

# History Repeats Itself

## (Even When It Comes to Engaging Millennials)

An increasing portion of my work with visitor-serving organizations revolves around millennial engagement. In conversations, “millennial engagement” often predictably morphs into a discussion on “digital engagement.” This seems logical: data suggest that millennials (those of us roughly aged eighteen to thirty-five) are generally a technologically savvy and socially connected bunch.

I was recently at the table with the leadership team of a large visitor-serving organization, discussing the very topic of millennial engagement. Near the start of the conversation, one leader thoughtfully attempted to communicate where he thought the organization was falling short in terms of engaging audiences. He declared:

“We need to be better at **telling** this audience the **importance** of our institution through our use of **technology** and getting more **impressions!**”

I immediately understood what this leader was trying to say. I’ve heard sentences like this too many times to count. And yet, these sentences never feel quite right. It’s like an ugly sweater made from your exact measurements with your name embroidered on it. You recognize it as made for you (and might even appreciate it)... but you’re just not going to wear it.

It seems that the emergence of new technological tools may be causing institutional leaders to second-guess themselves out of the valuable expertise that makes them leaders in the first place. While we millennials represent the first genera-

tion of “digital natives,” our wiring isn’t completely different than those who have come before us. This type of thinking (i.e., how better to engage millennials) needs a strategic refocusing on what really matters. Here are four distractions embedded within the “millennial engagement” mentality that are steering organizational leaders away from what is—and perhaps always has been—most important.

### 1 Distraction: *Tell* Focus: *Show*

Thanks in large part to the real-time nature of social media, potential visitors and supporters are now able to make their own immediate assessments of an organization based on how it communicates. When an organization posts on social media platforms, it builds its cumulative brand perception through the sum of these posts. In other words, what your organization posts reveals a great deal about who your organization truly is and what it actually values. In this sense, organizations are *showing* their values as opposed to simply *telling* audiences about them. An organization may post certain words related to its mission on social platforms, but if the overall essence of the posts doesn’t match that “promise,” it risks eroding perceived trust. Organizations should aim to constantly *show* who they are. Audiences trust what they see more than what you tell them.

### 2 Distraction: *Importance* Focus: *Relevance*

Many organizations seem to believe that declaring the *importance* of a topic will help it rise above the noise that pollutes our in-boxes and newsfeeds. However, if a topic isn’t *relevant* to your audiences, then it’s unlikely to be meaningful to your audiences. To be clear, being relevant is different than being timely or simply being present on digital platforms. Being relevant is about how an organization communicates its mission

via its content and the messages it uses to create a connection. Social media is a tool. An organization’s stories and information is the true connector. In order to attract younger audiences, it makes sense that those stories should be important *to them*—not just “important” as determined by the organization.

### 3 Distraction: *Impressions* Focus: *Influence*

“Impressions” is a word that has evolved from the concept of informing an opinion to what may be the worst sort of digital analytical jargon. Because its popular definition has become entirely quantitative, “impressions” may be tricking leaders into believing that their tried-and-true experiences don’t apply in the digital world.

What matters more than the number of millennials (or other audience members) who *saw* a story is how many audience members *cared about* that story enough for it to influence their perceptions and behavior. In other words, the sheer number of people who see an organization’s social media channels or website, for instance, is less important than the number of people who were influenced by its message and thought, “Hey, that institution interests me, and I’d like to learn more about it and perhaps pay a visit.” This certainly isn’t a new concept for leaders. Web-based “vanity metrics” are a new concept—and they are also a new distraction.

### 4 Distraction: *Technology* Focus: *People*

Consider this: digital marketing and marketing are one and the same. They are both about influencing people and behavior. Likewise, digital fundraising and fundraising are synonymous in successful organizations. Again, they are both about people and behavior. “Digital” is a way of connecting via engaging content. Sure, “knowing Java” and “mastering Facebook’s newsfeed algorithm”

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have value in the digital world, but they aren't the point of "being digital." Communication goals on real-time digital platforms should serve the same purpose and mission as the rest of the institution. An online donor is still a donor. A website visitor is still a visitor (i.e., a person connecting with your brand and mission). The difference is the platform ("connection point"); the goal is the same as "in real life."

Indeed, we millennials have distinct data-informed characteristics that define our generation. Data suggest that we are civic-minded, socially-connected "digital natives" who (gulp!) are used to attention and believe we are special. We *are* different, just as members of Generation X and Baby Boomers profile differently from their respective generational predecessors.

What if, instead of thinking "We need to be better at *telling* this audience the *importance* of our institution through our use of *technology* and getting more *impressions*," organizations posited:

**"We need to be better at *showing* this audience the *relevance* of our institution through our understanding of *people and behavior* and creating more *influence*."**

Indeed, the more things change, the more they stay the same. ●



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