

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW how to reach Generation Xers, eavesdrop on a training seminar conducted by Pencom International, a Denver-based company that provides training products to such restaurant chains as Denny's and Pizza Hut. You won't hear the trainers referring to restaurant patrons as "prospective customers." Instead, they're "hot targets." The trainers don't encourage new employees to "recognize and serve customers quickly." They're told to "lock on and fire." The language isn't what you'd typically find at a corporate training seminar. But, then, Generation Xers (a term they detest) aren't typical employees.

"These people grew up with Sonic the Hedgehog and Atari, so training has to be attention-grabbing," says Christopher O'Donnell, vice president of Pencom.

"Or as Beavis would say, 'The training can't suck.'"

Suck indeed. Members of Generation X, those 40 million or so Americans age 20 to 33, are forcing companies to rethink and reengineer their training programs drastically. Gen Xers' values, communication styles, and life experiences are so different from those of baby boomers that traditional training doesn't stand a chance. To connect with these young employees, forget *Father Knows Best*; bring on MTV.

Now, before you grumble about catering to a fringe element, here's an incentive: Training geared to the needs of Generation Xers may actually be better for training all workers.

"This generation is spearheading change," says O'Donnell. "They're

Can Generation Xers Be Trained?

teaching us a lot about how to manage and train everyone in the workforce.”

Granted, not all companies experience generational differences. At Dallas-based Texas Instruments, for example, employees are hired based on certain values and characteristics. That keeps TI's corporate culture harmonious and minimizes any discrepancies between workers of different generations.

“We don't see generational learning differences,” says Ray Gumpert, manager of training and organizational effectiveness for TI's Semiconductor Group. “We recruit a certain kind of individual, so there is great consistency among TIers.”

In *Twentysomething: Managing and Motivating Today's New Workforce* (Master Media, 1992), Claire Raines writes that companies such as Texas Instruments are the exception, not the rule. “[Though] all generations have things in common,” she says, “research on Generation Xers shows that this group typically learns very differently from those that came before them.”

Who are these people, anyway?

To understand why and how Xers' learning styles are so different, you have to understand the characteristics that set them apart from older workers.

To begin with, they are the first generation to grow up with many of their parents both working. As “latchkey kids,” many learned to become self-reliant. Consequently, they tend to be independent problem-solvers, who are remarkably good at getting a job done on their own.

Many, if not most, grew up with computers at home, in school, and at arcades on week-

Surprise! Generation Xers love training—and the kind of training that works for them is good for everyone. Read on.

BY SHARI CAUDRON

ends, so they are amazingly technoliterate. From the Internet to CD-ROMs, familiarity with new technology is just a mouse-click away.

In addition, Xers have been conditioned by the American culture to expect immediate gratification. Such things as automatic teller machines, pagers, and microwave ovens have taught them that they can have what they want, when they want it. In the workplace, that can mean that they expect answers and feedback *now*.

Xers came of age in an era that began with the Watergate scandal and ended with massive corporate layoffs, so they tend to distrust institutions. They don't have to be taught that there is no such thing as lifetime employment; they never expected it. Such distrust, combined with an inherent self-reliance, means that they're more likely to regard companies as places to grow, not places to grow old.

DEBUNKING THE SLACKER MYTH

Surveys of baby-boomer managers reveal that Generation X employees are widely perceived as lazy, disloyal, short on attention, and arrogant. In his book *Managing Generation X* (Merritt Publishing, 1996), Bruce Tulgan disagrees: "For every element of slacker myth, there is a flip side."

Tulgan says that the key to managing, motivating, and training people age 20 to 33 lies in understanding their unique characteristics.

Perception: Xers are lazy.

Reality: In a *Reader's Digest* survey of 1,050 Americans, 74 percent of Xers agreed with the statement: "Hard work is the key to getting ahead." Just 66 percent of respondents age 49 to 62 felt that way.

Perception: Xers are disloyal.

Reality: Their seeming restlessness and disloyalty indicate an ability to adapt to change. "Paying one's dues" means little to Xers, who value "self-building" jobs that contribute to their marketability.

Perception: Xers are arrogant.

Reality: They aren't arrogant; they're self-reliant. With working moms, they learned early on how to solve problems on their own.

Perception: Xers have short attention spans.

