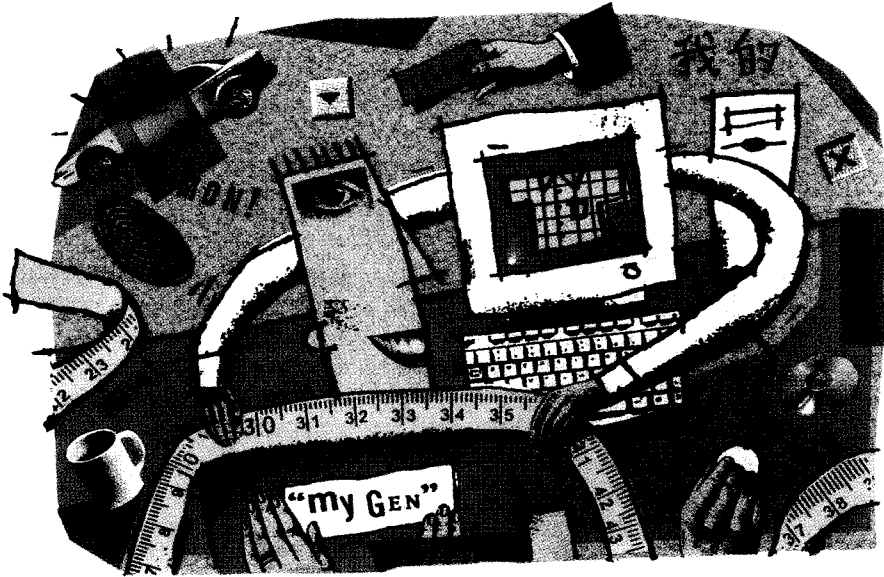


# 'My' Generation



The first generation of the new millennium wants it their way, or not at all. Will you be ready?

**W**e seem to have a mania in this country for sticking labels on various generations. We've had the baby boomers, the Yuppies and the Me Generation, more commonly known as Gen X. The popular tag on the upcoming group is Gen Y.

I'm not exactly sure of the purpose of these labels, but they often seem to suggest that the entire generation—as employees or consumers—share a whole range of work and/or consumption attitudes and patterns. Equally unclear is where this naming craze started or who's responsible for labeling each successive generation. Since no one seems to be in charge, I'll jump in by naming the very first generation of the new millennium. I call them the "My Generation."

While earlier generations have been influenced by technology, the MyGens are the first to be wholly shaped by it. Make no mistake about it. Those who will mature into employees and well-heeled consumers at the turn of the century have been thoroughly conditioned

by technology that screams, "My! My! My!" Their distinction as a group will be their determination *not* to be lumped into a group when it comes to what they consume and how they work. No black, mass-produced Fords or food for them. No, sir! No standard job description or benefits plan. Thanks, but no thanks!

They'll tell you, *individually*, what they want at work, home and play, and how they want it tailored specifically to them. What will you tell them?

## MAKE ME MY!

Remember when your personal checks were available only in blue or green? Or, when you found most of what you thought you needed on the shelves or off the rack? For the My Generation, that's like, so 1990s!

Even commercial CDs are quaint for these 13- to 30-year-olds: MyGen music lovers pick the songs for their custom CDs or download MP3 files directly into their own players. A boring, corporate-looking Visa card? Forget it: They'll pick their own design printed with a photo they've submitted. An e-mail address

with some company name like GTE.com in their address? No way: not when they can pick personalized Internet domains such as "most-wanted.com," "fly-girl.com" or simply "rickoliver.com." Their entire computer system was built to their specifications and their favorite Web portal provides a personal calendar, celebrity news of their choosing and the TV schedule for only the shows they like. In fact, they'll be able to choose how each show ends!

The personalization trend got its start in 1995, when the Microsoft Network (MSN) began offering a relatively primitive information-gathering service. Yahoo and Excite, then basic Web search engines, soon followed and gradually became the "portals" we know today. From there, the floodgates opened and business was transformed. Today, the Web is taking personalization to a higher level each week. According to Tim Brady, executive producer at Yahoo, "Well over half the things we've put out in the past year have some sort of personalized aspect to them."

Gone are the days when e-commerce sites treat buyers like an anonymous number (those that do are considered the most primitive sites). Instead, marketers gather personal information, then use it to deliver just what the customer wants, pitching them similar products while they're shopping and sending targeted notices in the future.

