

Gen Trends

January 2004

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

Another Perspective

Editor's note: Last month I received the comments below taking me to task for observations I had made in this column about younger generations' reliance on computers for critical thinking. The writer, Sarita Marfin, is Assistant to the Director of Governmental Affairs for the Oregon Medical Society. Readers' comments are always welcome.

A few decades ago, Isaac Asimov wrote a series of books known as The Foundation Series. The setting is in the far distant future on a planet far, far away. One of the characters, Hari Seldon, invented a new social science called Psychohistory. Today, Psychohistory is a legitimate field of study, complete with professional journals and university degrees.

Another element of this futuristic setting is Asimov's Encyclopedia Galactica - a galaxy-wide computer system containing all information. Everything housed in libraries, museums, universities, newspapers, cookbooks (you get the picture) is available on your computer. The advent of the World Wide Internet certainly legitimizes Asimov's vision of a universal source of knowledge and data available to all people.

How do you plan to encourage young people back into the libraries after they've experienced researching papers on their laptop in the coffee-house? I believe they already view the Internet as a sort of Encyclopedia Galactica and believe in the credibility of this type of research. Get real - you simply cannot put this genie back in the bottle.

Students should learn, however, to distinguish between primary and

secondary sources of information. All historians, journalists, authors and researchers know the importance of quoting from reliable sources and how to prove your source is accurate. I suggest you make the fundamentals of research the first assignment for all of your classes. Come up with questions that require the student to go to the library, even if it's to look up a catalog number or tell you who is on page 48 of *Who's Who*. Create a website with both bogus and true facts and have the students go to the library to verify the information. Show them how easy it is to create false "facts" (did Forrest Gump really know Richard Nixon?), how to falsify data with statistics, and how rhetorical argument can be used to influence opinion. Create an internal desire to go beyond the convenience of their laptops to get information. Have them write a critical essay comparing and contrasting the use of the computer in research papers. Convince them; don't force them.

"A generation whose primary cultural artifact is the Filofax has enormous difficulty shoehorning death into its schedule: it's inconvenient, time-consuming, and stressful. 'We don't have time to die this afternoon; Caitlin has ballet.'"

Joe Queenan writing in
Balsamic Dreams: A Short but Self-Important History of the Baby Boomer Generation

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Overhead in a movie theater between two employees:

"Whoa man, this work is like . . . work!"

To ponder . . .

Today, debt reigns supreme as the marketing and refinancing of paper obligations take precedence over the previous industry standard of investing in tangible commodities with potentially useful social purposes, such as homes, small businesses, and automobiles. These profound social and economic transformations have even achieved frequent expression in the popular culture. For instance, vanity license plates, presumably purchased with borrowed money, have been observed that proclaim to friends and strangers alike of the car owner's current financial woes: INDEBT, BROKE2, and BANKRUP. In an earlier era, such public pronouncements of privately shameful behavior would have been anathema. Today, however, they are apparently not only a sign of the times but also an expression of personal identity. How quickly the cultural norms have changed in the Credit Card Nation.

*Robert D. Manning
writing in Credit Card Nation*

To Read:

Credit Card Nation: The Consequences of America's Addiction to Credit. Robert D. Manning, Ph.D. Basic Books, New York, 2000. ISBN 0-465-04367-4.

This best-selling book broke new ground on the impact of consumer debt four years ago and is still very relevant today. Dr. Manning does a splendid job of examining each generation's attitudes toward consumer credit and spending along with the long-term effect of these practices on the social issues within American society.

Case Study Corner

Shannon is the new college grad hired as communications director for our small association. She supervises Doris, a 50-something receptionist who has been with the organization for more than 20 years. The problem is that Shannon is constantly attempting to use her newly learned management skills. It reached a head last week when she decided to teach Doris how to answer the phone "professionally." Doris listened to her patiently, excused herself and then left the room with a look that could kill. How can I, as Shannon's supervisor, help her develop a more effective supervisory style without throwing cold water on her exuberance?

You might begin by asking Shannon to evaluate her supervisory skills now that she has been in the job for a while. What does she think she is doing well? Where does she think she might improve? From the responses she gives, you should be able to make some positive comments and still leave an opportunity for constructive criticism.

Be sure that all you share is based on behavior and not hearsay. Conflicts between younger supervisors and older employees can occur easily due to different attitudes and perspectives. Once that begins, the gossip can become rampant.

Because you observed the incident between Shannon and Doris you might say, "Shannon, I have a concern about the way you chose to instruct Doris on how to answer the phone this morning. Rather than attempting to give her instruction on telephone practices, you might ask her why she says or does certain things. She might provide a logical reason that had not occurred to you. If not, a suggestion here or there shouldn't hurt."

Shannon should respond well to this. If not, perhaps more formalized coaching is in order.

The Millennial Malaise

Millennials are coming of age in a society of contradictions. This is a generation of young people growing up with the images of Saddam Hussein, the Oklahoma City bombing, Rodney King, David Koresh, and Osama Bin Laden. But as terrible as all of this appears, most experience it through the detached filter of television, which not only broadcasts it, but also tells them what to think about it. They've lived through an age of tremendous economic growth, yet most of the jobs being produced pay \$7—\$10 per hour.

The Internet allows them to explore worlds they've never dreamed possible, but it exposes them to levels of pornography and violence no previous generation has ever seen. The nation continues to focus on the quality of education, yet incidents in Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, and Oregon have taught these young people that the person sitting next to them in class could be a killer.

This is a generation of young people who are growing up within an invasive proliferation of self-indulgent temptation and situational morals. They are, some would argue, over-analyzed, over-scheduled, over-marketed, over-discussed, over-entertained, over-taught, over-controlled, over-parented, over-protected, and over-stimulated. And now they are preparing to enter your workforce, if they haven't done so already.

From Hey Dude! The Manager's Short Course on the Emerging Generations

Menu Driven Thinking

The Center is in the development stages of a book on what we've termed *Menu Driven Thinking*, that is, an impairment of critical problem-solving skills because of an over-reliance on computer technology to provide options and answers to every-day challenges.

We would love to hear your stories about this phenomenon and the impact it's having on your business. Please e-mail us at research@gentrends.com and put "Menu Driven Thinking" in the subject line. Thanks.