It’s no secret – one of the biggest challenges of any association is attracting and retaining members. But today, associations are struggling with not only recruiting, but also communicating and engaging with millennial members and prospects. To that end, MultiView and the School Nutrition Association (SNA) held a Millennial Impact Roundtable, a symposium focused specifically on how to attract, engage and retain these emerging professionals. The half-day event featured two generational researchers, a panel discussion and a culminating attendee roundtable discussion. In the end, themes of communication, membership structure, leadership challenges, and overall image and perception emerged.
Who are millennials?

This group of young professionals, also known as Generation Y, were born between 1982-2004. The media has told us that millennials are lazy, narcissistic, distracted, and entitled. But attendees soon realized that they’re motivated, optimistic, forward-thinking and they truly value social and professional networking, personal branding and community outreach.

“They [millenials] work differently, but they work 24/7,” panelist Matthew Maclaren of the American Hotel & Lodging Association said. “What I appreciate about my millennial employees is that if I send them something at 10:00 on a Tuesday night, I’ll probably get an answer back by 11:00. If I send it to them on a Sunday, I’m probably getting it back on Sunday.”

Vastly larger than the Baby Boomer generation, it’s apparent this group of individuals is highly educated and want to make a difference in the world. The recession in the early 2000s gave this generation an entrepreneurial mindset. But with higher college degrees than Generation X, millennials spend 18 percent of their annual salary on student loans – something that must be considered when formulating membership dues and structure.

What makes them tick?

- Millennials grew up in an environment of customization, meaning they’re more likely to be engaged in an association if they feel like their input and personal needs are being asked for, listened to and addressed.
- This generation is also known for personal branding. They want to feel valued. In fact, if they’re worth is being shown and recognized, they’re less likely to leave an association.
- Many millennials are craving mentors and looking to provide their own leadership. Some say that just 30 minutes – whether it be a phone call or email exchange – can have a huge impact on millennials.
- This group isn’t your typical 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. workers. Millennials are always on the go, working on multiple projects simultaneously. They send emails “after hours” and expect a follow-up during the same time period.
- Millennials are considered the most diverse generation because they’re generally more accepting of races and groups than older generations.

Circumventing the challenges of millennial membership

Millennials look to associations to help fill the necessary skills they need in their workforce — strategic thinking, public speaking, teamwork, creativity, educational growth and leadership proficiency.

This generation is so unique that associations face challenges when it comes to attracting, engaging and retaining millennial members. That said, once recognized and understood, associations will have no problem getting them through the door.

It’s important to understand the driving factors of why millennials join associations.

According to an Abila member engagement study, discussed in detail during the symposium, millennials join associations because of:

- Job opportunities (50%)
- Code of ethics (47%)
- Credentials (46%)
- Training (46%)
- Networking (43%)

And the top two reasons millennials quit associations? Cost (37 percent) and simply forgetting to renew (27 percent).

The Roundtable found that about 20-25% of association members are made up of millennials. However, this generation is quickly becoming the largest segment of the American workforce, making up 75 percent of the workforce by 2030. Because of this, if one in three American workers today are millennials, then association millennial membership should be at a higher percentage. Associations should be using this as an opportunity and market to this generation more.

Money stressors

Simply stated, millennials are in more debt now than older members. Think about it; Americans owe over $1.4 trillion in student loan debt, which is about $620 billion more than the total U.S. credit card debt. In fact, this generation uses 18 percent of their annual salary on student loan payments.

With so much of their annual pay being used on student debt, the last thing they want to do is pay an outrageous membership fee to join an association. One of the featured researchers of the symposium, Suzanne Martin, Ph.D., said that in order to avoid the challenge of student debt, associations should provide lower student or early career memberships to engage early and build loyalty.

Impact-driven

Millennials care about issues more than the actual organization. This generation goes in packs, so what motivates them is a desire to affect their cause through your organization with their friends. They want to make the world a better place, and they want to be a part of organizations that align with this.

“The reason why I pay the $40 annual membership fees to the organizations I’m a part of is because I know when I go to our national conferences that we have networking events for professional development credits and they’re on topics that I care about,” panelist Stefanie Dove, member of the School Nutrition Association, said. “They also make it a point to network, schedule mini-meetings in a region so we can get together and talk, and not just about our industry.”

A millennial will likely have an average of six careers in a lifetime. Therefore, they’re always on the move, looking for opportunities that offer a combination of leadership, volunteering and career knowledge.
Your association should be a part of this overall need of the generation.

“They should be influencing and providing information to your board to make the solid decisions it needs,” panelist Trevor Mitchell, CAE, of American Mensa, LTD., said.

By creating opportunities for millennials to be involved in philanthropic activities, associations enhance engagement on a deeper level – ultimately creating a sense of loyalty.

