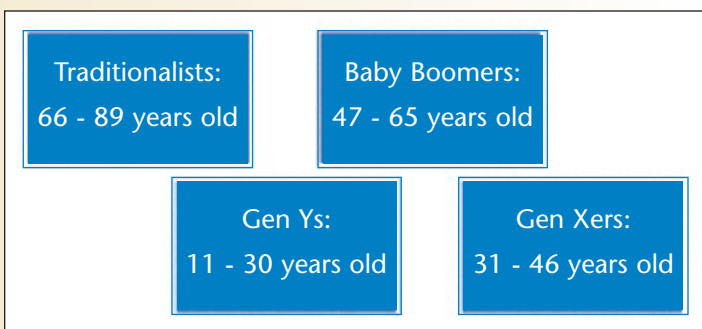


Four Generations of Customers: How to Boost Sales

By Giselle Kovary and Adwoa K. Buahene, co-founders of n-gen People Performance Inc.

The Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (AOLS) is a long standing institution, which was founded in 1892 to protect and serve the public interest. As with any organization or company that has deep roots and imbedded traditions, remaining relevant with changing economics, regulations and customer expectations is paramount to professional sustainability. However, the sustainability challenge is not only rooted in remaining internally relevant with employees; but also externally relevant with customers and other professional stakeholders. Given dynamic world influences, life-defining events and political and economic movements, younger customers may have different ideas on how your company can best serve them in fulfilling their needs. In this reality lies another challenge to your company - ensure that you are able to sell to and service effectively all four generations of customers.

You have four generations of customers – Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Ys. In the spring of 2010, n-gen described in the Ontario Professional Surveyor magazine some of the life-defining events, values, behaviours that have shaped each generation of employee. Those life-defining events and values have also shaped the behaviours and expectations of customers. In this article, we want to highlight some considerations that will allow you to evaluate whether or not you are able to effectively engage all four generations of customers.



Four Generations of Customers

Given that there are four generations of customers, it's important to consider how each cohort wants to interact with you as a customer. The way a Traditionalist wants to be sold to is not the same as the way a Gen Y wishes to experience the sales cycle. So it's important that sales and service people remember to provide service in the way in which the customer wants to receive it, rather than in the way in which the employee wants to provide it. It's the old sales adage of "ensure that you are selling the way the customer wants to buy, not the way you want to sell". For example, if a Baby Boomer

is trying to sell to a Gen Xer and is constantly asking for face-to-face meetings in order to share information or build a relationship, this is less likely to be successful, then if the Baby Boomer were to send the information in advance via email, and then request a meeting that focuses on clarifying information and action-planning. Gen X customers are going to evaluate you and your company on the results that you can offer that are professional, guaranteed and cost-effective. Conversely, younger sales people should recognize that for Traditionalists and Baby Boomers face-to-face meetings are important to building relationships and credibility. Traditionalists need to feel like they can trust you, and that you have the required years and level of expertise. Baby Boomers will want to know that the company that they select is well-ranked in the industry and has a strong reputation.

It is somewhat natural for each generation of customer to have a greater affinity to a sales or service person who is from their own generation. So a Traditionalist may initially feel a quicker or greater rapport with another Traditionalist or older Baby Boomer, just as a Gen Y customer may feel a closer affinity to another Gen Y. So within your sales and service team, it may be prudent to have representatives from all four generations within the team, or to pair up a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague when meeting with a new customer. If that's not possible, then it is important for each salesperson to evaluate where in the sales process s/he might have the greatest challenge with a customer, and to plan to mitigate that challenge by engaging others. To increase customer engagement, you must layer on a generational perspective to the sales and customer service process to ensure that you are tapping into the values, expectations and motivations of all customer groups.

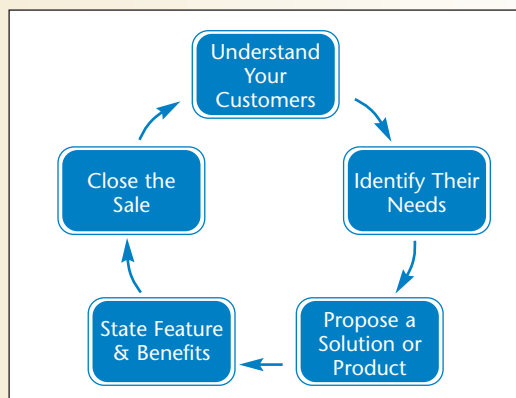
Customer Loyalty

With respect to Traditionalist customers, often companies experience a type of 'unquestioned loyalty' after they have made their decisions to purchase your product or service. There is a high degree of repeat business, and to acquire business a second, third or multiple times takes less effort on the part of the salesperson. Traditionalists are inclined to continue to purchase from, and recommend, a company for decades, without evaluating whether or not there may be a better option.