MyTicketMaster, for example, offers a personalized site where potential customers can choose to see information on only the acts or events they like, with e-mail alerts when tickets go on sale. To check out potential seats, shoppers can log on and get a 360-degree virtual reality view from any seat in the arena.

The world of generic gadgets no longer satisfies the palettes of MyGen consumers. Palm Pilot developers Jeff Hawkins and Donna Dubinsky have launched a new company and a mini-computer gadget, called the "Visor," that can be customized for the specific functions you need. Rather than just storing data, it functions as a platform that users can instantly modify into a cell phone, a digital camera, a pager, a game machine or an MP3 music player.

## THE EXPECTANCY RATIO

All these new developments reflect the kind of personal touch the MyGens are expecting from manufacturers and service providers.

In fact, they are the first to completely embrace what I call the "expectancy ratio." These customers expect constant improvements (better, cheaper, faster *and* personalized) in information technology products and services, and they transfer that expectation directly to all other product categories.

Brooks Brothers, for example, has had striking success with its computer-assisted custom shirt program, in which three-dimensional scanners are used to customize clothing to the individual. A growing business in toys is to create personalized dolls that resemble their owner. Oxford Micro Devices, based in Shelton, Connecticut, is developing a personalized gun activated by fingerprints. A sensor in the handle keeps the gun from firing if someone other than the owner tries to use it.

Toyota was deluged with phone calls when it recently announced a plan to produce a custom car in five days. Apparently they spoke too soon. The company later released a statement outlining a less ambitious customer order-to-delivery timetable. But the gauntlet has been laid down, and BMW, GM's Saturn and other automakers are moving in that same direction.

## PERSONAL, TO A POINT...

E-commerce sites have been at the head of the class in customization, but many have flunked when it comes to customer service. Consumers have come to expect lousy service from impersonal mega-warehouse stores in the physical world. But when they visit a flashy, personalized e-commerce site, they expect service to match.

In too many cases, they've been seriously disappointed. Many e-commerce shoppers complain about the poor follow-through and the inability to get customized receipts, shopping histories or order tracking.

To keep the MyGens happy, companies must spend as much effort on the back office as they do on the front. If My-

Gens feel slighted, they will click a mouse and go where they feel wanted and personally appreciated (and will tell 20 friends about it in a chat room).

One thing that may drive these customers away is the collection of personal data. But customer studies have actually shown that people don't mind giving personal information—if they get something personal out of the deal.

Hotel chains are notorious for gathering data and doing nothing with it. Brick-and-mortar retailers are equally bad at using the gold mine of information at their fingertips. Instead of using personal data to offer personalized products or services, they simply sell the lists to direct marketing companies.

If there's a model of how things should be done, it's on the B2B side, where results mean more than a good show. Companies at the front of technological capabilities have built customized Web sites for their important customers, complete with custom order forms, price lists and training documents.

Clearly, the first strategic rule for companies that want to reach MyGens in the 21st century marketplace is to personalize everything. These steps should be considered as well:

- Embed intelligence in products and services so they can learn the likes and dislikes of the user and configure themselves to individual needs.
- Understand "customer space"—what makes each customer unique—and create products that meet those unique needs at the "customer's point of requirement."
- Understand "customer time"—how individual needs change over time—and develop products and services that can evolve as needs change.
- Brand your customers by the level of business or potential and give them differentiated levels of personalization.
- Allow customers differentiated levels of access to your Internet site so that they can personalize their service levels, delivery schedules and the like.
- Never sell or misuse the personal information you get from customers. To MyGens, privacy, security and trust are the keys to a successful relationship.

## MYGENS AT WORK

Of course, the MyGens aren't going to leave their "My" selves at the door of the workplace. Employers must recognize their needs and expectations as they recruit for the 21st century.

The successful ones will throw away the standardized rule books and develop trained and motivated employees who understand how they individually fit into the organization and contribute to its success. They'll also do the following:

- Make workplace practices—wages, benefits, work schedules—as individually flexible as possible.
- Train people to fulfill their individual potential. Focus the job around them, not them around the job.
- Create an environment in which each individual understands he or she is a unique "company" within a larger organization.
- Create personalized jobs that allow MyGens to be as self-actualized as possible in terms of career goals, pay and work hours.
- Create personalized work environments that allow employees to bring as much of their personal life to work as possible. Many firms are allowing pets and the like at work.

• As with customers, never abuse the personal information given to you by MyGen employees. It's the cardinal sin.

One thing's for sure: The theme song of the MyGens is Sinatra's classic "My Way." Companies that want to prosper with them better treat it as more than just a marketing slogan. **MR**



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