

Does Your Service Training Stick?

How to update your approach to appeal to Generation X and Y

By James Dunne

I knew that I was finally old when I muttered the words that I swore I would never say:

"Kids these days...they don't know how good they've really got it!"

Regardless of whether you feel this way, or whether you sympathize with the plight of the so-called slacker generation, you must understand ONE thing: What you feel does not matter! Your focus need NOT be on how to change these post baby-boomers (aged 34 and younger), but rather, how to understand them.

Formerly in management, I have been a service staff trainer and Professor for the past five years. I have discovered that the traditional style of education is no longer effective. I say this after stumbling through my first couple of years, trying to be both the authority and the authoritarian.

Given the fact that I am a borderline Gen Xer myself, one might think that I would have a firm understanding of how to get through to my people. Growing up in a hotel kitchen with a traditional European chef and old school owner, I was trained to accept the word of the chef and boss without question. While I responded to this style and am proud to have developed within it, most of today's generation just won't respond to it. One of the biggest traps today's trainers and managers can fall into is that they convince themselves that they are all-knowing and that they can single-handedly wave a wand to instill their will on a group of people.

You must accept and come to the realization that this attitude simply does not work any more. We are in an economy where a body...let alone a competent one...is difficult to come by. The unemployment rate is at its lowest in decades. The days of a person needing to wait tables for a second income are over...at least for now. People are doing well at their primary jobs, or are making supplemental money in technology and investments. Kids aren't working as much because their parents are doing so well that they do not need to. What has resulted is a skeleton restaurant staff which will not stand for the authoritative and all knowing trainer or management team. They can just as easily walk across the street and pick up a job with the competition if they want to, where they will be grateful to acquire additional staff.

With that said, take a step back and look at how you communicate with your staff. Understand that they will respect authority, if the authority respects them. Be fair, firm and consistent with policies and procedures. What you enforce and dictate for one staff member, must be enforced for all...without being condescending. Be sure that your policies and procedures are relevant and effective. Go to your staff to help reassess these policies and procedures. Show respect and acknowledgement for your staff, and they will in turn give you the same. Always explain to them why you are doing what you do. Today's youth does not follow blindly-- they demand an explanation. They were raised to be self-sufficient. Many grew up in dual income homes where, at an early age, they were given a great amount of autonomy. Because of this self-sufficiency, they command respect. They expect to be treated as equals, and not subordinates. Understand this, and you will be able to communicate with them more effectively.

Here are some things to keep in mind when developing the training program for your operation:

Break It Up...

Try not to stay on a topic for too long. The attention span of this generation is much shorter, to no fault of their own. Just take a look at television and cable these days. The viewer who has grown up over the last decade has not been challenged to focus on any one particular program, image or scene for more than a few moments. With the remote control, and video images flashing by in increments shorter than a split

second, this generation has been programmed to retain and extrapolate from brief flashes of information. If you have videos, show them in short increments, or play them while the staff is setting up the dining room. If you have lecture sessions, give breaks, and break the activity so the group can move from topic to topic and presentation method to presentation method (lecture, to video, to role play, to interaction, etc.).

Clarify Yourself and Your Qualifications...

The Gen X and Gen Y groups want to hear it from someone who has been where they have been. The saying those who can't do, teach should be thrown out the window! This generation simply will not stand for it. Let them know that you are competent, and that you've gotten your hands dirty (and are still willing to get them dirty).

Clarify Your Purpose...

They need to know why they are doing the training. What's in it for them? Will this help their tips? Will it help bring in more customers...thus helping their tips? What? Why? Let them in on it. Be honest...that's what they want to hear.

Be Self-Deprecating...

Don't be afraid to criticize yourself and the mistakes you have made. They will respect your honesty and your forthright approach. They do not want to be told how lazy and lax they are...and what they should be doing. They will listen to a confident, experienced trainer who has been there, who will comment on past experiences and who is willing to wholeheartedly admit that they've made plenty of mistakes on their own. They don't expect...or want a perfect person. They want someone who is real and who can empathize with the position that they are in. Don't just tell them that you made mistakes. Be anecdotal, and be sure to tell stories that are relevant, they can learn from, and are amusing!

Get Them Involved...

Have members of your staff help develop the training expectations and session outlines. This empowerment not only helps them get involved and interested in the project, but it gets them to stand behind you when it is

delivered to the entire staff. The staff will be more likely to embrace it if one (or more) of their own is involved in its implementation.

I came to this realization years back while managing an upscale operation. When I needed to pick out new pepper mills, I went to the staff to help make the decision. I first narrowed down my choices, then got the samples from the distributor. I presented these to the staff and said, you guys pick!

I did this for two reasons:

1. I wanted to get them involved in decision making...especially since they were going to be the ones refilling these things and cleaning them every night.
2. I didn't want to hear the inevitable complaints about them if I alone picked them out!

Their final selection was a pepper mill with a round screw-on top. Each night, at shifts end, they would have to refill them. On occasion, I would hear the little ball dropped on the ground, and roll across the marble floor. Now, if I had picked out this pepper mill, they would have been cursing me and complaining each and every time the ball dropped. Instead, I never heard a word. When one fell to the floor, they always made sure that it was retrieved, without a rumble of discontent towards the decision that they made!

Make Them Laugh...

Do whatever it takes. They need to enjoy what's going on. If they start to joke around a bit...let it happen...just keep the reigns on it and keep the session moving along.

Utilize Role Play...

It is a lighthearted and practical way to put the training to work. It keeps the group occupied, it breaks up the monotony of the lecture, it lets them loosen up, and it lets them work together. Pair the staff off and be sure everyone is involved. Try not to single anyone out, and always be sure to group people together where a shy personality will be alongside an

outgoing one.

Embrace Their Input...

Encourage their participation in any way that you can. Participation keeps them alive. Even if they seem to be straying from the topic, encourage active participation. Be sure not to focus on just a few of the participants. Get everyone involved...but be sure not to make shy ones feel uncomfortable. Give out raffle tickets every time someone participates. At the end of the session, raffle significant prizes (they will be insulted if you are cheap). In my training I have raffled off everything from movie tickets, to packets of subway tickets, to bottles of wine (never less than a \$10 value), to cash (never less than \$10), to gift certificates (never less than \$10), to weekend vacations, to days off, to the option of making one's own schedule for a week, or choosing one's own station for a week, to...well, you get the picture...it can be just about anything. It is not as expensive as it sounds. Get your purveyors to donate assorted meats, assorted beers, bottles of wine, etc. Swap gift certificates with a store in your area or another restaurant. This will cut down on the cost significantly.

Don't Give In...

The moment you succumb to their rumbling and complaining and you decide to end your training early, skip a day, or skip a section, they own you! They will capitalize on this and take advantage in the future. Let them know that you indeed have an agenda...share the agenda with them...and see it through to completion.

Be Fair, Firm and Consistent...

No matter what the rules, the expectations or the standards you set forth, be absolutely sure that you are ready to follow them through to the letter. This generation will watch your every step to make sure that you practice what you preach. They will not bow down to authority--they will confront it head on--and they will be sure to let you know how they feel. Trust me on that one. They will respect the leaders who show integrity, and most importantly, are firm, fair, and consistent. If they see that each person in the group is treated the same, they will respond to whatever standards you set forth and take to your direction.

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