

BridgeWorks

Have You Examined Your Value Proposition Lately?

by Lynne Lancaster & David Stillman, BridgeWorks

You May Have More to Offer the Generations Than You Think!

A Baby Boomer recruiter for a national franchise operation had been writing employment ads for two decades. Lately, she was perplexed by the diminishing number of applicants they seemed to attract compared to years past.

In desperation, she printed out a draft ad, showed it to a Generation X co-worker, and asked what she thought of it. "It's okay," came the response, "but it's not any place I'd want to work!"

"That's strange," she thought. "She already does work here, and she likes her job. Hmmm..."

After a vigorous interrogation of the Xer, the light began to dawn. The Baby Boomer had been writing ads that would attract her own generation. The selling points she was highlighting weren't things that would make a Generation Xer want to work there.

Understanding the Customer Isn't Just for Customers...

We all know what our value proposition is for our customers. It's the features and benefits that attract someone to what we have to sell. One vendor might tout quality, while another pushes low price, and a third boasts convenience. Bottom line—each of them is proposing a particular value to consumers.

From advertising to packaging to special events, companies have worked hard at promoting these values to their customers. But it's astonishing how little effort these same companies put into understanding what values to propose to potential employees.

One of the most strategic plays companies can make today in the recruitment game is to not only figure out what values they can propose to their employees, but how those values might differ for each generation.

Different Generations Value Different Things...

In most cases, Traditionalists or Baby Boomers have been the ones to write the employee value proposition, and there's nothing wrong with that. The challenge now surfacing, however, is that subsequent generations coming in the door might see that same proposition more like a "Do Not Enter" sign than a welcome mat. They value different things than traditional workers did, and that's the piece that most companies are not clued in to.

When we examined the recruiting web sites of Midwestern Fortune 500 companies last spring, we uncovered a theme. The web sites all described when the companies were founded, how large they were, and how many people they employed. For the Traditionalists who built many of these companies, and the Baby Boomers who competed so hard to get jobs in them, messages about size and history were very attractive.

But few recruiters have stopped to ask whether these are the messages that will attract Generation Xers and Millennials. And more often than not, they don't. An Xer, for example, might be interested in seeing less about tradition and more about innovation, or less about a company's policies and more about its ability to be flexible.

A persuasive value proposition can take many forms. "I recently lost a Generation X candidate because he went to a smaller company that does business in Central America," said one Baby Boomer I.T. manager for a large, privately held Minneapolis conglomerate. "I focused too much on the size and background of our company because that is what was important to me. I never stopped to find out what was most important to him.

"After he took another job I learned that he'd been looking for opportunities to live abroad. Heck, we have offices all over the world—I could have arranged that!"

Oops. The benefits were right at his fingertips, but he didn't see them as part of the value proposition.

You Don't Have to Rebuild...Just Repackage.

One manufacturer asked us to evaluate its recruiting messages because they were having so much trouble attracting Generation X and Millennial product designers coming out of college and trade schools.

"Those with high-end design skills do not want to work in manufacturing," explained the Traditionalist CEO. "I thought they would be interested in the size of our machines and what they can produce, but all they see is a hot, sweaty plant. What can I possibly offer them?"




Too many companies avoid crafting an employee value proposition for fear they will be humbled by what they can't offer the generations. Yet in most cases, the values are right under their noses; they just aren't proposing them. The goal is to uncover the buried treasure.

When we talked further with the manufacturing CEO, we discovered there was much more to this firm than met the eye. For example, a state-of-the-art computer-aided design lab and an industry-leading recycling plant. As the CEO realized, these were pieces of the value proposition he was taking for granted and never dreamed of proposing.

Don't always change your shoe, just look for the right foot. Too often companies try to be all things to all people. But by carefully determining your employee value proposition, you can focus your efforts.

A bank president noticed that their college-recruiting hit rate had been tapering off for several years. When asked what his employee value proposition was, he said, "We're family oriented and offer people a lot of ways to continue their career with us long term."

Call us crazy, but most Millennials in cap and gown aren't thinking about a place that is family friendly or one to hang a hat on for a long time. But, that doesn't rule out all Millennials. The solution? Instead of recruiting at the large state universities, they focused their search on the smaller, liberal arts and religious schools since these tended to attract Millennials with values similar to their own.

"We realized we liked our value proposition very much. We just hadn't properly identified the people who were going to get excited about it. Our recruiting numbers have improved, and new hires are staying longer because it's a better match." 

Baby Boomer **Lynne Lancaster** and Generation Xer **David Stillman** are co-founders of BridgeWorks, a speaking and consulting firm (www.generations.com). They are co-authors of *When Generations Collide: Who They Are, Why They Clash, How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (HarperCollins, 2002), in stores now.