its simple, agnostic way of searching everything changed the expectations of a generation. Why do I care about format of what I want is in until I need to make my choice? If I'm going to mature in a world where nearly everything is digital (streaming media, books, magazines, newspapers, etc.) and on demand, I want my discovery and navigation tools to offer me everything at once, unlimited choice, so that I can filter from there. How would you grade the discovery services in your library in meeting this expectation? It's time to focus on format agnostic discovery using new technologies like federated search, OpenURL resolvers, and social network influenced results.

### **More Choices and Delaying Choice**

Another consequence of the new world of abundant and almost limitless information is too much choice. Another specific behaviour of the Millennials is to delay choice to the last second. You might have noticed (if you have your own test rats) that they don't commit to a Friday night social activity until almost past the point of no return. Technologies like mobile phones and instant messaging have found great favour with them as they make it easy to delay commitment to a plan. I suppose my teen years were slightly slower versions of this trend with ubiquitous landlines and fast food. What is the learning here for libraries? Simple, don't expect them to commit way in advance for your library programs. Also, don't disappoint and disillusion them when they just show up.

Are you providing pathfinders or research skills support training? Are they too directive? Do this first and then do this? Take the example of choosing an essay, project or science fair topic. Typically, Millennials like to explore 2-3 topics through several steps of the project. Choosing one topic and sticking to it through a process is as frustrating to them as their remaining non-committal is to us. Viewed another way, they learn a whole bunch more about the research process by exploring several paths. An alternative is to be aware of this preference and support the discovery process. Forcing choice too early meets neither their learning needs nor our agenda to have them discover advanced information fluency skills through experience.

### **Internet Natives, Internet Immigrants**

Mark Prensky wrote a seminal article on the key differences between those folks who learned the Internet and all its facets as adults (Digital Immigrants) and those who grew up immersed in it and who have never known another experience (Digital Natives). Millennials are those folks who have never really known a world without the web. Therefore, our standard approach of dealing with patrons doesn't work as well as it used to – asking them what they want. Ethnographic methods work the best. Just observe them in a non-judgmental manner and collect those observations and share them. Try to find insights. Have them teach you. That's where the magic sauce is. Immerse yourself in their world. Gaming nights or tournaments, rock the shelves concerts in the library, web page design clubs, discussion groups, story hours, and the like all provide opportunities to observe and learn. It doesn't have to be formal and large scale. It actually might work better on a more social level. Oh yeah, you could also look for Millennials where they (schools, clubs, parks, malls) are instead of just trying this in the library.

### **Nomadic and Multi-taskers**

This Millennial generation is nomadic and will get more so. They have the tools and the advances through their lives in mobile SmartPhones, PS or location aware services, wireless based software will unfetter them from the ties that bound us – landlines, televisions, movie theaters and desktop PCs. An untethered generation will present significant challenges to libraries. Our primary image, as confirmed by the OCLC Perceptions report, is all about physical tethers – buildings books, and reference desks. We know that is becoming more and more untrue very day, but as they say perception is reality. So, what are the tools we need to invest in to adapt to this generation: to stay on their radar as valid and relevant information and learning partners? For starters:

- Text messaging services
- Virtual Reference
- Instant Messaging
- Cross system collaboration- e.g. Public Library / School Board partnerships
- XML based websites that display well on any device
- Presences on social network sites like MySpace, Facebook and Bebo
- Gaming programs and collections
- Round tables and collaboration spaces
- Engaging websites that meet their daily needs for homework support and entertainment

So, here we are with a generation that can do and does many things at the same time. Some worry that they are in a state of continuous partial attention and lack the focus and concentration skills necessary for life. Some recent reports from Lee Rainie at the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicate otherwise. They are conscious and capable of the need for quiet time and sanctuary. This might be part of the trend for this generation to be more religious and spiritual as

well as highly concerned about their values, principles and ethics. From another point of view it might be the older generation, who has issues multitasking on a grand scale, which may be less skilled. Anyway, this generation is growing up in a very noisy and media driven world clamoring for their attention. Learning young how to filter and choose what to pay attention to is a critical skill.

## **More Friends**

Millennials today tend to have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. This is easier to maintain with IM Buddies, e-mail nicknames and social networking websites. This is where things are really moving quickly. Libraries need to get on the train or be left at the station. I am talking about the social networking sites like MySpace, Bebo and Facebook. When something captures the attention and engagement of an entire generation, it would be ignored at our peril. Facebook, by some estimates, engages the vast majority of college and university students, at some institutions over 90%. With MySpace growing at over 200,000 new users daily and the average user visits twice a day for 20 minutes while contributing content of all types, posting to their blogs more than all blog postings anywhere combined, organizing and attending events, and sharing their opinions throughout the social network, we are witnessing the birth a transformational technology. By the way, nothing is new about the technology it's just the web 2.0 trends converging in a useful space aimed at a key target audience. Not putting libraries and library services in the path and spaces frequented by Millennials is foolhardy. Here we see people maintaining a supra-network of their friends and contacts. It can exist beyond the context of their school or community and follow usefully them for life. Need help? Ask your MySpace community. The library lesson here is simple. Talk to those libraries that have set up library MySpace pages this year and hear the stellar early results. Some have done parental awareness sessions and built anew their connections across the generations. I've loved those library programs that taught kids how to pimp their MySpace pages while subtly teaching Internet safety skills. Marketers have a rule: Be where the customers are.