Reality: Their way of learning was shaped by computer technology. That engendered a knack for innovation and an ability to connect seemingly unrelated pieces of information. They prefer to jump around, assimilating data from multiple sources.

So, what do all of those characteristics mean for HRD professionals? Bruce Tulgan—founder of Rainmaker, a firm in New Haven, Connecticut, that helps companies recruit, motivate, and retain Generation X workers—reminds us that in the old days, the corporate approach to training was paternalistic.

"It used to be 'welcome to the family,'" says Tulgan. "Companies would tell employees, 'Here is your training agenda, this is the training we'll provide, and this is what you need to know.'" That approach just doesn't work with Xers. They want to know *why* they must learn something, before they will take the time to learn *how*.

Says Tulgan, "I'm not saying you must change the learning objectives; you must change the process." He recommends focusing on outcomes more than techniques and on what Xers are going to be able to do, not what they need to know.

For example, at the Orlando-based Olive Garden restaurants, training for servers had them memorize the menu and ingredients of the dishes. Now, training director Marty Fisher says that training emphasizes what servers are supposed to do with that information.

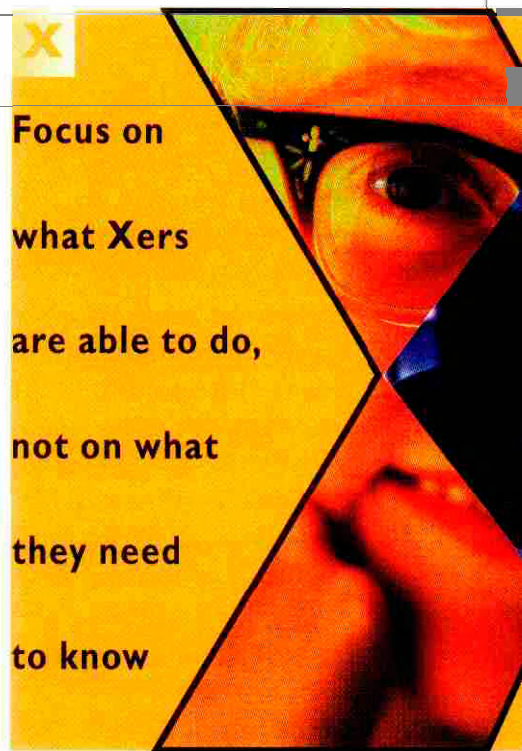
"We tell servers we want them to be tour guides for the menu," says Fisher. Through role play, servers can practice telling customers about each dish in appealing terms. That way, employees not only know why they are learning the ingredients, but they also know how to put the information to work.

At Chicago-based Andersen Consulting, trainers spend a lot of time up-front getting trainees' buy-in. According to Joe Kotey, a manager in the consulting education department, young employees have to see value in the training, or they aren't motivated to learn new skills. "Training results vary greatly, depending on how motivated a group is to learn new skills," says Kotey. "By focusing on outcomes, we show up-front why [employees] need this information."

Pushing the right buttons

Once you have the attention of Generation Xers, keep it by making training experiences meaningful, memorable, and fun. Xers are used to being entertained, having been weaned on portable CD players and Game Boy.™ "We can't just pour knowledge into their heads," says Fisher. "We need to combine education with entertainment."

One way to keep their attention is to make training experiential. As



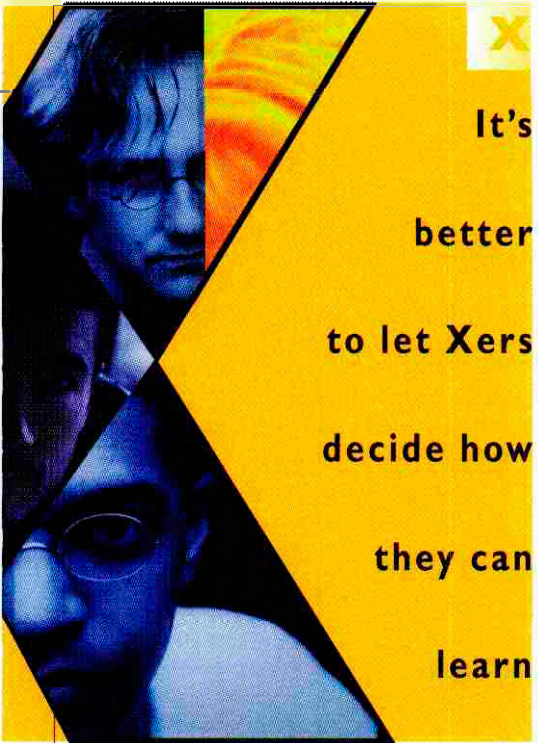
much as possible, use all six senses, role play, and simulation learning—similar to the approaches used by NASA. Astronauts aren't expected to pilot a space shuttle without having practiced. Don't expect Xers to perform without practice.

