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Best Technologies & Best Practices for Superior Results

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2015 and Beyond

Your secret to success must involve attracting and retaining new and young talent.

BY PAT ALEXANDER

In October 2008, I attended the ReSource Pro Innovation Summit in Qingdao, China. Attendees went through a number of activities designed to get them thinking and planning for the agency of 2015. Every attendee whom I have spoken to agrees that this meeting opened eyes and minds—and showed everyone how to plan for the future.

Both wholesale MGAs and retail agencies attended the summit. By the end of the meeting, however, we all agreed to some common necessities for creating a roadmap:

1. Determine the identity of the performer and understand how to develop talent.
2. Determine core competencies of the company, what will be outsourced to strategic partners, and what will remain in-house.

3. Acknowledge that change is needed in order to be profitable.
4. Determine client values; assert that if work is not based on a client value, it is not worth doing.
5. Perform client research—what will work and what will be needed to get there?

Attracting young talent

When I work with agencies, I continue to talk to them about #1 above: how they plan to attract and retain new and young talent. I have witnessed a number of situations where young people were hired to be trained as technicians and then as CSRs. Often, there is no training plan for these individuals. Instead, they are left to flounder.

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Agency management systems are only intuitive to those of us who have used them for years. To someone who has never used them before, agency management systems are outright frustrating. I have seen many new hires become disenchanted quickly and move on to something else.

Unfortunately, many agencies are so mired in the past that they can't get to the present, much less the future. I did a presentation about this subject at HIGH-TECC 2009. I began my presentation with the YouTube video “AT&T/TOMS 30 second spot.” The video is about Blake, the Chief Shoe Giver at TOMS Shoes. He operates his entire business from his smart phone. Sometimes when I reference this video people say, “Well, that is not insurance.” My response is that it should be.

Nationwide Insurance is already heavily advertising their mobile app for reporting auto accidents. It may not be a perfect app, but it's the first. And sometimes, first attempts make lasting impressions. For example, all tissues are called Kleenex no matter their brand. Photocopiers are often referred to as “the Xerox” no matter the brand. While we might not call all future smart phone insurance apps “Nationwide,” they are making a first impression.

In the 2015 and Beyond session at HIGH-TECC 2009, we shared our experiences of working with young people. It seems we all agree that young workers want the ability to be

mobile. However, one person also pointed out that the young people he employs also enjoy having an actual office work space as well.

One of the primary areas we discussed is the next generation's need for social networking and communicating via texting and social networks instead of by phone or in person.

Retaining talent

While you want to attract and employ the younger generation, you also need to retain valuable members of your current staff who are fully engaged in your business. You may even want to attract new talent in these age groups. Each of these groups has different work styles. Many workplaces do not recognize these differences.

In my research about millennials, I continually find that an employer needs to be prepared to do the following:

- **Provide structure.** Reports should have monthly due dates. Jobs should have fairly regular hours. Certain activities should be scheduled daily. Meetings should have agendas and minutes. Goals should be clearly stated and progress assessed. Assignments and success factors should be defined.
- **Provide leadership and guidance.** Millennials want to look up to you, learn from you, and receive daily feedback from you. They want “in” on the whole picture and to know the “scoop.” Plan to spend a

lot of time teaching and coaching—and be aware of this commitment when you hire millennials. They deserve and want your investment of time in their success.

- **Encourage the millennial's self-assuredness, "can-do" attitude, and positive personal self-image.** Millennials are ready to take on the world. Their parents told them they can do it—they can. Encourage—don't squash them or contain them.
- **Take advantage of the millennial's comfort level with teams.** Encourage them to join. They are used to working in groups and teams. In contrast to a Lone Ranger attitude of earlier generations, millennials actually believe a team can accomplish more and be better—they've experienced team success. Watch who joins the volleyball match at the company picnic. Millennials gather in groups and play on teams; you can also mentor, coach, and train your millennials as a team.

- **Listen to the millennial employee.** Your millennial employees are used to loving parents who have scheduled their lives around the activities and events of their children. These young adults have ideas and opinions, and don't take kindly to having their thoughts ignored. After all, they had the best listening, most child-centric audience in history.
- **Millennial employees are up for a challenge and change.** Boring is bad. They seek ever-changing tasks within their work. What's happening next is their mantra. Don't bore them, ignore them, or trivialize their contribution.
- **Millennial employees are multi-taskers on a scale you've never seen before.** Multiple tasks don't faze them. They can talk on the phone while doing e-mail and answering multiple instant messages. This is a way of life. In fact, without many different tasks and goals to pursue within the week, millennials will likely experience boredom.

The Anderson Agency Report

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POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to The Anderson Agency Report (TAAR), POB 6218, Broomfield, CO 80021-0004.

- **Take advantage of your millennial employee's computer, cell phone, and electronic literacy.** Are you a Boomer or even an early Gen-Xer? The electronic capabilities of millennials are amazing. Let's say you have a salesman in China and want to know how the trip is going. Old timers call and leave a message in his hotel room. Or, you can have your millennial text message him in his meeting for an immediate response. The world is wide, if not yet deep, for your millennial employees.
- **Capitalize on the millennial's affinity for networking.** Millennials like to network around the world electronically. Keep this in mind, because they are also able to post their resumes on Web job boards viewed by millions of employers. Sought after employees, they are loyal, but they keep their options open—always.
- **Provide life-work balance.** Your millennial employees are used to cramming their lives with multiple activities. They may play on sports teams, walk for multiple causes, spend time as fans at company sports leagues, and spend lots of time with family and friends. They work hard, but they are not into the 60-hour work weeks defined by the Baby Boomers. Home, family, spending time with the children and families—all are priorities. Don't lose sight of this. Balance and multiple activities are important to these millennial employees. Ignore this to your peril.
- **Provide a fun, employee-centered workplace.** Millennials want to enjoy their work. They want to enjoy their workplace. They want to make friends in

their workplace. Worry if your millennial employees aren't laughing, going out with workplace friends for lunch, and helping plan the next company event. Help your long-term employees make room for the millennials.

In actuality, I have found many “millennial traits” in very successful people throughout my career. The only difference is that in the past, some of us were not as likely to speak up. Those of us raised by Depression Era parents were taught to be thankful for our jobs.

In short, remember not to bore millennials, ignore them, or trivialize their contribution. I have seen so many companies lose valuable staff because they didn't pay attention to this advice.

So, open your eyes and minds to the possibilities. If the younger generation knows more than you do about a technology, ask them to mentor you.

Mentors don't have to be older than you. When Jack Welch was CEO of General Electric, he wanted to know about the Internet and how it could be valuable. He sought a younger staffer in his organization and set aside time on his calendar for weekly mentoring sessions.

Don't be afraid of what you don't know. Seek information if you want to survive and grow. ☒

Patricia Alexander, CIC, is a Consultant, Coach & Mentor. Her many years of experience in retail agency and MGA settings gives her a broad range of knowledge in agency operations. She is dedicated to educating her clients on using their technology to enhance and build their business and profitability. Subscribe to Pat's Blog via her Web site www.patalexander.com. She may be reached at pat@patalexander.com.

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