

HOW WILL GENERATION Y ENHANCE CUSTOMER SERVICE IN MID-SIZED
LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES BY THE YEAR 2008?

Article

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CHANGING LAW ENFORCEMENT THROUGH GENERATION Y

There has never been a better time in the history of law enforcement to make the needed changes to be better able to serve the public. Waves of incoming police officers are poised to make the greatest difference in the history of law enforcement. This change can be facilitated by existing police officers, supervisors and managers with the understanding that they are facing a generation like never before seen. They are facing the millennial generation.¹ This group of workers is the largest America has ever seen. According to the United States Census Bureau, they shadow even the Baby Boom generation. Their numbers now comprise 30 percent of the population while the Baby Boom generation is currently at 29 percent.²

These Millennials, or as literature has called them Generation Y, are loosely defined as those born between 1980 and 2000.³ There will always be those born before and after these years who will be considered Generation Y, but for the workforce in law enforcement, it will be those entering the profession after the turn of the century who are viable as police officers. In California, the minimum age for police officers is 21 years old.

Generation Y and what they will do to the law enforcement landscape in the area of customer service is beginning to unfold. When compared to their predecessor, Generation X, the gap between the two groups of professionals is tremendous. The

¹ Neil Howe and William Strauss, Millennials Rising. The next Great Generation, (Random House, Inc., New York, 2000), 6.

² U.S. Department of Commerce, The Statistical Abstract of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington (1998).

³ Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, Bob Filipaczak, Generations at Work (New York, American management Association, 2000) 130.

history of the term “generation gap” is a term that law enforcement tends to ignore. When hiring new officers, law enforcement tends to want to mold them into what they feel will fit the organization, the community and themselves (the trainers). The shortsighted organization uses organizational culture to make this fit. What is not seen is what the new generation can bring to the organization. Therein begins the real generation gap and a generational difference that has profound consequences when looking at the new or incoming generation.

Currently, many Generation Y incoming officers are being trained by either Generation X or Baby Boomer field training officers (FTOs). The generation known as the Baby Boomer generation is known throughout literature as the generation born between 1936 and 1964.⁴ There are a multitude of differences in the training, education, and life experience of these two predecessors to Generation Y. One of the biggest problems that face the older FTOs is the fact that they are unfamiliar with Generation Y. This unfamiliarity will be seen as a difficulty too late into the evolution of Generation Y. The FTOs will be attempting to shape the Generation Y rookie into what they feel a perfect police officer should consist of and become.

In reality, Generation Y already has an idea of what they want to become and it has been described in literature as more like the generation of long ago, the veterans. This generation is seen as the true traditionalists and last of the gray flannel suits. Think “American values,” and you’ve got what the Veterans stand for – civic pride, loyalty,

⁴ Ibid.

respect for authority, and apple pie. Their generation is typically seen as those born between 1922 and 1943.⁵

Looking at what faces Generation Y in law enforcement, one of the most basic premises is that of face-to-face interactions between them and the citizens they serve. The citizens, or customers, want few things from their police departments when that relationship is thoroughly studied. One of the main things many citizens want is for them and their children to feel safe in their community and their homes. The relationship between law enforcement and the public is seldom seen as customer service, but in reality this is what most people want from their police departments.

Using the term customer service in a law enforcement setting is unfamiliar to many in the industry. Although the term has come to be used more in the last few years with the advent of community based policing, it remains an abstract idea to many who work in law enforcement. When looking at the larger law enforcement picture, the reality is that many of the case law decisions, consent decrees and other mandated regulations law enforcement agencies are forced to abide by can be traced back to some state of degraded customer service. These regulations are really what their citizens (customers) wanted in the beginning. In many cases, the small numbers of offending officers do not possess an understanding of how to treat other people. These deficiencies can be traced back to these officers and to their lack of basic human interaction.

As simple as the solution seems, the problem has persisted in many organizations throughout the United States and for that matter, the world. Part of this ongoing problem is rooted in the fact that training new police officers with field training officers who do

⁵ Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, Bob Filipaczak, Generations at Work (New York, American Management Association, 2000), 18.

not understand “the new generation” perpetuate the same culture that has caused American law enforcement problems since the turn of the 19th century.