For example, Andersen Consulting uses CD-ROMs during training to simulate client meetings. Using audio and video clips stored on disc, trainees can interview clients, receive phone calls, obtain advice from senior consultants, and review internal memos.

At the end of the computerized course, trainees have an opportunity to deliver a presentation with the findings and recommendations usually delivered to a client. "We want employees to see and feel what a client call is really like," says Roberta Menconi, training manager.

Classroom learning can also be made experiential. Pencom's O'Donnell remembers a training session he conducted for young employees of a Denver restaurant.

"I was trying to communicate the importance of seating [customers] right away, but getting nowhere. When I asked employees how long [customers] could wait comfortably before being seated, their responses ranged



X
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better
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CDs, and in self-paced manuals and workbooks. That puts the information into employees' hands right away and makes them accountable for learning. Generation Xers like that kind of structured self-study."

Given Gen Xers' penchant for technology, computers are a natural choice for delivering training. But their ability to control has to be built into the technological solutions.

Menconi says that Andersen tested its first CD-ROM courses with younger employees to gauge their responses. "We discovered that they click around a lot. They want control over the paths they take. They want to stop and start at will."

To accommodate those needs, Andersen built sophisticated navigation systems into all of its CD-ROM-based courses.

Gen Xers' propensity to jump around—unlike older workers who tend to go step-by-step—doesn't necessarily signify a lack of attention. It's more an ability to assimilate information quickly and to focus on multiple ideas at once—called, "parallel thinking."

"Look at MTV or commercials," says Raines, "and you'll see four or five things going on at the same time. That drives me crazy, but these kids are used to it."

Companies can appeal to younger workers by developing training materials that provide multiple sources of information at once. *USA Today* and *Wired* are good examples of how to present information to Xers. Those publications combine charts, photos, text, graphics, and cartoons on a single page.

When making your materials more eye-catching, make sure you also keep the information simple. Don't make Gen Xers have to guess what you're trying to say. Raines recommends highlighting key points to make the information highly scannable.

A note of caution: Don't go overboard and be too trendy. A few years back, the Wendy's restaurant chain created a training video, "Grill Skills," that featured a rap singer in gold lame reviewing food-grilling techniques. The video won awards. But, after a year, it lost its effectiveness; employees saw it as outdated.

COMMUNICATING WITH XERS (AND OTHERS)

Encourage. Foster a learning environment in which everyone is a teacher by making teaching part of every person's job. Teaching shouldn't draw core people away from their tasks, but it should enhance productivity. When teaching Xers, share information and practices without dictating unnecessary rules; try to let them learn by doing. Inspire them to define problems, engage their innovative powers, and come up with creative solutions.

Build. Create a rich information environment that facilitates ongoing learning. Provide multiple learning resources in diverse media, encourage Xers to set their own learning goals in structured self-study programs, and let them process information and meet goals at their own pace.

Challenge. Spur on Xers with new projects that demand fresh skills. Expose them to diverse facets of the business by allowing lateral moves to new areas. Armed with new skills and motivated by the learning process, they will assume new responsibilities gladly and meet challenges with greater productivity and initiative.

Communicate. Keep open the lines of communication. Schedule time daily or weekly for brief, detail-oriented sessions to review projects, provide updates on management issues, monitor results, resolve problems, answer questions, and establish and adjust goals and deadlines.

Source: Generation X: The Workforce of the Future (Rainmaker, New Haven, Connecticut, 1996).

Prime targets

Generation Xers—more than other employee groups—tend to make job decisions based on whether training is available. So, it may be more important that you provide them with training than how you provide it.

Says Tulgan, "Training depart-

from three minutes to several more."

Frustrated, O'Donnell asked the group to time him for one minute. "I acted fidgety for a full 60 seconds while they watched. That minute went on forever and drove home the point that [customers] need to be seated immediately."