## **Gamers**

OK, let's get this part out of the way. Gaming is good. There are some bad games but it's overplayed in the media. Only 15% of games sold were rated with a violence designation - 85% of games are rated E for Everyone E+10 for ages 10 & up, or T for teen (13-17). The media hype may have us believing otherwise. And gaming is not a passing fad - it's a 20+ billion dollar industry. According to the Entertainment Software Association in 2006, the average age of the gamer is 33 with 25% of adults over age 50 playing games and over 45% of gamers are women. The Pew Internet & American Life Project's recent report on *Teens and Technology* discovered that 81% of teens surveyed in 2005 said they played games online, and this doesn't even include other types of electronic gaming. Libraries adapted to different formats and containers throughout history. We

added novels when they weren't considered 'good' content and magazines, videos, DVDs, and more. We must remain open to these formats as how their role will play out in the content space emerges. We already know that gaming skills improve the performance of surgeons, that gaming environments are showing up in R&D laboratories, that gaming is proving to have positive military, safety, educational and learning benefits. Yes, we must evaluate all new technologies thoughtfully and in an informed way. Let's make sure we hold this trend close to us and see how it evolves. The emergence of the gaming world based Second Life Library 2.0 is a great experiment to keep our eyes on.

Does banning or restricting gaming for teens result in deteriorating the skills that they will need for their futures?

### **And more:**

I could cover so much more about the Millennial opportunity. This generation also shows signs of:

- Greater respect and celebration of diversity (not just racial and religious but in other broader and more intangible ways)
- A greater desire for a balanced life (perhaps because of their reaction to the Boomer role model). They actively seek a healthy lifestyle and exercise more than previous generations. They also have a strong family-orientation combined with some renewed traditional values.
- Politically this group tends to be non-aligned and often describe themselves as independents and make choices based on evidence and argument rather than party affiliation. While they are a reasonably conservative generation on many points for their own lives, they tend to be socially liberal on issues like abortion, same sex relationships and take a live and let live attitude to broader society.
- A clear and sustainable optimism for their future combined with high expectations for themselves. They are very achievement-oriented, perhaps worryingly too much so with very high parental expectations (the so called helicopter parents), but as a possible consequence we are seeing a very high level of entrepreneurial attitudes and tendencies.
- A greater commitment to civic involvement with very high levels of participation in volunteer, church and charitable activities.
- A love of reading, although perhaps not the traditional forms we measure. As Graphic novels win Pulitzers and gaming magazines fly off the shelves and e-books, websites and text games compete for the reader's attention we might need to evolve more diverse collections faster
- They appear to be a generation that is evolving a new ethic around respect for intelligence, talent, inclusivity and the individual. They are, notably a very direct generation. Their parents chose to raise strong and opinionated children. They tend to be very direct which can look impolite to older eyes, but when reviewed later they were just interacting in a way that is more direct than Boomers and GenX were encouraged to behave.

This creates challenges and friction if the behavioral generation gap between service staff and users is not ameliorated.

- Their learning styles are more diverse, and while the traditional strengths in mathematical/logical and text based learning are still in evidence, there is growing confidence among experiential, physical and graphical learners.
- As for social values they appear to be developing a model of interaction that is both adaptive and flexible while preferring team and collaboration modes in their work. Working alone or silently is not an overall strength. Round tables in libraries as well as small seminar spaces act like magnets.

## **Conclusion**

We are dealing with a confident and talented generation. That's wonderful. They are, after all, our children – sons, daughters, nieces, nephews and friends. They'll continue the chain that has been forged since time immemorial. We have a sacred trust in all sectors of libraries to make sure they can be the best they can be, that our communities can be great and that we respect the traditions of our past while evolving to be our vision of a better future.

*This article is based on a presentation at the 2006 Texas Library Association Conference. The PowerPoint slides of that presentation are here:*

<http://www.txla.org/conference/handouts/Millennials.ppt>

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## **Great Readings**

If you've only got time for a few readings on this, try these:

### **Books:**

*Got Game, How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* by John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade (Hardcover - Oct 2004) [In paperback as *The Kids Are Alright: How the Gamer Generation is Changing the Workplace*, (Harvard Business School Press, 2006)

*Everything Bad is Good For You, Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*  
by Steven Johnson

*What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* by James Paul Gee (Paperback - May 7, 2004)

### **Free PDF's:**

*Millennial Behaviors & Demographics* by Richard Sweeney, 2006  
<http://www.library.njit.edu/staff-folders/sweeney/Millennials/Millennial-Behaviors-August-14-2006.doc>

*"Born With A Chip"*, by Stephen Abram and Judy Luther, *Library Journal*, May 2004  
<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA411572.html>

*Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* by Marc Prensky (2001)  
<http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf#search=%22Prensky%2C%20Digital%20Natives%2C%20Digital%20Immigrants%22>

[Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Millennials: Understanding the "New Students"](#) by Diana Oblinger, Educause  
<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0342.pdf#search=%22oblinger%22>

*Educating the Net Generation* by Diana Oblinger, Educause (2005)  
<http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/>

*Why Johnny And Janey Can't Read, And Why Mr. And Ms. Smith Can't Teach: The challenge of multiple media literacies in a tumultuous time* by Mark Federman, Chief Strategist, McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, University of Toronto  
<http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/WhyJohnnyandJaneyCantRead.pdf#search=%22Mark%20Federman%2C%20Why%20Johnny%20and%20Janey%20Can%E2%80%99t%20Read%20and%20%22>

Pew Internet and American Life Project: Many reports  
<http://www.pewinternet.org/>

### **Blogs and Web Stuff:**

Ypulse  
<http://www.ypulse.com/>



LA Times 2006 Series

*Computers, Cell Phones and Multitasking: A Look Inside The Entertainment Life  
Of 12-24 Year Olds.*

<http://www.latimes.com/media/acrobat/2006-08/24767411.pdf>