The time is now right to initiate a change in how law enforcement trainers teach new officers. The time is now right due to the fact that this new generation has a better understanding of what is expected of them. And, there are more of “them” than ever before.

Some simply state, “Treat others as you want to be treated.” This simple statement is one of the basics of customer service, which was mostly ignored by police academies until it became an issue with the publicized cases of the 1980s. One of the most infamous cases, which brought this lack of customer service to the forefront, was the Rodney King case. The resulting regulations are an attempt to bring the law enforcement profession into conformity with what the citizens (or customers) wanted initially: to be protected from the criminal element.

With this viewpoint in mind, many Baby Boomers and Generation X’ers are concerned about their children growing up in what has been described as the millennial world. The Generation Y culture is beginning to accept the word “millennials” as their preferred name. The millennial world is how they describe their generation and their environment.⁶ Generation Y is strikingly different mostly due to their parents’ concern for their children. The downside is that Generation Y has spent and will spend their childhood in an era of high crime and low civility.⁷ The upside is that many parents desire their children to be more protected and group-oriented than the children of the 1970s. The results are that Generation Y is becoming a team-oriented generation that

⁶ Neil Howe and William Strauss, Millennials Rising. The next Great Generation, (Random House, Inc., New York, 2000), 6.

⁷ Chris Loyd, Millennials Enter a High-Crime World, 3.

will grow up to expect organization and responsibility.⁸ This same emphasis on group standards should continue to lower crime, especially as parenting methods grow even stricter and more protective.

Generation Y differs from the preceding generations where young adults of today take pride in going it alone and doing it by themselves. An example being the X Games where individualized sporting events are the norm. The young adults of tomorrow will pride themselves on carrying out large tasks together.⁹ With these attributes in mind, predictions for the future X Games will be seeing more team-oriented sports. In the law enforcement realm, plans for a more team-oriented organization means nothing but positive attributes for this upcoming generation.

What can be expected from Generation Y in the form of the new officer as well as their population in general is just now beginning to be understood. As Generation Y comes of age, attaining adulthood in whatever profession they choose, their upbringing is undoubtedly different than any generation before them. The globalization of society and the economy is one of their biggest influences. For many in Generation Y this seems most obvious in individual self-awareness as part of a larger community and their responsibility to improve it.

In order to better understand the influences that shape Generation Y, the preceding generations have to be understood. Many different factors are shaping Generation Y even as this article is being read. The foundational attributes of Generation Y are the results of various forces and events that form the collective experience of the preceding

⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁹ Ibid, 3.

generations. Looking back on the influences that shaped those generations provides insight into what is now being seen in Generation Y.

The past has shown that generations are forged by common experiences. The Baby Boom generation was shaped by events such as the war in Vietnam, Woodstock and the first lunar landing. All these events were brought to the world by the then-new technology called the television. The Baby Boom generation could be called the Cold War Generation, the Postwar Prosperity Generation, the Growth Economy Generation, or named according to some other development in society that affected them. However, it was really the impact of the television, which shaped this generation and the world more than anything else.

To say that television transformed the world around the Baby Boomers is an understatement. In 1950, only 12 percent of households had a television. Eight years later in 1958, this number had soared to 83 percent.¹⁰ The television had quickly become the most powerful communication technology device of the generation.

What the television did to the Baby Boomers, the computer and Internet technology has done to Generation Y.

In addition to shaping a generation via technological advances, generations are shaped by their numbers. Baby Boomers started having children in greater numbers after 1978. By 1997 there were almost as many five- to nine-year-olds (12,854,000) as there were thirty- to thirty-four-year-olds (20,775,000).¹¹ Generation Y now constitutes the largest

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, The Statistical Abstract of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington (various years).

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Families by Presence of Own Children Under Eighteen: 1950 to Present. U.S. Census Bureau Web site. <<http://www.census.gov/>>.

cohort in the United States. Their influence will only grow as they come of age and the Baby Boomer population declines due to mortality.