Digital communication

Simply put, phone calls are out – email is in, Dr. Martin states that you need to customize your messages for your targeted audience and talk to them regularly.

With email being the main form of communication for this group, it’s imperative that associations “up their game” and make sure emails are easy to read and the response time is short.

“If I’m getting an email at 8 p.m., it’s probably from a millennial and when we respond back to them in that same time frame, they really appreciate it,” Maclaren said.

According to a study from Hubspot.com, if you have smaller following on Facebook, posting twice a day will result in about 50 percent fewer clicks per post. This means that your engagement per post will be reduced, but your total number of clicks will be higher than if you were posting only a couple times a week.

Remember that you want to engage your members, so if you’re only reposting relevant news articles, it won’t do much. They want to know what your association is all about and what you’re engaging in.

Engagement

Often associations find themselves lacking in millennial membership, but why? Often the generational stereotype is a large part of millennials not becoming members of your association. The stereotype that others have on millennials affects the engagement between different generations, ultimately causing millennials to feel devalued and unwelcome. This is especially true when it comes to trying to have that daunting question with association boards of getting participation from millennials and actually having them sit on the board.

So let’s get rid of the stereotype and work on inclusion:
- Include millennial imagery in any association ad campaign or magazine covers
- Provide young professional roundtables at your events
- Create a place on your board for young professional representation – engage them in the association social system
- Use bold, edgy statements in any recruiting efforts
- Allow them to perform smaller actions or serve shorter terms
- Provide direct feedback
- Teach them how to use social media professionally
- Offer exclusive services or membership perks

Millennials feel the need to be constantly connected, which is why they’re so well-versed in social media platforms. Whether it’s at a conference or being a part of the leadership team, it’s your job to make sure they’re connected to you. If you offer them a seat at the table or to head committees within your association, they’ll get the self-worth they’ve been desiring and you’ll reap the benefits.

“I’ve noticed how my board operates [compared to volunteer ones]. They’re [millennials] extremely professional and they’re extremely focused on the deliverable and what comes out of it and getting to that action item,” panelist Nick Serfass of The American Institute of Architecture Students said. “They’re not interested in just pontificating and saying their peace or opinion and just letting things go. They want to get to an end result.”

Tradeshow

Having a conference? Update them on the excitement of your speakers, attendees, and special events and entertainment. If they’re not in attendance at your conference, make sure you’re posting items on social media platforms or provide live streams to give them the sense of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). If they see you’re having fun, they’ll most definitely want to be a part of it. Try using a TED Talk format with education sessions – 20-minute, concise talks on specific topics.
Key Takeaways

With millennials making up a majority of the workforce, this generation will soon become the leaders of the association world. It’s critical for associations to immediately understand how to attract, engage and retain this often-misunderstood generation.

So in conclusion, the Millennial Impact Roundtable had several takeaways, including the following:

- Avoid stereotyping.
- Try pairing them with more tenured members of your association. This generation looks for mentorship.
- Certify them to help them bolster their resume. They love credentials.
- Make them feel like they’re part of the association. Use appropriate imagery and bold statements in any recruitment campaign or magazine feature.
- Look at a reduced or free membership classification to get them in the door and expose them to your association and its mission.
- Give them a reason to come to your tradeshow. Peer-to-peer networking opportunities, TedTalk-type sessions, fun scavenger hunts or social contests.
- Communicate via email. Phone calls simply don’t work.
- Know their work ethic. Be supportive of communication “after hours” and be prepared to answer.
- Create taskforces, allowing them to serve short amounts of time.
- Help them establish a personal brand.
- Give them opportunities within your association to utilize their knowledge and expertise – social media, newsletter, etc.
- Listen to their ideas ONLY if you’re willing to implement them.
- Market your association as mission-focused.
- Understand and consider life stages of this generation. A “one size fits all” won’t work.
- Remember that his generation is very brand-loyal.
- Start preparing for Gen Z now (born 2005 and after).

And what was most clear at the symposium – this generation does not want to be called “millenials.” Try using young or emerging professionals when referencing them.

“I always tell people ... if you are over 65, do you like to be called elderly or senior citizen? Because technically, that’s what you’re classified as from a scientific research perspective," Dove said.

By understanding their values and goals, providing leadership and growth, and connecting them with a larger purpose, associations can gain the desired membership from Gen Y.

“We have to somehow educate people like me, and people running associations at the board level, that this group isn’t just kids. They’re very powerful kids," Dan Mattland, panel moderator and MultiView president, said. "They’re the most powerful group out there right now."

The Millennial Impact Roundtable took place Oct. 25, 2017 in the offices of the School Nutrition Association in National Harbor, Md. MultiView would like to thank SNA for hosting the event and providing valuable insight.