Therefore, some companies may still have a culture that relies on this type of loyalty from their customers but also from employees who are selling or providing service. In today's market, many companies might be surprised by the extent to which they had to justify their services and work approach to younger customers. Given younger customers'

viewpoints on what gives someone authority, they are not inclined to give a salesperson expert credence just because they have been in the business for 20+ years. They will expect your company to prove its expertise through testimonials, references or factual descriptions – any external validation that reaches beyond the words of the salesperson. Also, it's important to remember that your company should be prepared to offer evidence of your authority each time you deal with a customer, whether it be repeat business or a referral. The younger consumer is constantly doing research on the Internet and comparing services with their social network. They are vigilant in ensuring that they are receiving the best value proposition from a company, and will switch brands quickly. Regardless of age, all customers want a positive and collaborative working relationship with their surveyors. However, be aware that the grace period that Gen X or Gen Y customers give your company to get this relationship right, is much shorter than that of Baby Boomers or Traditionalists. Customer loyalty - what it means and how long it remains, differs across the generations.

In today's environment, you cannot be guaranteed unquestioning customer loyalty. However, there is a direct link to building customer loyalty through employee loyalty. In some companies, managers and owners might be surprised if younger employees ask or question the way service is being provided or the types of products you offer. In fact, for many Gen Y employees, unless they understand and believe in the value proposition of the company, they will have a very difficult time (or may even refuse) to sell that value proposition to customers. Since we all know that our best ambassadors in sales are our own people, it is imperative that we focus on engaging internally, while engaging externally as well.



The Sales Process

Within the sales process it is important that salespeople layer on a generational perspective. Above, we have highlighted factors that contribute to understanding your customers by understanding how each generation attributes authority and where they go to get their information (colleagues, friends, Facebook, Yellow Pages, etc.). Recognizing that, in particular for younger generations, customers are typically already well informed because they have done a lot of research on the Internet.


In identifying customer needs, active listening skills, strong analysis and communication skills are paramount. It is impor-

tant to listen to the questions and to gauge your interaction appropriately – is the customer seeking advice, or are they already well informed and are looking for you to present choices? If they are new to the experience, how can you help educate them? How closely are their needs and expectations aligned with what you are able to offer? This is an important stage because this is where you are able to manage your customers' expectations and help guide the sales process.

In proposing a solution, you have to be careful to balance providing too much choice vs. not providing enough. If you offer too many options and choices, some Traditionalists may question your expertise, and may think “you're supposed to know what the best solution is in this situation”. Conversely, if you try to persuade a Gen X or a Gen Y customer into a singular option, they may question why there are no options or will propose an option to you.

In stating the features and benefits of a solution, younger generations of customers will tend to trust you more if you are also able to highlight any drawbacks to one proposed solution versus another. They are more likely to build trust and confidence with a sales or service person who is transparent. Obviously, if there are more drawbacks than benefits, your company wouldn't offer the solution; however, if there are any limitations to offering the service to a particular client, in their particular situation, then it is best to highlight those upfront. These drawbacks could be about the service itself, the possible outcome, or even the timeframe in which the service can be offered. In this day and age of viral marketing and younger customers who can post messages that reach hundreds or thousands of people in seconds, it is imperative that your company reduce the possibility of 'buyers regret' up front, before the sale.

In closing the sale, remember that there are different vehicles by which you can follow-up with customers. Judge whether a face-to-face meeting, a phone call or an email might be appropriate, and also ask when your customer might want you to follow-up.

In selling to the four generations of customers, keep in mind who you are selling to and the best sales process to engage each customer. Whether you are a younger salesperson selling to more mature customers, or you are an experienced salesperson selling to a younger customer, the one-size fits all approach to sales no longer works. While the sales process doesn't change, by layering on a generational perspective, you are likely to have greater success in building relationships and ultimately in being able to close sales. 

*Adwoa K. Buahene and Giselle Kovary are the authors of **Loyalty Unplugged: How to Get, Keep & Grow All Four Generations** and co-founders of **n-gen People Performance Inc (www.n-genperformance.com)**. n-gen is the training partner of choice for industry leaders, providing solutions for managing generational differences in the workplace.*

By focusing on the root causes of customer service, sales, leadership, teambuilding and HR practices, we deliver training programs that measurably improve performance within a multi-generational workforce.