For a generation that grew up with more remote controls than rattles, the need to control learning is important. Xers need buttons to push. They are independent, and they're used to managing their own time. Because they're accustomed to calling the shots, they tend to resent and resist efforts to force-feed them training. To give Xers a sense of control over their learning, it's wise to provide as many options as possible where and when they can participate. That means a choice of locations and times.

"Because this generation is stubborn, we can't be," says O'Donnell.

It's even better to let Xers decide how they can learn. Tulgan tells the story of a Big Six accounting firm with a series of outstanding training courses. But they were so popular that no one could get into them.

Says Tulgan, "I suggested that the firm put course content on videotapes, audiotapes, and interactive

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF GENERATION X

Here's a menu of what Xers like and don't like.

LIKES

Honesty. This group can see through a snow job. Give it to them straight, whether it's good news or bad.

Feedback. Xers need a lot of ongoing feedback from managers. Though they like praise, they're also resilient in the face of criticism.

A lot of visuals. Look at *Wired* and *USA Today* for clues on how to prepare written communication. Combine quotes, photos, text, and boxes on a single page. Make information highly scannable.

Speaking their language. Forget corporate jargon, such as "prospective customers." Call them "hot targets" instead.

Ongoing development. Xers crave learning. Because they know there is no such thing as job security, they understand the importance of continuous development.

Fun. Xers don't live to work; they work to live. Make training fun, or they won't have any part of it.

DISLIKES

Hearing about the past. Especially yours. Forget sharing your own experiences. Xers want to know how information will affect them.

Inflexibility. Xers want to control their own schedules. Make training available at different times and locations if you want to increase their participation.

Being over-managed, over-watched. Train Xers and leave them alone. Periodic follow-ups work better than a lot of supervision and hand-holding.

Disparaging comments. Don't put down their taste, styles, and so forth. Xers like to make a fashion statement just like every other generation has.

Feeling disrespected. Don't waste their time with bogus training. Make sure it has a point they can understand.

Focusing on techniques. Xers want to focus on results.

Being called "Xers." They have received a lot of publicity—most of it negative. As a result, they detest this label.

the training approaches that work well with them make sense for almost everyone, regardless of age. Here are some tips for training workers of all ages.

Focus. Training should emphasize end results and place learners in control. Such training helps prepare employees for challenges on-the-job. After all, isn't the goal of empowerment for employees to focus on business objectives and make the necessary and appropriate decisions to achieve them? Fewer managers means that all employees have to take more responsibility for their work; learner-directed training is a great way to get them used to that.

Be flexible. Large-scale corporate cutbacks mean that more people are overworked and are juggling multiple demands. A flexible training schedule and choice of training resources (such as CD-ROMs, videos, and so forth) help employees fit training into their work schedules.

Emphasize visuals. Create eye-catching, highly scannable training materials. Most people don't have time to read through pages of materials. Like it or not, most of us have been conditioned by the media to expect a point to be made quickly.

Provide continuous education. Though younger workers have never counted on cradle-to-grave employment, older employees are also getting the message that they must prepare for unexpected events. The companies that provide continuous education are in a better position to retain productive employees.

"If you want to see the future of work, look into the eyes of a Generation Xer," says Tulgan. "We were shaped by the same forces that have shaped the [current] workplace and economy. We're comfortable with the new workplace because we never got accustomed to the old management style."

But whatever you do, don't call them "Generation Xers." ■

Shari Caudron is a freelance writer. E-mail sinclair@aol.com.

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Xers tend

to stay when

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ments are the ace in the hole for retaining and motivating today's workforce." That's because young employees don't envision long-term relationships with their employers, he says. They know that they must keep growing in order to stay marketable. If they don't receive training, they

tend to start looking around at other jobs in other companies.

"In today's job market, you want to train employees to leave at any time," says Tulgan. "They won't, because they'll see working for your company as an incredible opportunity to grow and develop."

Terri Wolfe, director of HR at Patagonia—a Ventura, California-based clothing retailer—agrees that the biggest emerging trend among younger workers is their desire for continuous education. "We have an extensive continuing education program that a majority of our younger workers take advantage of. They're taking classes not only to advance their careers, but also because they are inherently curious."

What generation gap?

What is perhaps most remarkable about training Generation Xers is that