

The Millennials Are Coming - Proven Engagement Strategies (Jun 13)



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Most of us have heard the term “Millennials” and recognize that change will inevitably come, just as it always does, but we often don’t completely understand what specifically the “Millennial” shift may mean. We hear, for example, that Millennials have a different learning style, a different level of comfort with technology, a different culture, and a different way of relating to their workplace.

As this new generation enters the workforce, training organizations need to evaluate how they are going to motivate, engage, and inspire these learners to achieve results in their new positions. We have interviewed Nate Chai, senior director of Design Consulting at [Allen Communication](#), to tell us what he has learned about capturing the attention of incoming Millennials.

What problems are training companies facing in reaching Millennials?

Millennials, the generation of people born between 1981 and 1999, are the largest, most educated, and most diverse generation since the Baby Boomers. They are ready to enter the workforce and are doing so in strong numbers. According to PwC, by 2016, 80 percent of the workforce will be made up of Millennials.

Because we’re sometimes not sure what to make of the “Millennials” talk, we sometimes oversimplify and underestimate them, talking as though this group as a whole has a short attention span, spends all day on social media, or responds poorly to previously successful training strategies. Millennials certainly may have unique learning preferences and bring a different level of fluency and expectations around media and training, but they still have similar core work values and are committed to reaching business goals.

What are the main concerns?

The main concern seems to be that Millennials—whatever that means—are coming fast! The word itself is often recognized as a buzzword in corporate training, and people don’t know how seriously to take it or whether to think about it at all. As they do when they assess any new audience, training organizations are asking themselves: Should basic training methods or technologies be updated? Should everything now be bite-sized, mobile, and social? Should core messaging strategies be changed? In some ways, the uncertainty around this new audience mirrors the uncertainty around mobile training that occurred a few years ago: People knew it was happening, they knew it could be significant, but they weren’t sure what to do about it.

All of these concerns are very real, but they can also be overplayed, and Millennials are obviously not uniform. Companies can learn from Millennials and adapt training to incorporate strategies that they are more comfortable with. And we can all gain something from their interactive learning style, fluency with new technology, and sharing culture. We can update current training courses with Millennial learning techniques to engage all learners and build better training.

Which concerns pertain to the whole learner audience, not just the Millennials?

The initial steps of the training course should be the same regardless of the audience. Here at Allen, the general planning questions apply to every course. Always start with performance mapping: What are the business goals? Once we answer those questions we work backwards, considering which activities will build the desired skills, knowledge sets, and motivation.

What strategies and activities can you use in training to engage Millennials?

Strategy #1: Mobile Learning

Millennials are much more comfortable with mobile than previous generations. Millennials can be reached on desktops and laptops, but mobile adds a layer that is faster and sometimes more effective.

When developing mobile training initiatives, we want to respect the way the learner actually uses the device, not ask them to change their habits to accommodate a training program. In other words, we build off of current mobile habits to maximize the efficacy of mobile training. People use their mobile devices for quick information, simple interaction, and one-click answers to their problems, and that is how we need to design learning initiatives for mobile.

Strategy #2: Gamification

Gamification in training is often used because people don't know what else to do; they suggest a game because "it will be fun!" That's usually not the best way to approach gaming in training. Learning games, like other training strategies, must directly align with business goals in order to be a valuable training investment.

At Allen we define gamification as a technique or strategy to add game-like features into training (usually in realistic scenarios). These additions include features that enhance competition, social sharing, and immediate feedback through scoring and badge systems. This instantly builds an element of motivation into the scenario. Too often, we instructional designers and training professionals focus so much on elements of learning that we overlook the importance of learner motivation. Millennials respond well to game-like features when used in scenarios relevant to their job tasks.

Training organizations must ask themselves what they want to achieve. Are they trying to build a skill, increase knowledge, or motivate a group of people? Once you have decided on the goal you can then evaluate whether a training game may help you meet those goals. Resist the impulse to develop games solely to have a game.

One business goal of a retail store was to build prioritizing skills in its store managers. They created a game that presented the learner with multiple everyday scenarios in a virtual store, and the learner had to prioritize tasks such as dealing with customers, cleaning the store, and restocking merchandise. In this way the game engaged, of course, but more importantly, it simulated real-world retail challenges and helped the audience learn to prioritize tasks and master new skills, with immediate feedback and coaching.

Strategy #3: Video-based Learning

Millennials can be more visual than older learners. Millennials have grown up in a viral, social, video culture in which media is two-directional: They often contribute and author new media just as fluently as they consume. Media becomes a conversation, not a passive review.

Drawing on this trend, Allen is working on a product knowledge design in which employees will film short videos explaining a process or technique. The videos may be tagged, titled, associated with specific workflow steps and roles, and uploaded to an answer center. Co-workers may then watch, rate, and comment on videos. In this case, this design may be a relatively low-cost way to let employees train each other and prevent knowledge from being lost as older employees leave the workforce. The best and most useful video content can naturally rise to the top of the video library, just as it does on common social media sites.

Conclusion

When developing training for Millennials, don't lose sight of the basics and get too carried away with gimmicks. Establish your business goals and work backward to achieve them with training activities. [Mobile learning, gamification, and video-based learning](#) can be great ways to engage learners of all ages if you develop them correctly to create real change.

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