

Engage:GenY

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The Election Is Challenging Gen Y Values: Impatience Versus Optimism

by Mike Doherty, Friday, November 5, 2010, 9:11 AM

Beginning with the primaries, youth turnout in the 2008 elections was double and even triple what it had been in the past. And yet this year, only 27% of 18-29-year-olds surveyed by Harvard University's Institute of Politics say they will definitely vote in the upcoming midterm elections. While some pundits have concluded that this group is once again uninterested, I don't agree.

Gen Yers are impatient but not uninterested. Consider that the White House seems to have lost focus on the values (optimism, change, "Yes We Can") that once aligned them with Millennials. President Obama's answer to a question Jon Stewart asked on a recent episode of "The Daily Show" illustrates the problem. Would he change his campaign slogan to be less audacious? The President replied that he believes in "yes we can ... but it takes time." Not a great answer for impatient and results-oriented Millennials!

The President's answer is especially problematic when you consider that Gen Yers are one of the demographics most challenged by the job market. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor force participation rate for workers 16-24 has decreased to 54.7% and they have an unemployment rate of 18.9%.

Furthermore, Millennials have sacrificed a lot for our wars and the credit crisis isn't doing them any favors with their student loans. No wonder their patience is being tested. This is reflected in the drop in Obama's approval rating with Millennials to just 49%. Given their values and the fact that this is the first downturn many of them have faced, a better, Millennials-friendly answer from President Obama might have been "Yes we did."

This is an engaged generation and when they voted for Obama, they were in essence becoming part of a coalition for change. He could have reaffirmed everything the coalition has accomplished (in a pithy way) while still acknowledging what's left to do and inspiring them to make sure it continues.

Another area where the midterm election is in direct conflict with Millennial values is in the tone of the conversation. This election season it was very negative and polarizing. Millennials are optimistic and don't like extremes. They are not the rebellious type, which is one reason many identify politically as independents.

They are team players who will work with anyone to solve a problem or get something done. This is not exactly the reality of Washington, D.C., (consider things like the health care reform process) or the tone of the campaign ads this year. Candidates are using personal attack ads at much higher rates than in the past. Because Millennials have a lot at stake, personal attacks that don't focus on problem solving seem extreme and only fuel their distrust and dampen their optimism.

Research studies have shown that this generation shies away from the extreme ends of rating scales and that they don't like it when advertisers bash their competition. Given that, I doubt they find negative political attack ads engaging. Such ads don't connect with the generation's optimistic, team-player orientation and certainly don't give them confidence that solutions to their woes are coming.

This generation is interested and they want to be engaged. But they want to support politicians who adhere to the same values and principles as they do. They were receptive to an optimistic reform agenda in 2008, and I have to imagine they would be again. But this is not a matter of getting out the vote. It's a matter of engaging them in the right way. A way that informs them and once again taps into their optimistic, achievement-oriented nature.

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Mike Doherty is president of Cole & Weber United. He is a marketer with more than 25 years of experience creating effective growth strategies for a diverse group of clients. Working on both the agency and client sides of the business, Mike's passion lies in helping clients find new ways to go beyond the boundaries of traditional advertising to effectively engage customers in branded experiences.

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