This tremendous wave of youth seen above coincides with the explosion in the use of the computer. Together, these two factors are producing a generation which is not just a demographic bulge, but a wave of social transformation. The benefits to law enforcement are evident. To not take advantage of what Generation Y can bring to law enforcement is to deny that change is needed.

The use of the computer and the Internet by Generation Y is akin to the television and the Baby Boomers. The numbers are comparable also. In 1984, only eight percent of households owned computers while 30 percent of those same households had children who used computers. By 1997, the number had grown to nearly 37 percent and to 74 percent of households with children.¹² The number of households where children reside with computers is even more prevalent today than in 1997. Understandably, families believe that computers help children to do better in school. According to one family-school research firm, close to 80 percent of parents believe this to be true.¹³

The Internet is permeating U.S. households almost as fast as television did in the 1950s. Starting from virtually nothing in 1955, over 40 percent of American households will be connected by the end of the millennium. With the digitization of television, most households will have become wired within a ten-year period from 1995 to 2005.

Many people believe that the Internet and television are analogous because they both involve screens. The Internet, however, is fundamentally different from previous

¹² Newburger, Eric C. Computer Use in the United States, Current Population Reports. U.S. Census Bureau, October, 1997.

¹³ Ungar, Harley Guttman. Computoys Dawn on Computer Horizons. Digital Kids Report, August, 1996.

communications media such as the radio and television. Both of these technological wonders are unidirectional and normally controlled by adults at the broadcast sites. They tend to be inflexible and centralized within their peer groups, which reflect the values of their own generation as well as stockholders. By contrast, the Internet is interactive and distributed in control. That is, the user is exposed to more neutrality and what is viewed can be controlled by anyone. It will do what we command and there are currently millions of Generation Y'ers around the world at the keyboard expressing their thoughts on every subject imaginable.

On the Internet, one must search for, rather than simply look at or listen to information. This has forced the growing Generation Y users to develop thinking and investigative skills. They must become critics. Further, children begin to question assumptions, which previously have gone unchallenged. The diversity of opinion on the Internet constantly challenges people of all ages. The Internet is leading a generation that increasingly questions values contained in information. This information becomes knowledge through human judgment, and as Generation Y interacts with each other and the endless information resources on the Internet, they are forced to exercise critical thinking as well as judgment.

This level of interaction has never been seen before or with such rapidity. While their Baby Boomer counterparts sat in front of a television and were unable to interact, Generation Y has been able to interact worldwide. This is changing an entire generation and how they see the world in which they live.

When comparing the technologies of the television and the Internet, their differences can be clearly seen. The similarities between these two "screens" are only symbolic and

represent more than a disparity in generational thinking. The Internet is changing the way Generation Y thinks and acts. It is changing the landscape of an incoming generation just as the television changed those before them.

To be able to tap into this generation and have them change the law enforcement paradigm, it is incumbent upon the professionals of today to initiate that change. To be able to do this, the Generation X and Baby Boomer supervisors and managers must understand Generation Y, their values and how they perceive the world. In addition to this, they must be able to embrace the desired changes. They must realize that these changes bring hope, new vision and opportunity.

Strategies will have to quickly be developed to obtain a foothold into Generation Y and the treatment of their customers. Generation Y is coming into law enforcement at a rate that is equal to those who are leaving law enforcement. The majority of new officers will soon be part of Generation Y. The values they bring to law enforcement will be scrutinized closely as they shape the future of the industry. The strategies do not have to be complex or difficult to administer, but they have to be understood by everyone involved. From supervisors and managers to the field training officers, understanding Generation Y is imperative. In addition, internal and external qualitative analysis should be considered as a strategy to ascertain what the Generation Y officer is doing in field work relating to those they contact on a daily basis.

Generation Y is coming to the forefront of law enforcement in the next five years. Not taking advantage of the largest generation in history to make needed changes in law enforcement would be a great mistake. Generation Y is poised to make changes in a way that is predictable. With the proper guidance from learned supervisors and managers,

Generation Y will make historical differences in the way policing is conducted. Their attributes are here and are slowly evolving. With this knowledge, the changes are possible. Changes that will result in fewer citizen complaints, fewer use of force incidents and less litigation by cash strapped municipalities.

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